An Address to One and Many:

Epistolary Experiments with the Public Sphere

in England and the United States -

1735, 1796, 1998

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Abstract

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Chair of the Supervisory Committee:

Gary Handwerk

Comparative History of Ideas

This dissertation examines the genre of the author-published familiar letter to consider the ways in which people come to understand themselves as part of a public, and as actors who might affect the shape of that public. Chapter 1, on Alexander Pope's *Mr. Pope's Literary Correspondence* (1735-7), and Chapter 2, on Mary Wollstonecraft's *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* (1796) look at eighteenth century British volumes—written and published in a culture of letter-writing when the standards of epistolary writing are strongly expressed and familiar to readers. Chapter 3, on Dodie Bellamy's *The Letters of Mina Harker* (1998) examines the structural capacities of the letter form in the late 20th century. These capacities – including the form's hyper-awareness of polite social norms, its necessary narrative polytemporality, and the effect of transmuting pronouns (the expectation that the "you" addressed will become the "I" responding) – are discursive tools these three authors

use to outline a site of agency for themselves and their readers in political history. Pope's provocative crudeness and didactic description of what constitutes a "pleasing" response to his lewd remarks proposes a model of authentic discourse free of the polite constraints dictated by letter manuals and the nascent bourgeois public sphere; Wollstonecraft's hermeneutic revision of Gothic encounters, combined with the epistolary imperative to reply, summons readers to recuperate their own British identity as rooted in radical "grand causes" such as equality, contrary to Burke's slow, accretive, progressivism; and Bellamy's occult narrator—the spirit of Mina Harker possessing the character Dodie Bellamy—brings the dilemma of the transmuting subject (I/you) and the expressive possibilities of the epistolary into question, and draws attention to the necessity of a locating an irrational subject against the hyper-rational neoliberal political economy through a logic of proliferation. These epistolary addresses are experiments, exemplary rhetorical responses to the dilemmas of entering through language into the public sphere.

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Introduction: Connecting Letters and Publics

1. Fundamental Questions

How can the individual subject affect the collective? How does one conceive of and actually relate to a larger commons, a "public sphere"? These are the questions that underlie the discussion of epistolary writing (an ostensibly "personal" genre) and the public sphere. Emma Goldman puts it, "The problem that confronts us today, and which the nearest future is to solve, is how to be one's self and yet in oneness with others; to feel deeply with all human beings and still retain one's own characteristic qualities" (qtd. in Hester 63). As I started writing this introduction, the COVID-19 parameters of social engagement restricted coming together in person for any reason other than 'essential work'. Then George Floyd was killed, and the isolated, the unemployed, and the essential workers (and others too), came together across the country and then the world to demand the end of police, the military, and the violence of racial oppression. This dissertation is not about any of these movements, but more theoretically an investigation into experiments of individuals seeking to enter into and shape the public sphere—not merely to shape its outcomes and its effects on politics (as Habermas's now common understanding of the public sphere would have it), but to shape the way the public sphere as a whole operates, changing the way that people interact to create it and be within it—to change the way that individuals come together.

This dissertation takes up three disparate time periods to examine authorial experiments with the public sphere. Each author uses the epistolary as a form for experimenting with the sense of the public, for entering into conversation with others and inviting a response—or at least, the idea of a response. This is not a sustained examination of the epistolary, nor is it a homily on the nature of 'the public sphere'—instead, it is a series of studies on attempts to

transform the public sphere by leveraging the norms and discourse of the existing dominant sense of public propriety and inviting readers to reconsider their place in the public, thereby re-imagining the public itself. This is an examination of the possibilities of collective self-formation, and production of the public sphere.

2. Defining the Public Sphere

What, exactly, is the public sphere? The "public sphere" is sometimes understood as collected opinions, evidenced and produced by the action of polling[1]—what Hauser calls the "objectivist theory" (83); or it is a short hand for mass media—a voice proclaiming to speak on behalf of the whole to the whole, to 'form' the public opinion. I am interested, though, in the more nebulous element of the public sphere as an 'imagined' entity as Charles Taylor terms it, and as Benedict Anderson calls the nation. As Michael McKeon puts it, "to ask how people came to inhabit the public sphere is the same thing as asking how people came to think of themselves as inhabiting the public sphere" (74). Charles Taylor gives us the phrase of the "modern social imaginary" which is the "ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations" (24). And Anderson, speaking of the nation, explains that this social body is "*imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members…yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (6). Nations are one particular kind of "communion", but others come into existence and can be distinguished, Anderson proffers, "by the style in which they are imagined" (6). This dissertation is interested in the various styles in

[1] For a history of "public opinion" and its mirror "private opinion" see Wetters' *The Opinion System* (2008).

which a public—and therefore by definition also the individual's relation to that public—is imagined.

There are other kinds of publics—Michael Warner distinguishes the text-based public sense from the public that is an audience at a theatrical performance and other crowds that are gathered and "bounded by the event or the shared physical space" (66) such as at sports events, concerts, or riots. Hauser distinguishes the vernacular public sphere from the polling of public opinion, which depersonalizes the public, abstracts the personal experience of public discourse and turns it into an "abstract expression" and "a snapshot in time" (Hauser 5). This dissertation follows Warner and Hauser in looking at the public sphere as one that exists extended over time and space, dynamically forming and re-forming through the performance of individuals addressing an imagined audience, or to borrow Habermas's formulation—private persons coming together in public. How is it that people can 'come together' and 'imagine' that they are doing so? This dissertation is interested in the form of coming together, the tools used to create a rhetorical context for engaging others—not one that is pre-determined by a set of rationales, but one that is reinvented or reimagined every time it is engaged.

While my study is not oriented to nationalism, the sense of a public I'm interested in is informed by Benedict Anderson's definition of the nation as an 'imagined' community: "*imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even here of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (6). Writing and reading in public requires this sense that the author and audience are speaking to one another and in doing so 'inventing' or 'imagining' the nation with each

utterance.[2] This imagining is a "simultaneous consumption" of an idea of a shared sphere. Charles Taylor qualifies the term "imaginary" with the adjective "social." The "social imaginary" is for Taylor the underlying warrant for all the institutions, behaviors, activities, and sense making of the social world: ""The social imaginary is not a set of ideas; rather it is what enables, through making sense of, the practices of a society" (91). Put another way, Taylor explains that the social imaginary is how people "imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations" (106). He gives two examples of the 'social imaginary': the modern social imaginary and the pre-modern one. The modern social imaginary is based on the notion that the "new normative order [is] the mutual respect and mutual service of the individuals who make up society" (Taylor 96), which contrasts with the pre-modern mode in which individuals "act within a [hierarchical, cosmological] framework that exists prior to and independent of their actions" (Taylor 115). Anderson's definition of the nation as an 'imagined community' parallels Taylor's argument—the nation is a modern form, replacing the hierarchical, cosmological organization of monarchy and empire.

3. Acts of Address and the Imagined Public Sphere

Both "social imaginary" and the "imagined community" of the nation are broader, more diffuse concepts than the public sphere. Anderson does not speak much of the public sphere per se, though his imagined community operates through the same functions of print capitalism that

[2] Anderson cautions that the term 'invent' used by Gellner is too strong a word, too easily misread, "The drawback to this formulation is that Gellner is so anxious to show that nationalism masquerades under false pretenses that he assimilates 'invention' to 'fabrication' and 'falsity', rather than to 'imagining' and 'creation'" (6). I use the term 'invent' here in the latter, productive, sense.

undergird the public sphere. Taylor articulates the relationship between the social imaginary and the public sphere. The public sphere, explains, is one of the key forms through which we can see the operations of Western modernity's social imaginary. Taylor draws on Habermas's definition of the public sphere, and defines the term as referring to "a common space in which the members of society meet through a variety of media: print and electronic as well as face-to-face encounters, wherein they discuss matters of common interest and thus are able to form a common mind about these" (Taylor 111-12). When participating in the common space that is the public sphere, he explains "[t] he immediate sense of what we're doing (e.g. getting the message to the government and our fellow citizens that the budget cuts must stop) makes sense in a wider context, in which we see ourselves as standing in a continuing relation with others, in which it is appropriate to address them in this manner, and not, for example, by humble supplication or threats of armed insurrection" (Taylor 109). That wider context is the social imaginary. Notably, however, the public sphere is not less 'imagined' than the social imaginary: "a public sphere can exist only if it is imagined as such. Unless all the dispersed discussions are seen by their participants as linked in one great exchange, there can be no sense of a resultant 'public opinion'" (Taylor 113). There are other more concrete institutions that rest on the form of the public sphere—all the apparatuses of print media, as well as the institutions of coffee shops and other places for gathering to "discuss matters of common interest and thus are able to form a common mind about these" (Taylor 111-12). The public sphere is, in other words, an imagined form that is premised on the warrant of the modern social imaginary. This is not an infinite regress—but it is a maddeningly diffuse definition, and one that does not lend itself well to study without redress to either the output of the public sphere—"opinion"—or to a purely materialist

study of the media through which the public sphere is practiced. The public sphere's existence is in the minds of those who participate, but it is also a shared space.

The public sphere and to a great extent the 'social imaginary' is, in Taylor, Habermas, and Anderson, textually based. Shared to what extent? This opens a question about the possibility of public spheres—plural; and the notion of counterpublics (this latter I return to under the thesis of circulating texts/circulating letters). Taylor argues for a singular public sphere, arguing that it exists as a singular concept that is executed through multiple media, but that the discourse across media (newspaper/radio/TV—or in the case of the 18th century: coffee shops, journals, pamphlets) operates as a shared discussion on relevant matters only because there is a conception of one shared common arena. Warner argues from the instance of the public formation through the circulation of texts that we should talk of 'a' public and of 'publics' rather than a singular social totality (65). However, Warner too suggests that a certain systematicity of public conception is possible, "What I mean to say about [my formula of the public] here is simply that this pattern has a kind of systematicity that can be observed in widely differing contexts and from which important consequences follow" (12). Warner gives seven theses on "publics", which give some more specific theoretical paradigms for thinking through its operations. However, even with these theses, I wrote this dissertation as an enquiry into the question of how we can get a grasp on the public sphere if it is imaginary through and through, self-organized, and primarily existing in the ways "people [come] to think of themselves as inhabiting [it]" (McKeon 74).

Key elements of the public sphere operate through texts. Or perhaps better to say—through textuality. Anderson points to the advent of the printing press combined with nascent capitalism as the originating conditions for the imagined community of the nation: Printing

presses standardized language and made it readily reproducible, to be distributed widely. This process "laid the bases for national consciousness" by "creat[ing] unified fields of exchange and communication" (44) and by "[giving] a new fixity to language" (44). Print culture, specifically for Anderson print-capitalism, ""created the possibility of a new form of imagined community, which in its basic morphology set the stage for the modern nation" (46). The circulation of texts (the newspaper in particular, though also the novel) is also central to Anderson's explanation of how individuals come to think of themselves en mass, participating in a ritual, in which "each communicant is well aware that the ceremony he performs is being replicated simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others of whose existence he is confident, yet of whose identity he has not the slightest notion." (Anderson 35). Habermas characterizes textual circulation as the basis of the public sphere: "They [institutions of literary discussion] formed the public sphere of rational-critical debate in the world of letters within which the subjectivity originating in the interiority of the conjugal family, by communicating with itself, attained clarity about itself" (51). Warner too looks to texts as a location for dissecting the operations of the public, "[T]he notion of a public enables a reflexivity in the circulation of texts among strangers who become, by virtue of their reflexively circulating discourse, a social entity" (Warner 11-12). The "public," or "publics" are abstract notions, existing as an invention, an idea, an imaginary, but traces and metonymic elements are present in texts.

If the "public sphere" is not an object, and is not evidenced by polls or by declarations of media and public figures, how can one study it—it is an 'object' that is nowhere. If the public sphere is constituted by the 'style' of the imaging, and held in the minds and lives of the members of the community, it is an object that is everywhere evidenced. As Michael Warner contends, "The making of publics is the metapragmatic work newly taken up by every text in

every reading" (12). Any work of literature, speech, or art that sets out to "address publics" as readers requires of the writer that "they engage in struggles…over conditions that bring them together as a public" (Warner 12). I turn to letters to look for traces of the public sphere; specifically, I turn to the form of the familiar letter its structural parallels with the form of the 'public sphere.' The number of familiar letters available to look at are vast, and the literature on them as a form is growing (Eve Tavor Bannet, Clair Brant, Susan Whyman, and Susan M. Fitzmaurice are prominent in the study of eighteenth century letters; Patricia Meyer Spacks' spreads her study of the same across her ouvre). For this dissertation, I have selected texts that invoke the status of the familiar letters as their mode of composition, but which have been published for circulation amongst the reading public—the literary public sphere.

Following four theorists of the public sphere—Habermas, Warner, Taylor, and Anderson—and scholars of the letter form in familiar letters and to some extent in epistolary novels—I look to the genre of the familiar-letter published to consider the ways in which people come to understand themselves as part of a public, and as actors who might affect the shape of that public (after all—if it exists only in the mind, than the idea of the public could change). In order to think more concretely about how a public is created and experienced, my approach here is to take the abstract principles of the public sphere—particularly those that are modeled on or through the operation of a text-based relationship—and turn to a genre of writing that makes the same moves in a literal way: the letter. In other words, I look to letters as a concretization of several abstract features of publics.

4. **Addressed: Publics are addressed/Letters address.**

Every text, every writer of every text, must think implicitly or explicitly of the readers who will take it up—an imagined collective that exists only in the idea that it is being (or will be) read by others. The author and reader both are taken in by the question "What kind of public is this? How is it being addressed?" (Warner 12). And yet, we cannot simply ask a reader or an author to answer for us "what public are you part of?" what is the nature and style of the community you imagine yourself to be writing to? to be a part of as you read? Warner says, "it seems that in order to address a public, one must forget or ignore the fictional nature of the entity one addresses" (12). Again the public sphere is everywhere and nowhere.

There are, however, features of the public sphere that seem to mark its existence, discursive moves that can point to the production of a public, stylistic markers that can indicate the public sense that operates in the writing and the reading of a text. These include an act of address, i.e. a person writing *to* someone else; an authorial conceit of an audience that is a collection of readers not just a singular known person but a group (aka a 'public'); that audience is both real and unknown ("one must forget or ignore the fictional nature of the entity one addresses" (12)), made up of individuals and not actually addressing a singular known person. These presumptive public acts also constitute its style: the way the text addresses the audience is premised on assumptions about their hermeneutic methods and seeks to shape how the audience reads the text. Or to put it in the inverse—ideas of the public shape how the text is written so that it might address the public. As Warner reminds us, a public both precedes and proceeds from the text. The act of address is fundamental to the imagination/invention of the public.

The action of addressing, speaking to, communicating to, or in the case of letters writing to is the abstract public act made concrete in letters. The addressive nature of letters is a central features that distinguishes the epistolary form from other genres of writing (pace Derrida, who

expostulates "the letter, the epistle, which is not a genre but all genres, literature itself" (48)[3]). The form of the letter requires an addressee, not merely an audience ("the theater can do without a confidant, in monologue, whereas the letter cannot" (Altman 51). Unlike "simple first-person writing" like memoir, autobiography, or diary, the letter posits a reciprocal experience (Altman 89, 92, 117), and the letter is composed with the reader in mind. The letter is shaped by this fundamental action of address, the rhetorical turns and the content itself are shaped by the feature of speaking to another, "The letter's function as address to a specific other encourages the letter-writer to exploit the full rhetorical palette in order to construct the most persuasive, affecting, and subjective discourse possible in order to reach one's correspondent" (Fitzmaurice 236); Rhetorical persuasion in eighteenth century letters is visible in the selection of salutation and subscription –that is, the opening and the closing lines of letters. The formal elements of the letter show the act of address as the fundamental rhetorical act and also the fundamental stylistic act of letters. As Eve Tavor Bannet observes, "suiting a letter to the station of one's addressee relative to oneself also impacted the body of the epistolary text. Letters from an inferior to a superior were supposed to express themselves in a more elevated style, and in a manner that was deferential without appearing obsequious or servile, and flattering without appearing fulsome or insincere" (Bannet 68). Letters cannot be defined merely an essay that is sent to someone or a diary entry enclosed and put in the mail with an end location notated. Though they may "be so private as to appear almost indistinguishable" the address assures the genre distinction (Bower *Responses* 5). The letter is an act of address through and through. The form, the style, and the content are affected by the action of address. But content does not define a letter. If we understand 'genre' as form + situation (as Janet Giltrow does), then we cannot define the letter as

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[3] Also quoted in Cook page 23.

a genre. Situations as varied as love, business, science, and politics form the context and content of letters. If we understand the letter as a function—as Thomas O. Beebee does (8-15)—then we can see that the operative function is address. Any number of ideas, content, feelings, and thoughts can be put into a letter; any number of recipients may be designated. The specifics of the writer or the reader matter less to defining a letter than the fact that the letter addresses.

If we can look at form, style, and content of letters as evidence of the act of address, perhaps (I posit) we can see the operations of imagining a public, an act of social imagining that also operates through addressing.

5. **It's Relative: The public is a relation among strangers/Letters are a relation between 'you and I'.**

Other forms may address a public audience (e.g. the dramatic monologue, a political or religious screed). The letter's address calls for a response. "The reader is 'called upon' to respond" (Altman 89). Altman calls this the "epistolary pact" though in writing a letter one enters into a pact that the reader might or might not fulfill. Nonetheless, "[t]he most distinctive thing about the letter form as literary devise may be that no matter what else it does, it always attempts to elicit or offer a response" (Bower *Responses* 181). Letter-writers, eighteenth century handbook advised, must always show regard for "time and place and person" and "must endeavor to suit…expressions to the nature of the subject, and the rank of our correspondent" (*The Court Letter-Writer* 43 qtd.in Bannet 65). Not only is the letter an act of address, it addressed from one to another. The letter calls for a response "from a specific reader" (Altman 89). Letter exchange is often understood specifically as an exchange, a kind of "commerce" (Bannet x-xi), a

conversation or dialogue[4] or as polite conversation in absentia[5]. The act of address that shapes the form, style, and content of the letters (particularly British, continental, and American colonial letters) requires a particular address of an I to a you. The "I" addresses the "you" (see Altman 121, 186-7). In the letter form, the I and the you are tied together by the address that calls for a response: because the letter calls for a response, the "*you* of any *I-you* statement can, be expected to, become the *I* of a new text" and vice versa (Altman 121). Letters are textual evidence of relationships between people.

Letters are particularly understood as addressed to a known correspondent. This is posited in the directive to take into consideration the particular you who is addressed, such that "Addressee-consciousness informs the act of writing itself" (Altman 11). The communication occurs concretely. Even an 'open letter' is addressed to a known entity, a named person, organization, or collective. A letter addressed "to whom it may concern," or to "the general public" constructs a reader who is addressed as such. The audience is explicitly summoned. Contrast with Warner's public of a text entered into the public sphere: "addressed to strangers." Warner notes the difference between a letter's address and a public address:

"In some contexts of speech and writing, both the rhetorical addressee and the public have a fairly clear empirical referent; in correspondence and most e-mail, in the reports and memos that are passed up and down bureaucracies, in love notes and valentines and Dear John letters, the object of address is understood to be an identifiable person or office. Even if that addressee is already a generalized role—for example, a personnel committee, or Congress, or a

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[4] More on letters as exchange see Altman 121; Anderson et al 269; Bannet x-xi; Fitzmaurice 48; Spacks *Gossip* 78, 91; Spacks "Forgotten Genres" 51.

[5] On letters as conversation see Anderson et al 269; Bannet 89; Brant 21, 34.

church congregation – it is definite, known, nameable, and numerable. The interaction is framed by a social relationship.

> But for another class of writing contexts – including literary criticism, journalism theory, advertising, fiction, drama, most poetry – the available addressees are essentially imaginary, which is not to say unreal: the people, scholarship, the republic of letters, posterity, the younger generation, the nation, the Left, the movement, the word, the vanguard, the enlightened few, right-thinking people everywhere, public opinion, the brotherhood for all believers humanity, my fellow queers. These are all publics. They are in principle open-ended. They exist by virtue of their address. (Warner 73).

So what happens when a text is written in the former capacity and then transitioned to the latter? Especially when the publication retains the apparatus of the letter and invokes the epistolary context of composition?

In the context of familiar letters, the I-you relationship is created through the act of address. Also through the composition of the letter, the I and the you are constructed. That is, the writing "I" shapes itself and also imagines the you to whom the letter is addressed. When responding, the letter writing (the "you" become "I") is responding out of the you constructed by the received letter as well as repositioning themself as an "I". Fitzmaurice describes this grammatically and then draws on the grammatical function to describe the pragmatics of epistolary discourse:

> Hanks (1990:7) remarks that 'the intuition of subjectivity is most productive when encompassed by the recognition that the speaking subject is never more than one of a pair in a social relation, and that the subject is, as they say, social even in his or her own solitude.' This is true of epistolary discourse, which accommodates both self-expression

> (or locutionary subjectivism) and engagement of the interlocutor in an exchange of information and involvement. …. In other words, the deictic coordinates of the epistolary world situate their inhabitants in relation to one another and in relation to one another's stance. (Fitzmaurice 48)

The subject and the interlocutor are constructed through the letter, much as their relationship is constructed. Statements and intimations of the first person's character are one concrete place to look at a self-consciously (or semi-self-consciously) constructed subject—a subject constructed specifically in relation to another. This dynamic of self relating to other is central to the public sphere, but difficult to locate. Letters offer a location for finding traces of the articulating self. Similarly the letter-writer's construction of the "you" who is addressed offers a trace of the you who is imagined. Fitzmaurice takes the letter-writer's imagination of the "you" as "one more aspect of [the] self] (Fitzmaurice 200). I think this is a mistake; rather than reading the constructed "you" as self-reflective of the writing-I, I read the second-person as a construction of the idea that there are indeed others with whom one has a relation. The 'you' in a letter certainly cannot 'speak for' the correspondent, but it can demonstrate the kind of relationship the writer imagines herself to have to another, and the direct address, its warrants and style, its endearments and rebukes, can suggest the parameters of social relationship that are the norms of engagement. These expectations of norms are personal, even intimate (in a one-to-one, I-you address), but as the next sections sketch out, the address of a letter cannot be solely to a singular person, but always has a third party audience. So too, I suggest, we can read the address to the 'you' as an intimation of relationships of one to many—an outline of the ways in which social communion might be imagined.

This is the formal appearance of letters, the singular (one-to-one) addressive structure on which the genre rests. But its deep structure is plural. "The notion that the mails involve delivery of a private specifically addressed message was late in evolving" (Peters 165). Letters were singularly addressed, but writers anticipated their words would be read aloud to the recipient's friends and family (Bannet 225, Brant 5). Letters were a means of conveying news, and circulated well beyond the family and friends of the recipient (who might be known by the writer) to strangers in the salon or coffee shop (Bannet 256, 278; Brant 5; Peters 165). The letter, particularly the newsletter, is formally figured as necessary precursor to the function of the public sphere by Habermas (20-1)—a gesture that is elaborated by David Randall who traces the rising popularity of the letter in the 14th and 15th centuries to a civically oriented humanism. Randall argues, "As a matter of theory as well as of practice, the Renaissance private letter came to be seen to have both the capability and the duty to include public affairs among its subject matter" (14).

6. Third Persons: The history of the public sphere is in the mind of its participants / The letter writer is mindful of its auditors.

The letter is thus addressed singularly—I to you—but read plurally—I to you, and you read it aloud and circulate it amongst others known and unknown to me, the writer. There is yet another audience, though, and like the singular and plural 'you' to whom the author writes, this third person audience too affects the style, and content of the letter. "[A]s a tangible document the confidential letter is subject to be "overheard" by anyone at any time" (Altman 51), and this triangularity, "the potential reading by the third party "act[s] upon the relationship between the sender and the receiver" (Beebee 57). The third person is the always-anticipated interceptor, an

eavesdropper, a purloiner, a thief, a spy, an accidental audience for whom the writing is not intended but who is nevertheless anticipated. The possibility of the third person was made acute by the advent of the post-office (in Britain: 1657). The post-office—enabling the vast increase of personal correspondence (How 7)—was created in part from an official interest to intercept letters:

> Previous governments had attempted to stop communication by the people as a means of preventing the fomenting of plots. Now, [Cromwell's Secretary of State, John] Thurloe had decided that the interception of letters was a far more effective weapon; letters that were often pored over first and then, using sophisticated techniques, delivered without indications that they had been read. (How 12)

Letter writers were well aware of "the vulnerability of letters traveling by common post was not secret" (Bannet 252), and "secret communications like notes between lovers or treasonable messages" came to rely on "secret" readings in addition to the "open" surface appearances (Brant 127). Anderson et al argue that interception and surveillance by the government was not a significant concern or constraint on letter writers: "Although there was always the danger that letters of interest to the government might be opened in London, this practice did not affect ordinary correspondence; and the easing of restrictions on speech and printing following the Revolution promoted a general freedom of expression" (270). While the overall effect of the post does seem to have been a vast increase in correspondence (made possible by cheap and reliable routes of delivery, as opposed to sending a letter by a traveler (infrequent/unreliable return) or by hire (expensive), this increase in letters and the felt-freedom of expression must be understood in the context of the state and imperial project. How notes this paradox, "It was these developments [of the penny post] which ensure that it became easy to correspond on matters of

no particular importance and to send and receive letters quickly and often. Thus the letter was no longer restricted to business letters or emergency messages and became, instead, a vehicle for something approximating conversation" (How 7). The free expression of correspondence was, as Bannet shows in great detail, curtailed by extensive sensitivity to such contexts. Writing freely or authentically was (in the sense Anderson et al discuss) despite these constraints, or within them—finding ways to communicate by code, implication, and insinuation. There were also, of course, conceptual and stylistic problems of free or authentic expression—discussed in the following section on norms

I deal very little with the question of 'secret' readings in this text, but note it here because it shows the extent to which an audience of strangers is imagined in the writing of letters. Not as an audience to be written to, certainly, but as a distinct presence that haunts letters. We must not mistake letters as privately written and privately received. As Maclean writes, "Letters are inscriptions directed from a first person or persons to a second person or group of persons, but as matters of discourse they invariably entail—directly, implicitly, or by way of exclusion—the position of a third person, singular or plural" (Maclean 177). Once the narrow view of the letter (singular I to singular you) is displaced, "the field of the (epistolary) third person opens onto language, grammar, writing, transportation, communication, etc" (MacLean 194). In this perhaps Derrida is vindicated—letters are language. But what I am particularly interested in is the way that letters open publics. Letters are not synonymous with the public sphere—the nature of their personal address is at odds with entrance into the public sphere as such. But the always present possibility of interception and the expectation that "the letter is always subject to circulation among a larger group of readers" (known or unknown) means that the letter can pass "from the

private to the public domain and even back again" (Altman 109)."Writers' use of familiar letters" Brant concurs, "played with a public-private divide" (53).

7. **A Matter of Style: The public sphere is organized by discursive style / Letters communicate through style and standards**

Habermas's definition of the bourgeois public sphere includes in it a normative stylistic expectation: "The medium" in which "private people came together as a public," to present their claims to the governing authorities, "was peculiar and without historical precedent: people's public use of their reason (*öffentliches Rässonement*)" (Habermas 27). Reason in public requires bracketing of private interest; the premise of reason is that all people involved hold only the good of the public-as-a-whole in mind, and not their individual financial pursuits; this basic assumption requires that individuals also 'bracket' social inequalities and "deliberate as peers" without drawing attention to social inequalities between individuals in the public (Fraser 4). The form of reason requires also a style of address—one that is depersonalized, and one that has a shared language. "Public discourse says not only "Let a public exist" but "Let it have this character, speak this way, see the world in this way." (Warner 114). Public discourse is normalizing in its prerequisites for joining the discussion; it is also normalizing in the sense that it reproduces itself in its own likeness: "[t]he elaboration of a distinctive culture of civil society and of an associated public sphere was implicated in the process of bourgeois class formation" (Fraser 6); and because "discursive interaction within the bourgeois public sphere was governed by protocols of style and decorum that were themselves correlates and markers of status inequality" (Fraser 10). To speak otherwise is to mark oneself as unequal, and therefor suspect of engaging in public discourse to gain goods for oneself. One sees how this norm of rationality—to bracket specificity in favor of the general good—becomes self-reproducing.

In theory, however, these modes of discourse and of reason are not the only means by which people might come together as a public. Indeed, other styles of publics—what Fraser calls counterpublics—have always been offered as alternates to the rational-critical public sphere as those who were not seen as sufficiently 'rational' (i.e. those who are notably socially unequal and those who refuse to give up a performance of social difference) nonetheless addressed a variety of discrete publics through speech and texts. She explains, "“[V]irtually contemporaneous with the bourgeois public there arose a host of competing counterpublics, including nationalist publics, popular peasant publics, elite women's publics, and working-class publics. Thus, there were competing publics form the start, not just from the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as Habermas implies" (Fraser 7). Fraser argues that counterpublics necessarily exist alongside, under, and in conflict with "the public" but cannot and should not aim to replace the public sphere. Counterpublics instead provide fundamental discursive arenas "for the formation and enactment of social identities" (16). Warner offers a different view. While still valuing the mode of counterpublics as an "expression of subaltern culture" (121), he suggests that counterpublics offer a means to undo the replicative reproduction of public sphere and the normative modes of subjectivity that must be embodied to act within it:

> It is in fact possible to imagine that almost any characterization of discursive acts might be attributed to a public. A queer public might be one that throws shade, prances, disses, acts up, caries on, longs, fantasizes, throws fits, mourns, "reads." To take such attributions of public agency seriously, however, we would need to inhabit a culture with a different language ideology, a different social imaginary. (Warner 124)

Warner sees this transformative capacity evident in counterpublics *qua* counterpublics, and also as a possible-though difficult to imagine-different social imaginary than the currently dominant

one.

I am interested in this dissertation to look at the styles of public address, the ways in which authors invite their audiences to constitute themselves as subjects in modes other than that demanded by the bourgeois critical rational public sphere, and also in modes other than the private or intimate respondent. Given the hegemonic claims of the critical-rational public sphere, how might a writer address and summon a public that recognizes itself as such without reproducing the rational, self-bracketing expectations of the public sphere? I turn to letters as a highly stylized and regulated medium, whose very standards and regulations are the means by which individual letter writers produced personal and particularized relationships.

Letters are often mistaken as spontaneous, private, or otherwise unregulated speech. But it is clear that the history of letters is one of cultivated genre knowledge. Letters were a branch of rhetoric, complete with its own guides to writing since the 1190 'Epistolary Encyclopedia' (*Summa dictaminis*) by Bernard of Meung (Boureau 24). By the 18th century, a vast array of letter manuals and compendiums of sample letters outlined the standards of letter writing, not only giving guidance to the would-be epistoler, but giving models for imitation, organized by social rank and social occasion. Letters, and the letter manuals of advice, produced highly detailed examples of social standard, and successful letter writers used navigated these norms with style—adhering here to a genre expectation, veering from the standard style to produce surprise or insult, returning to propriety to assuage the moral order. "Epistolary form symbolized – an enacted – social conformity" (Brant 34). Letter manuals were explicit in their organization of class status, giving tables with lists of proper ways to address those both higher and lower than oneself in the class scale (Brant 38). Collected examples of letters – highly popular and widely purchased by the literate of many classes, "nourished a social knowhow and a social imaginary"

(Chartier 5). Spontaneity and naturalness were themselves constructed styles—learning to write as though from the heart without either appearing to trite and imitative, while also cleaving to the proper letter form was an art highly prized—particularly by the Augustans of the early eighteenth century. Even as the possibilities for free expression expanded into the late 18th century, dilemmas of proper class relationships shape the possibilities for spontaneous writing. Some manuals advised for the most familiar letters that "here…rules should apply most, and impossibly, so should a natural easy manner" (Brant 39).

Letters, as self-consciously styled texts, give us a textual and contextual setting in which to trace the moves of using, leveraging, and transforming the style of speaking to others. The context of letter manuals and explicit social guides for proper epistolary discourse provides a source of illumination to throw particularities of communication into relief.[6]

8. Public Time/Letter Time

Warner draws attention to the temporality of the public: "publics act historically according to the temporality of their circulation" (96). One facet of this thesis on time and publics is that published texts confer on the duration of public discourse. If we understand the public sphere as "people coming together" to deliberate, discuss, argue, etc, we might be inclined to think of public conversations as momentary. But when we consider the durability of a published text, we see that publics, like texts "continue to circulate through time" and thus have an ongoing life—they are durable (Warner 97). And yet, the particular conversations texts engage in—and the ideas that are engaged by the reading public, do change over time. Moreover, texts appear at

[6] Eve Tavor Bannet demonstrates this mode of reading to striking effect in a study of two letters between Queen Anne and the Duke of Marlborough. See *Empire of Letters* 81-2.

particular moments, and they gain and wane in the public conversation over time. In this, published texts significantly differ from letters, whose circulation is much narrower—even keeping in mind the plural address discussed above.

Yet the temporality of letters is of particular interest when it comes to considering the construction of a shared conversation. Correspondence does not follow a simple linear timeline. We could try to construct one: a writer has a though or experience, writes it down, and puts it in the mail. The letter is carried across the city, the country, arrives sometime after it was posted. The respondent reads the letter, writes down a recent experience or idea and sends the letter back to the first writer. But in the language of the first letter, the writer might say "just this morning I—" as a way to preface an anecdote. Well, "just this morning" will be three weeks ago by the time of the reader's receipt of the letter. And if the writer says "this evening I will"—well, this future tense too will be past tense. So we see that reading a letter requires a construction of time that is complexly related to both the grammar of the letter received, and to the timeline of one's own experience (now, what was I doing three weeks ago when my friend was making plans for the evening?).

Benedict Anderson draws attention to the fundamental importance of shared imaginings of time for the creation of a national sensibility through the common experience of reading the newspaper. It is not only, he argues, a shared awareness of the same events that links people together; it is also that: "The date at the top of the newspaper, the single most important emblem on it, provides the essential connection – the steady onward clocking of homogenous empty time" (33). The onward march of time is intensified by the fact that the newspaper will be made obsolete the next day when the new one is published.

Letters too are often marked with a date at the top. The mode of their imagined, shared

time, however, does not simply produce the steady onward march of time. Instead, letter writers and letter readers must engage more consciously in the construction of a history that accommodates the timeline of writing. I do not wish to make a formalist argument for the nature of an imagined chronotropic community of letters—the genre is too extensive for such an argument to inhere anyway. What I wish to draw attention to instead is that the letters' inherent temporal weaving opens to correspondents a space for attention to the construction of history.

The work of constructing a history and of understanding oneself as living within a history and temporality of a particular kind is one of the underwriting, unspoken, and hotly contested warrants of public discourse. Arguments for the nature of social relationships, political rule, distribution of authority, land, and wealth, as well as claims for agency are arguments that rely on (implicitly or explicitly) claims of origin. Charles Taylor and Benedict Anderson both point to the significance of the transformation in temporal imaginaries from a kind of "time immemorial"—in which reigning authority is legitimized by its longevity (and corresponding divine blessing) and particular activities are marked by recurrence and ritual, change occurring incrementally if at all—and modern "empty" "secular" time, in which action effects meaningful changes, a chain of cause and effect that is called 'history' (see Anderson 22-31 on "Apprehensions of Time" and Taylor 116-117). Letters, through their formal imperative to construct a timeline, offer readers and writers entrance points to shape a relationship to the passage of time. Through their grammar of past, present, future woven through a series of replies (or anticipated replies), letters offer a site for observing the temporal arguments that are elsewhere playing out in the imagination of the public sphere.

9. Addressing One and Many: Private Letters Circulated Publicly

This dissertation looks at letters that were privately written and printed publicly. While letters

alone offer the parallels for public thinking outline above, I have chosen three volumes of letters that perform public acts by in fact being publicly printed and circulated. The public actions I proclaim of letters are performed publically—which is, as Warner argues—the primary act of public making[7]. I take the transition from familiar letter to published volume as an invitation to read the text as a specific intervention in the public sphere, and an intervention that works by way of invoking the audience as an epistolary readership. In other words, by maintaining the aura of the familiar letter, the public reader is summoned to read the letters as voyeur (the third party eavesdropper), as the second person audience in the room with the directly addressed recipient, and potentially, simultaneously, as the familiarly addressed you.

The slippage between being directly addressed and being a stranger creates an intimate frisson of public entre—a private person made strange, a stranger made familiar. Reading published texts always invokes a movement of the subject between the private I and the public participant: "Public speech can have great urgency and intimate import. yet we know that it was addressed not exactly to us but to the stranger we were until the moment we happened to be addressed by it" (Warner 76). This is true of the public reader of published familiar letters as it is for the public reader of any other public text or speech. My interest in letters is the particular structure of epistolary reading that is also provoked. Especially in the eighteenth century, the genre rules of reading were widely known. Readers would have, and did, read collections of letters in the conceptual framework of the epistolary structure. The nascent public of the

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[7] "A public is a space of discourse organized by nothing other than discourse itself…A kind of chicken-and-egg circularity confronts us in this idea of a public. Could anyone speak publicly without addressing public? But
how can this public exist before being addressed? What would a public be if no one were addressing it?" (Warner 67).

epistolary sphere appears as a shadow structure and a meta-discursive toolkit for reading the published letters. This offers a sight for authors to intervene in the private participation of readers in a sense of a public. And it is this transfer across the boundary of private person / public collective that I try to trace in the texts I've selected. Is the reason, in fact, that I chose the texts examined in the chapters that follow.

10. Overview of Chapters

The first two chapters look at eighteenth century volumes—written and published in a culture of letter-writing when the standard genre expectations are strongly expressed and widely familiar as such. The third chapter takes up a volume written and published in the last two decades of the twentieth-century; though no longer a culture of letters, but one of telephones (though limited by long-distance calling rates), of television and cinema, the epistolary form nonetheless carries the structural capacities of address and temporal imaginaries, the latter perhaps more heavily weighted by the nostalgia of the letter. I am interested across all three chapters in how the authors leverage the letter form as a language and rhetoric of construct a self coming together with others in a constructed public sphere. What, I ask, are the performances of self that are written and what subject is addressed and called upon to respond? How are norms of communication leveraged by the letters? How are the apparently personal, intimate, or private addresses used to imbricate a public audience, and to transform the identification of public readers with the addressed reader and with written "I"? How does the style of the epistolary address create a plane of public discourse within the normative structures of public deliberation?

The public structure I'm interested in is not the "intimate public sphere" that Lauren Berlant describes—which is defined by "an expectation that the consumers of its particular stuff *already* share a worldview and emotional knowledge that they have derived from a broadly

common historical experience" (Berlant viii). The formal structure of the letter does not require shared emotions or shared worldviews though it does invoke a social knowledge of methods by which emotions and worldviews might be conveyed. As Beebee points out, the letter form is comprised of many genres—an assertion of the manifold functions to which the tools of letter can be used—worldviews, affects, emotions, and purposes are highly divergent. The volumes I look at do not presume intimacy, but do leverage the implications of a singularly addressed epistolary 'you' to draw readers into a new kind of relationship in public.

The texts I've chosen are engaged in moments of public sphere transformation—in the early 18th century Alexander Pope's *Collected Letters* (1735/1737) play a role in the legal transformations of copyright; Mary Wollstonecraft's *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* (1796) was published in the aftermath of the French Revolution as the open debates over the possibilities of British radicalism seem to be waning; and Dodie Bellamy's *Lettters of Mina Harker* (1998) was written over fifteen years between 1980 and 1994 in San Fransicso, a time when AIDS activism was bringing sex, desire, and homosexuality into public discourse and simultaneously neoliberalism's market-logic was rising as a rubric for the value of the subject. I do not make claims that these texts cause transformation of material conditions or ideological constructions of public relationships. But I do argue that each author's interventions are positing a subjectivity and summoning an audience to participate in a transformed public discourse. It is important to the inquiry of this dissertation that the volumes of letters were all published by their authors; I excluded from consideration texts that were posthumously published. As a means for looking at the construction of the public sphere as an active process of address, it is conceptually important that these are not mere collections of letters but rhetorical acts understood as such on their publication.

The volumes I look at certainly are placed within the tradition of posthumous letter collection, and so also can draw on or subvert reader expectations as another rhetorical tool. Collections of letters “written for one kind of audience, pre-empted by another” offer themselves, Spacks suggests, “for psychological analysis, but elude literary exegesis” (*Gossip* 65). The authors of the volumes I look at invite psychological analysis by way of publishing letter collections, but also invite and require literary exegesis because they have published the letters intentionally—the work is no longer only confessional, purloined by the public, but rhetorical and literary.

11. Chapter Abstracts

Chapter 1 looks at Alexander Pope’s *Collected Letters*. The letters were first published in 1735 by the printer Curll—with whom Pope had a long history of bitter pranks and spats, including a brief incident of the poet poisoning the publisher and then writing a mocking pamphlet on the episode. Shortly after the first printing, Pope issued a corrected volume amidst his own loud clamoring that his character had been besmirched by the unauthorized editior. It turns out, however, that Curll did not purloin the letters, and instead he was put up to it by Pope himself: an elaborate scheme to create a scandal of publication. Pope’s volume of letters was the first peri-humous publication of collected letters. Publishing one’s own letters would have been its own kind of scandal—a vanity and a disgrace to put oneself forward when the primary function of letter collections was to act as a moral model for readers to follow. After the publications in 1735, and subsequent editions in 1737, Pope went on to leverage the scandal in a court case over copyright. The letters were distinctly not model letters: he is rude and crude; he violates norms of letter writing and of polite society. His vulgarity is particularly evident in the letters to Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, and it is at these letters in particular that I attend in the

chapter. If Pope's letter publishing scandal is primarily aimed to address issues of copywright—why does he include vulgarities in his 'authorized' version? If his purpose was biographical or confessional—to demonstrate his masculinity alone—why would he make this the exemplary subject of a copyright scandal? The chapter seeks to bring together the two dominant modes of scholarship on Pope's correspondence –studies that focus on the biographical and those that focus on the textual history. While convincing scholarship exists on each of these tracks (copyright/personal), I argue that both are at work in Pope's publication. The content and the context are at play in his epistolary experiment in the public sphere. I argue that the apparently biographical and psychological content of the letters is best understood as a provocation of public sensibility. The sensibility he summons is not one of propriety and civility, but of raillery extended to provoke discerning judgment.

Chapter 2 turns to Mary Wollstonecraft's 1796 *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark*. Though the volume is based on Wollstonecraft's travels through Scandinavia, the letters themselves were written for the sake of the publication, with only a very few remnants of originally sent familiar letters. The veneer of familiar letters published, though, assisted in both getting the book into publication letters being, after all, a genre recognized as particularly suitable for women to write (Perry), and also less apparently polemical than Wollstonecraft's previous essays advocating for the Rights of Woman and the French Revolution. Scholars have focused on Wollstonecraft's significant revision of herself for a public audience—a necessary project for her to undertake given her outspoken support of a Revolution that ended in Terror, and her simultaneous status as a single mother. This work is often read as a step back from her more radical prior writings. I argue, though, that this work is a continuation of her radical, revolutionary politics, a politics that becomes evident when we take

seriously the operation of the second person address of the epistolary form. More than merely seeking sympathetic readers, Wollstonecraft's second person address constructs a new subject position and hermeneutic for her public of readers. Through the mechanisms of epistolary form, I argue, that Wollstonecraft summons readers into a British revolutionary consciousness that both revises the Gothic aesthetic to liberatory ends and provides an autochthonous origin story for revolutionary politics. This revised aesthetic and re-rooted British historical sensibility endeavors to free revolutionary sentiment from association with the particular failures of the French Revolution and its conclusion in the Terror. The chapter unfolds in two parts—the first part reviews the use of the second person throughout the volume while the second part examines the aesthetic and historical revisions of the Gothic. Wollstonecraft's *Letters Written During* tests out the possibility of rewriting the sense of a collective you as a means to re-enter the literary public sphere after her apparent 'disgrace.' As her highest selling volume during her lifetime, her experiment was a success—though as this text has faded with its (undeserved!) reputation of reformist compromise, her experiment was short lived.

In the third chapter of this dissertation, I take the tools of epistolary reading—attention to the unstable you/I, the function of a subject constructing itself through address of an audience, and the creation of communication by way of perverting and leveraging formal, normatizing, constraints—to read a late 20th century volume, *The Letters of Mina Harker* by Dodie Bellamy. Bellamy's book can be considered a novel—a designation that would mark a severe divergence from the narrow set of "familiar letters published". However, much like Wollstonecraft's *Letters Written During*, Bellamy's volume was first drafted as letters sent through the post. Possessed by the main character of Mina Harker, Dodie Bellamy composed letters and sent them to friends, inviting a response in their own persona or as a possessed correspondent. This back story is an

important part of the text's composition and presentation—the original letters were also published (*Real: The correspondence of Sam D'Allessandro and Mina Harker*). The novelistic volume is a revision, a collaged make-over, of the original letters combined with rewriting and new writing. Just as Wollstonecraft's *Letters Written During* entered the literary public sphere as ostensibly sent familiar letters, so too does Bellamy's novel.

Bellamy is closely identified with the New Narrative writers—a group of writers characterized more by their commitment to community than by the style of their writing. Yet Bellamy's *Letters of Mina Harker* in its published form presents some significant problems for readers entering into community with it. As one scholar notes, "[hester: it's alienating]. I suggest that the difficulty of the text and its focus on subject formation can be better accessed with a more robust appreciation of the epistolary as a reading technique. When epistolarity is attended to, despite its weak (one might say gimmicky (cf Ngai 2020), structure in the text, *The Letters of Mina Harker* presents series of subject forms that can be read as experiments towards a true freedom from both the neoliberal constraints of self-disciplining subjectivity and the narratives of self-responsibilization generated through biopolitical AIDS responses.

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Chapter 1: To take Raillery Seriously: Alexander's Pope's Epistolary Proposal for Public Discourse

1. Introduction

Before he was known as a poet, Alexander Pope was a letter writer. He achieved entrance into the literary world through his youthful correspondence[8] with renowned Restoration playwright William Wycherley; with dramatist, poet and diplomat John Caryll; and "reputed…greatest actor of his time" Thomas Betterton (Mack 89). At the height of his career, Pope published his letters in the face of the common understanding that letters of the living were private communications and published letter collections were appropriately those of the dead, whose lives could serve as exemplary moral guides. Though he made his reputation in large part through the personal connections and friendships he formed in private letters, Pope leveraged his letters to make a scandalous splash amongst the reading public and to affect legislative developments around copyright for authors. Scholars of his letters tend to focus on either the private and personal aspects of the letters, or on the public effects of the circumstances of the letter publication. Close readings of the letters tend to prefer the biographical or psychological; studies that attend to the effects on the public sphere tend towards the contextual or the editorial, with an interest in the legal parameters or the scandal of norms-flouted. Rarely is a study attentive to the effects of Pope's epistolary maneuvers in the text of the letters as a potential intervention the public sphere in equal measure to his publication maneuverings. In this chapter, I look at the anomalous reception of Pope's letters to Mary Wortley Montagu to argue that his letters are charting a style of public discourse that diverges from both polite, courtly standards

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[8] See Stephanson's *Yard of Wit* on the connections between Pope's male friendships and his poetic imagination of male creativity. Stephanson looks to his relationships with these men as foundational to the development of his poetic imagination of male creativity.

and from the developing norms of the rational-critical public sphere. Pope's epistolary discourse demands his readers tolerate crudity and embrace misdirection as a provocation to articulate a sharp response.

Working with Pope's letters is a tricky task. George Sherburn published a five volume collection of Pope's letters which includes Pope's letters and replies from his correspondents from 1704-1740. This collection is arranged chronologically, making it a rich resource for biographical reading. As Erskine-Hill and Raymond Stephanson have critically noted—this boon to biographers is also an impediment to literary analytical approaches to Pope's letters (Erskine-Hill xxi; Stephanson "Curious Case" 16). Pope himself throughout his life considered his letters to be part of his literary output (Sherburn notes he began thinking of publication as early as 19 November 1712 ("Introduction" xi)), both with explicit statements of his aspirations that the letters would be recognized as remarkable, and by the way he "treated them to the revisions and modifications to which he subjected all his works" (Cowler 36). There are thus multiple versions of many of Pope's letters—a few originals, several that were copied by correspondents and can be considered close to original, letters that Pope revised to a lesser or greater extent for publication. Pope also engaged in many schemes for publishing his letters, and similarly other persons—including a former mistress of Pope's correspondent Henry Cromwell and the publisher Edmund Curll—schemed for ways to publish Pope's letters to their own advantage. From the start, with volumes of letters published in 1726 and 1729, Pope's schemes and Edmund Curll's schemes were crossed (See Sherburn "Introduction" xii). Both engaged in publishing letters for profit, but Pope was concerned with control over his reputation even as he courted scandal. This became clearer in the publication history of the collection titled *Letters of Mr. Pope and Several Eminent Persons* (1735). Pope did not publish this set of letters as a single

volume. Instead he "stage managed three different versions of his correspondence" which then saw "at least seventeen editions between 1735 and 1742" (Hammerschmidt 273). It is these volumes that most significantly indicate Pope's commitment to manipulating the market and the interests of the reading public by putting his letters into their hands. The publishing scandal, in brief, is as follows: the publisher Curll and Pope had an established public hostility dating back to 1716 when Curll published, without permission, poems by Mary Wortley Montagu. Pope sprang to her defense by contriving to administer an emetic in Curll's drink and then writing a mocking commentary on the event, *A Full and True Account of a Horrid and Barbarous Revenge by Poison on the Body of Mr. Edmund Curll, Bookseller* (1716). The subsequent years saw Curll and Pope engage in other small skirmishes (See Winn 9-41 In 1733, Curll advertised for submission of material relating to Pope in preparation for a biography (McLaverty 265). It was not customary to publish one's own letters (Brant 47, Jones 23), and it seems likely that Pope was both gravely concerned that Curll not publish unauthorized versions and that Pope himself was seeding a manuscript of letters to the publisher. As Winn tells the story, Pope "invented" a "mysterious character" who responded to Curll's advertisement for materials by Pope (31). The 1735 publication of Pope's letters by Curll as then an occasion for Pope to reissue a corrected and authorized volume of the same letters, also in 1735. Pope went on to reissue the same letters in a new volume in 1737, with still more edits to the contents. These three main versions of the letters saw further editions through 1742. This poses a clear problem for literary scholars looking for an authoritative text to work with. Sherburn's *Correspondence* reflects the many edits to the letters with a complex set of annotations, but collapses the literary and editorial distinctions into a chronology.

While the material in Sherburn's collected letters of Alexander Pope is sufficiently detailed to reconstruct an understanding of Pope's edits between the privately sent and the variously publicly printed letters, it is a difficult task, and not one central to my purposes. Though the publication history of Pope's letters in his lifetime indicate that he considered them a literary publication of merit amid his other works, it is, as Erskine-Hill observes, "Pope's only major work not to have been edited in the twentieth century" (*World and Word* 10, qtd in Stephanson "Curious Case" 1). The gap between the 'original' letter and the 'published' letters is significant; in a project like this one which seeks to think through the ways that an individual epistolary voice enjoins readers to respond in the framework of a public setting, the differences between privately written and publicly printed letters ought to have bearing. In the absence of an edited volume of the Letters as published by Pope, this chapter takes a page from Stephanson's approach to this 'Vanishing text' to look at "how Pope's 1730s versions of his own letters have been used, fought over" (Stephanson "Curious Case" 2). But where Stephanson looks at the history of how and why the 1735-1737 volumes have come to be neglected by modern scholarship, this chapter looks at the way that even existing scholarship on Pope's letters has neglected the literary provocations of Pope's epistolary maneuvers themselves.

Where Pope's letters have received scholarly attention, preserving them from utter oblivion, their function as letters—that is, writing addressed an audience expected to respond—has been neglected. The letters maintain precarious visibility as biographical, as 'persona' (Coenen) or 'reputation' building (Cowler), or as evidence of marketing brilliance (Brant 47-48) and audience building,[9] and legal persuasion around copyright (Hudson, Rose). Soren

[9] Ingrassia demonstrates the connection between Pope's cultivation of a poetic persona and his financial success in her entry in the *Cambridge Companion to Alexander Pope*, "Money" and at greater length his anxieties about and manipulation of "paper credit" in her chapter on the

Hammerschmidt alone asks the question of why the Pope chose to make his legal maneuvers through a selection of correspondence (273). Hammerschmidt locates his answer in a study of "character" not merely persona, but as an "interface….connecting the period's media forms to each other and to their users; [character] mediated (between) them and made meaningful exchanges possible about who somebody was or was thought to be" (274). Character as a social mechanism is key to Pope's writing,[10] and Hammerschmidt's article moves a good way toward understanding it as an "intermediary" that requires readers' construction as much as it requires writer production. Still, though Hammerschmidt's main focus is on Pope's production of character as self-figuring and reputation building. In what follows, I look at several of Pope's published letters to Mary Wortley Montagu to demonstrate the ways his self-figuring illucidates the parameters of polite character presentation, and I suggest that his letters ultimately point away from authorial primacy and toward reader responsibility. He does this by eschewing and confusing genre norms, refusing consistency or clarity in his missives to Montagu, and praising her for her refusal to take his writing at face value. Pope's published letters suggest that "civil discourse" (particularly what a 20th century, Habermasian reader who seeks origins of the public sphere in the eighteenth century would desire—rational, critical, polite, considered, clear) is immaterial to the matter of social cohesion and he seeks instead a reader (and by extension a reading public) capable of piercing through misdirection such as raillery, rudeness, and self-importance.

Dunciad in *Authorship, Commerce, and Gender in Early Eighteenth-Century England: A Culture of Paper Credit*.

[10] Much more has been written on the subject in relation to Pope's poetry—see especially Branciforte.

Pope's letters to Montagu are of particular interest because they appear to diverge from Pope's apparent epistolary aims of reputation building for a high-literary persona, or as a "gentile" letter writer. Nor do his letters to Montagu play a particular role in the market manipulations, which were primarily facilitated through the circumstances of publication (clergyman, "unauthorized" publication). Reading Pope's letters to Montagu as a coherent body of letters is something that other scholars have done—Stephanson makes a note that these letters are "unremarkable," Grundy reads the letters to her in the context of Montagu's biography, and Cynthia Wall looks at his letters to Montagu as a case study of how she ultimately does not matter to his world-construction at all. The lack of a scholarly edition of Pope's self-published correspondence means that studies of the letters to Montagu are always out of context. For example, one letter to Montagu is published merely as "Letter to a Lady Abroad." Though the letters to Montagu are a set of text compiled post-facto, I join the ranks of scholars looking at the letters as an informative series nonetheless.

Scholars diverge on how to read various aspects of his letters, especially the tone and purpose, some suggesting that his letters are in fact gentile, "cultivated" and "gallant" (Mack 302) while others read them as manipulatively controlling (Ingrassia *Authorship* 45) and intellectually dismissive of her intellect and early symptoms of his later "full-blown, gendered hatred" of Montagu (Grundy xviii). Scholars also diverge over the role his letters play in his "reputation building," as Cowler does, or as part of an authorial "posture," as Coenen does, and others prefer to read his letters to Montagu as sincere admission of his true feelings (Winn). Where one scholar reads Pope as sexualizing Montagu (Grundy) another will read him as enjoining deep friendship (Cowler). John Butt merely notes that the correspondence with Montagu is an anomaly in Pope's letters because it is one of only three correspondences that

were ended and never resumed. This divergence of interpreting Pope's letters to Montagu is, I believe, a result of the division into interpretations of the private effects versus interpretations of the public effects of the letters. Pope's use of and explicit commentary on the affordances of the medium and genre of the letter suggest a way to see the necessary bridge between the private and the public. In fact, I will argue, this division between the private and the public is mistakenly over read into the letters, imported from our 20th and 21st century ideas of a differentiation between the two spheres that was only nascent in Pope's time.

2. **Distance, Intimacy, & Truth-telling**

Letter writing manuals were rife in Britain during the 18th century. Eve Tavor Bannet documents over 50 volumes providing advice and sample letters as models for polite correspondence. While the real explosion of manual publication occurred in the second half of the century, several were published at the end of the 17th century, and the genre of the letter manual extends to the middle of the 16th century in France, with roots clearly visible in Italy and stretching back to the Middle Ages volumes of *Ars Dictaminis* (Chartier 64). Treatises on letter writing provided "rules, advice and models" (Chartier 65) while the genre of collected letters—the first instance of which was published in France in 1538, provided a "storehouse that could be raided for inspiration and ready-made expressions" (Chartier 66). These two genres –manual and model letters--soon merged into one, and served as a normative reflection of letter writing practices. These normative models were an essential technology for nation and empire building, shaping the nature of individual relationships into the structure of an imagined social organization enabling real material effects. Bannet says of turn-of-the-18th-Century manuals that they "facilitate[d] transatlantic trade and communication by offering English epistolary models whose codes were recognized and understood" (Bannet 150). Pope was well versed in the history

of letters, modeling himself consciously on the precedents of Vincent Voiture's courtly letters and aspiring to enter into the halls of 'epistolary fame' (we'll come back to Voiture later in the chapter). Whether or not Pope explicitly learned from the letter manuals of the time, he would have absorbed the codes of communication through his lengthy exchanges with Wycherly, Caryll, and others. Pope's letters, then must be read as engaged with commonplaces of epistolary exchange when he sets out to establish a correspondence with Mary Wortley Montagu as she departs London for Istanbul in August of 1716 (well before he published the letters, but as Sherburn notes, well after he'd first begun thinking of doing so with at least some of his correspondence in 1712). In the first letter he writes to her after she has left London, he introduces the idea that the distance at which they communicate offers a situation in which they (or at least he) can test the normative boundaries of public and private correspondence.

Pope's letters to Montagu explicitly address the issue of how to communicate at a distance—a subject of much interest to letter writers and letter writing manuals. After all, every letter is a transmission across a spatial and temporal separation[11]—even letters sent within a household, e.g. from master or mistress to servant, are by nature crossing time and space[12]. Pope explicitly theorizes on the effects distance will have on the relations between himself and Montagu. He says of his letters to Montagu as she travels further from London,

> I foresee that the further you go from me, the more freely I shall write, & if (as I earnestly wish) you would do the same. I can't guess where it will end. Let us be like modest

[11] See Altman, who defines the letter's function "as a connector between two distant points, as a bridge between sender and receiver" (13).
[12] Bannet, on letter manual advice for writing reprimanding letters to either family members or servants, "[A] letter, which itself represents and bridges physical distance, is used to introduce a temporal distance during which anger can be dissipated and conciliation can occur" (118)_Thus also—potentially at least, if not in practice always—the contemporary e-mail.

> people, who when they are close together keep all decorums but if they take a little step aside, or get to the other end of a room, can untie garters or take off Shifts without scruple. (*Correspondence* vol. 1 384)

Wall quotes this passage and says of it, "The very distance between them, he suggests, becomes a condition for intimacy" (224). His theory of communication is one that he spells out his first letter to Montagu after her departure from London.

> "The unhappy distance at which we correspond, removes a great many of those punctilious Restrictions and Decorums, that oftentimes in nearer Conversation prejudice Truth to save Good breeding. I may now hear of my faults, and you of your good qualities, without a Blush [on either side]" (*Correspondence* vol. 1, 354).

The benefit of her absence is not simply a condition for intimacy, but an opportunity for experiments in impoliteness—both frank and dissembling. The "punctilious restrictions and decorums" of "good breeding" can be ignored. He couches this as a point in favor of "Truth" telling—accusing polite society of preferring falsehood and dissemblance to protect against 'blushes.' This opening gambit is a small gesture that I take to justify rumination on the role Pope's letters to Montagu might play in an experiment in public discourse. There are contextual reasons to consider these flirtatious, or as many have called the letters, "gallant" comments as more than personal, psychological, or mere self-posturing. Or, at least, whatever personal motivation Pope may have had, I am interested to read them as indicative of an authorial stance that seeks to provoke polite society and its constraints on early bourgeois public sphere discourse.

3. At Odds with Epistolary Standards

Pope's premise that distance enables blunt truthfulness is at odds with the standard expectations of letter writing as described by letter manuals—which in fact prescribe the exact opposite. Sample letters from manuals offer exemplary models for writing to one who is at an unusual distance. The genre features effusive sorrow at the absence, and a longing for nearness so strong that the letter becomes a medium of conversation. Letter manuals propose a conceptual model of elaborate sincerity that undergirds the grammatical techniques writers use. Blount's 1654 *Academie of Excellence* includes a letter "To a Lady, upon her leaving the City" which opens with a portrait of the utter despair the lady's departure has imposed:

> Ever since you left London, all joyes and good fortune have left us, the heavens have not ceased to shed continual teares for your absence, and Mars has fround. {It was a time of great rain.} upon all our undertakings, nor can we hope to receive good news or enjoy fair weather, till the rayes and vertue of your presence returne hither, to uncloud the watry element and uncharm the fortune of War. (173)

A slightly more subdued emotional state is modeled in a letter "Complaining of absence" in the same manual: "If I could find out words to express the language of my heart, I should then be able to demonstrate how little I enjoy myself, whilst I am absent from you." These read as exuberant, and perhaps even exaggerated expressions of absence's effects. La Serre's 1654 manual, reprinted in 1673, suggests, though, that the intent of these remarks is to express desire that friendship not be diminished by absence. Such introductory statements attempt to ward off the perceived obstacles that distance creates:

> "Letters of Visit serve to continue friendship between men when they are absent, and supply the place of visits, one would afford a Friend if he were neere at hand. There you may say, You have no greater content then to discourse in writing with him, seeing you

> are so farre distant one from the other, that you cannot doe it by word of mouth ; that you much desire to know how he doth, and if his affairs succeed prosperously ; and that not doubting but they having the like desire towards you, you send him word how it is with you and yours. That you Languish with desire to see him as soon as possible may be: that days wherein you see him not, seem whole years to you, and years whole ages, especially when you receive no letters from him. That you conjure him to write often, and that he can do you no greater a favour, promising you will do the like to him, and give him more cause to complaine of your importunity then of your carelessness or neglect. And conclude with a protestation of inviolably maintaining and continuing the Friendship which is betwixt you, saying that neither distance of place, nor length of time, shall cancel it out of your heart: that you hope to make it appear in deeds more then in words, whensoever it shall please him to make trial of you ; and that you rest assur'd of the like return of love from him, to whom you wish all manner of prosperity. (La Serre 13)[13]

As in Blount's samples, La Serre describes the writer's attitude as one of great anguish—so great that it is hyperbolic. Where Blount's sample of a sorrow so great the whole of London and even her weather are affected is a grand pathetic fallacy, La Serre's model writer experiences time itself dilating. The effect of the friend's absence on the writer must properly be expressed, but the occasion of the letter in the manuals' instruction is to substitute for, and thereby overcome, the fact of a friend's absence: the letter is in place of a visit, acting potentially as its equivalent. In other words, though the elaboration of regret at the distance may be quite florid—with "all joyes and good fortune" departed, rain itself a metonymic representation of sorrow, and the

[13] Page number refers to the PDF page number as accessed on EEBO, July 12, 2020. https://search.proquest.com/docview/2248556758?accountid=14784

planets mourning too, letters at a distance must endeavor to overcome the obstacle of distance—exaggerating emotions to make a continuation of the friendship possible. We will see that Pope does not consider distance an obstacle but an opportunity, and he uses the language of exaggerated intimacy to ribald effect.

Clair Brant—whose *Eighteenth-Century Letters and British Culture* provides by far the richest and broadest overview of epistolary moves in postal communication of the era—describes the common trope of writers theorizing their letters as in-person interactions[14], continuing a relationship held in person. She explains,

> "writers who describe their letters as conversational often follow it with an evocation of the recipient's presence….The conversational idiom is tied to a fantasy that the addressee will surmount the absence: the point is not informality or spontaneity for their own sakes, but how they enable a trope for voice….Eighteenth-century writers' liking for tropes of voice through the image of conversation can be seen as a way of dealing with the body's imperfect disappearance in letters. In face-to-face conversation, bodies are present and communicative; body language is its non-verbal adjunct. In letters, bodies are absent but they can have a phantom presence if the writer represents writing as conversation, in which voice acts as a half-way point between body and consciousness" (Brant 22).

The body is very much present in Pope's letters, with a level of lewdity and rudeness that has preoccupied scholars of his letters to Montagu. The sexualized body in Pope's letters is a topic I will turn to in greater detail in the next portion of this chapter, but it is impossible to miss the prominence it plays in his re-writing of the effects distance plays in his embedded theory of

[14] See also Randal "Epistolary Rhetoric" on the tradition of using letter style to reproduce those elements of face-to-face settings (9) and the history of understanding letters as a variant on or substitute for speech (7-9).

the letters he is writing to Montagu. Rather than using exuberance to overcome distance so that the letter can be a proxy for in-person conversation, Pope sees the intermediary letters as an opportunity to increase the intimacy with which he can engage Montagu beyond what he might to do in person. In his fourth letter to Montagu (as collected by Sherburn), he writes, "Methinks it is a noble Spirit of Contradiction to fate and fortune, not to give up those that are snatchd from us" (*Correspondence* vol. 1,367). As La Serre would have it, Pope presents a "protestation of inviolably maintaining and continuing the Friendship". This partial adherence to the spirit of epistolary propriety, modeled and dictated by manuals, is belied by Pope's next lines. He continues to say that not only will he refuse to "give up those that are snatched from us" but that he thinks it best to "follow them with warmer Zeal, the farther they are removd from the sence of it" (*Correspondence* vol. 1,367). His letters use the distance as an excuse for exactly those things that would not be possible in person: disrobing, excessive flattery, warmer zeal than usually allowed for in polite face-to-face conversation, and an intimacy that exceeds social propriety or even friendly allowances. We might call these 'extra-epistolary' interests, as they exceed the standards of the letter as well as more-than-hintingly suggesting a sexual relationship in the flesh, and (I will suggest) making interventions in the conventional modes of reading and apprehending ideas in the public sphere.

Pope gives his own reason for eschewing politeness at a distance: "Sure Flattery never traveld so far as three thousand miles; it is now only for Truth, which overtakes all things, to reach you at this distance" (P.4.VI.367). Here, as with the opening gambit of his letters, the introduction of distance allows Pope to introduce increased flattery which he equates with increased Truth telling. The distance at which they write, Pope proposes, makes it possible for them to have conversation that would be prohibited were they in close proximity in London. As

he puts it in the opening letter (quoted above), the distance makes it possible for him to ignore that "punctilious decorums" that "prejudice Truth to save Good breeding."

4. Testing Decorums: Is It Gallant; Is It Sincere?

Pope tests what he calls the 'punctilious decorums' of the letter genre and the social conventions of conversation through sexualized and bawdy descriptions of himself and his imagination of Mary Wortley Montagu. Here is a brief list of his affronts: Pope announces to Montagu that he thinks "not every body naked so fine a sight as yourself" (*Correspondence* vol. 1, 352); he offers himself as an alternative lover to her husband, and barring that, he wishes her that she "receive from him as many pleasures and gratifications as even I think you can give" (*Correspondence* vol. 1, 355). In case the reference to her "pleasures" were too obscure to emphasize the sexual lewdness of his letters, he writes to her (in a letter sent but not published in his lifetime), a request that she bring back to him a concubine who resembles herself: "This is what I really wish from my Soul, tho it would ruin the best project I ever lay'd, that of obtaining, thro' your means, my fair Circassian Slave. She, whom my Imagination had drawn more amiable than Angels, as beautiful as the lady who was to chuse her by a resemblance to so divine a face" (*Correspondence* vol. 1, 364). And (also unpublished) he speculates on the presentation of vegetable hors d'ouvres in the harem: where unhappy Women converse with none but Eunuchs, and where the very cucumbers are brought to them Cutt" (*Corr. vol, 368).* While many of these passages were not published in either the 1735 unauthorized versions or in the subsequent authorized editions, his requests for naked revelation were published, and his letters to Ladies, particularly those to Montagu, have been read as at the very least toying with sexuality and flirtation.

Maynard Mack, author of a definitive 1985 biography of Pope, largely set the tone for contemporary scholarship on the content of Pope's letters to Montagu. He argues that Pope's letters to Montagu are in the tradition of "epistolary Gallantry." Mack explains the genre of the gallant letter as one defined by excess, extravagant and overwrought writing, carnivalesque and comic narrative, and in short, "a species of flirtatious game, governed, if not by rules, at least by norms" (303). Pope's letters to Montagu, Mack argues, are a presentation of extreme sentiment taken to the point of implosion so that their extremity and sentimentality are both undermined or at least brought into question by the absurdity of their expression: "Much that [Pope] chooses to say to Lady Mary takes the form of consciously droll scenarios, in which the ostensible fervor of the message is exploded by the absurdity of the medium" (Mack 304). Mack suggests that the gallant epistolary can be used to either or both "creative or destructive ends" depending on its use and the ways in which both writer and reader play "the game" of the genre (303). In her 2001 biography of Montagu, Isobel Grundy also describes Pope's letter as "gallant" but unlike Mack she describes Pope's use of the genre as firmly destructive, and frankly misogynist. In Grundy's analysis, Pope is not simply "gallant"; instead, he takes up and modifies the discursive genre to develop his own "style of flattering gallantry" (Grundy 114), specifically for the purpose of writing to Montagu, with the goal of focusing on her body and her femininity to the exclusion of the intellectual gifts and interests. (Grundy xvii).[15] These two biographers' take on Pope's epistolary gallantry is indicative of the divisiveness of gallantry as a genre of discourse, and as such it is a genre that tests (as in shows they exist, but also threatens to break) social parameters of communication.

[15] See also Spacks "Familiar Genres," which continues Grundy's line of analysis.

Gallantry's divisiveness is most evident on gendered lines—as we see instanced in the diverging biographies of Pope and Montagu above. Laura Runge, before detailing the divergence of women writers' view of gallantry from men's, gives a brief history of the "widely accepted code of behavior for men—namely gallantry" which is in brief the expectation that "a gentleman is responsible for protecting the vulnerable and proverbially beautiful sex" (43). This social conduct was, she explains, "espoused as a polite advancement over barbaric practices, whether of England's past or of other kingdoms" (43). Rising in part out of a courtly tradition of elaborate rhetoric to appeal to and appease the monarch, gallantry broadens its rhetorical scope to "presenting a trustworthy image of politeness" (Runge 46) to an aristocratic and (increasingly) bourgeois English social sphere in the late 17th century. Much like "courtship" before it, "gallantry" is both a sociable discourse and a wooing one; it works to establish the (male) performer as a suitably sophisticated and 'polite' member of cultivated society while also playing out romantic games. Runge explains the connection between the two functions of gallantry (sociable and romantic): "the discourse of gallantry situates the male as a practitioner of a rich and symbolic language through which he becomes civilized (or desired), and consequently the male gallant views this language as a means to an end and values it according to its effectiveness" (47). It is exactly this dynamic that strikes its female readers differently than the male beholders of gallant behavior: "The dynamic of eighteenth-century gallantry positions the female as the recipient and interpreter of ambiguous flattery and indirect proposition, and thus her main concern with this language is more subjective and semantic" (47). Men write and speak in the gallant style as a performance for each other and as a demonstration that they are 'cultured' enough to recognize women as objects of aesthetic pleasure, a gesture that gains the male speaker further social capitol. Women must read gallantry as a peace offering—a

recognition of their presence in society but not a peer relationship. Gallantry is wooing in the form of conquest (Landgraf 32). Women, in other words, can only respond to gallantry as objects of it. If we take this definition and turn back again to the varied readings of Pope's letters to Montagu, we see that gallantry's gendered dynamics repeatedly explain the interpretation of the letters. Grundy responds to Pope's letters as rude and subjugating, while Mack sees the letters as merely a "flirtatious game."

Other scholars of Pope also look at his letters to Montagu as gallant. The term works to paper over the oddity of the letters, the way that these few letters seem to break the conventions of sincerity and of propriety. In what follows, I look at the primary scholars on Pope's letters and at how they seek to comprehend the Montagu letters from a biographical, personal, or reputation building point of view. I then turn to consider the scholarship on Pope's letters that focuses on his interventions in the public sphere in the form of market and legal manipulation. Finally, I look to square these two accounts of the function of Pope's letters in public to suggest that he is not merely publishing the private, or manipulating the parameters of public discourse, but proposing a style of discourse that relies on reading insincerity sincerely without a boundary between the raillery and authenticity, or between public and private.

Pope's 'gallant' style, whether understood as rude or courtly, playful or sincere, has antecedents in Vincent Voiture's then-recently translated collection of *Familiar and Courtly Lettters*, as well as connections to the "coarser precedents for racy elements" in the 'hack' and pornographic writing of the early 18th century (Winn 64). In the only book-length study of Pope's letters, Winn reads Pope's letters to ladies more firmly on the 'courtly' and decorous style of former, arguing that his letters are "models of decorum compared to the love letters Brown and other hacks were writing and collecting" (64). Pope, Winn argues, emulated Voiture's style,

adopting "raillery, compliment, and *double-entendre* to insinuate the writer's fundamentally sexual response to the woman being addressed" (63). Yet despite locating Pope in Voiture's lineage of gallant letters, Winn offers a contradicting argument how to interpret where to place Pope's motivation for such (barely veiled) lewdity. While on the one hand Winn sees Pope's style as stylized, courtly, fanciful, and even exaggerated (though less so than hack writers would do), he suggests on the other hand that Pope is sincere and we should read the poet's claims for authenticity as the true statements. Pope says of his own writing to Montagu, "May I thus tell you the truth of my heart" (*Correspondence* vol. 1 363), and "I can't go on in this style: I am not able to think of you without the utmost seriousness" (Corr ? 364, October 1716). Winn reads these statements at face value, arguing that Pope's more elaborate (and sexualized) raillery are but "a way to dramatize his feelings toward Lady Mary, but in a form far enough from being explicit that his own feelings are protected" (113). Whatever Pope's motivations, though, there is no indication in the text of his letters that we can take sincerely Pope's statements of sincerity any more than we can his raillery[16]. Winn is confusing serious with chaste—an interpretive

[16] Bannet says of Raillery and epistolary style, "Most difficult to carry off successfully was the jocular or rallying style, which signaled the *sprezzatura*, or "ease" and "negligence" of the true gentleman, and was the style most admired by the New Critics who tended to equate it with "wit." Characterized by the light and jocular treatment of serious subjects, and by the mock-serious treatment of trivial subjects through disproportionate analogies, counterfeit truths, pretended passions, and absurd or fantastic comparisons, the rallying style offered greater freedom than any other. But for this reason, it was most likely to lapse into excessive freedom or into over-vamiliarity, and thus to give offense. The art of Raillery was an art of brinkmanship: to take the liberty of mocking to the edge of propriety; to reflect familiarly on the character, conversation, conduct or appearance of others without obtruding too far. Raillery had to remain pleasing even to the person or persons being rallied…Both [Courtin and Mr. Spectator] set limits to the freedom and familiarity permissible, by insisting, for instance, that raillery shold neer reflect on men's politics, religion, misforutnues or serious physical defects; transgress the rules of modesty by lewdness or double entendres; offend against the rules of good taste by puns, slapstick, mean comparisons and other forms of false wit; or be used to express personal malice or contempt" (Bannet 293-4).

elision that hides Pope's epistolary maneuvers.

Yet determining which side of the equation to fall on is a fool's errand as the division between 'sincere' or 'gallant' is a false one. As Runge's history of the manner reminds us, gallantry's game is ambiguity:

> "The open-ended nature of gallant language, and especially the ambiguity that enables indirect proposition situates the male suitor in the advantageous of either being taken seriously in his offer of service or being regarded as a charming *bon vivant*" (Runge 54) (my emphasis).

However, this kind of tension itself is a key feature of the letter, and one that Pope leverages as a model of discourse to provoke the reader to a new mode of reading. The trick is to read the contradiction without pursuing the answer of whether it is one or the other (see the last section of this chapter for what Pope directly advises).

The idea that letters might be read 'sincerely,' also have a root in the Augustan epistolary style and in Voiture's style. Pope, Winn and Jones explain, admired Voiture's ability to simply 'throw himself onto paper.' There is a tension between the courtly sophisticated stylings and the sense of spontaneous authentic writing. Jones explains the Augustan take on this tension through the words of Pope's early mentor William Walsh, who, Jones notes, wrote in his 1692 *Letters and Poems* preface what then became an eighteenth century maxim, "The style of letters ought to be free, easy, and natural: as near approaching to familiar conversation as possible." (Jones 21, quoting Walsh). She explains the conundrum this maxim constructs for early eighteenth century letter writers:

> "[I]n their letters the Augustans always aimed at the simplicity and naturalness of individuals in whom the values of a highly-civilized society had been inculcated. They

> would have been horrified had they actually encountered in their correspondence the colloquial or the random discourse which might realistically approximate their oft-expressed belief that the perfect epistolary style must resemble intimate discourse" (Jones 21).

Pope's language is, let us remember, specifically phallic in the unpublished letters, and even in the published letters it is preoccupied with the imagination of undressing Montagu as she travels into the distance. Can we call Pope's lewd discourse to Montagu "intimate"? It is surely much more "colloquial," though to call it such is something of an equivocation when it is outright lewd. If the epistolary discourse options at hand are highly civilized, carefully constructed naturalness, and accidental colloquial intimacy, Pope's letters to Montagu do not fit comfortably in either. Pope's letters to Montagu also do not seem like "failure" to achieve the ideal Augustan discourse.

If the model of the epistolary discourse is carefully crafted authentic intimacy that maintains polite society relationships, the epistolary style can fail in two ways. It can fail by appearing over-constructed and therefore artificial and inauthentic[17], and consequentially it disrupts the established social relationship by over-formalizing it. It can also fail through insufficiently crafted prose that is mistakenly colloquial, with the consequence of making the social relationship more intimate that it properly should be. Here the gallant style that Mack and Winn turn?? does open something of a third option: by offering a style of witticism that suggestively violates the established relationship with gestures of courtship. But Pope's letters

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[17] See Eve Tavor Bannet *Empire of Letters* for discussion of the stylistic tension in letters between authentic, matter-of-fact, clear, concise language and elegant, genteel, and 'embroidered' language (27-29) Bannet also discusses imitation and use of standard genre forms in this chapter. Bannet also discusses "The Paradox of Politeness" pages 63-69)

are not, as I suggested above, gallant. If the letters to Montagu are not a model of Augustan polite intimacy, nor a failure thereof, and they are not 'gallant', then what is Pope doing?

5. What is Pope doing by publishing his letters?

Pope is definitely doing something with his letters—not just the ones to Montagu, but it is the Montagu letters that present a particular oddity within the epistolary project Pope undertakes. Butt (distinguished 20th century editor of Pope's poetry) notes in 1957:

> It is still unusual to publish one's private letters, and a man who does so, unless he is exceptionally conceited, may well feel that such an action is lacking in modesty, especially if the letters are mainly concerned with his private life. That was what Pope thought; but nevertheless he was determined to publish. (62)

Jones describes at greater length the oddity of self-publishing one's own letters. Letter collections were often published posthumously, particularly letters of famous individuals. They were popular as "useful moral instruction" (22), and as a "literary genre" demonstrating a "life worthy of imitation" (23). But letters were also understood as "private communications" (23), the publication of which besmirches the character of the author who publishes them, as so doing violates the private relationship of the correspondents. Thus to publish one's own letters means that they will fail as a public literary work, being no longer morally exemplary having betrayed the private lives of the correspondents. The moral prohibition against publishing one's own letters is widely understood as the reason for Pope's cloak-and-dagger schemes to get Curll to publish a volume of poems, allowing him to follow up with authorized versions. There is still, though, a question of why Pope was so invested in publishing his letters and going to such lengths to make them passably acceptable to a reading public.

The question of why he would publish his letters widely is amplified when it comes to consideration of why he would publish his letters to Montagu, given that even in their edited form they are more explicit than is polite. There are two broad answers given in the literature on Pope's letters. Scholars who delve into the content of the Montagu letters tend to focus on answers that highlight persona-building, and in so doing often justify his performance as a psychological compensation for his physical shortcomings: "by the time he began to be known as a successful poet he was already established in his own mind and in the minds of others as a dwarf and cripple" (Mack 153), and thus throughout his life, "For Pope, unquestionably, an intimately related interest would have been that of countering at least some of the distortions and defamations of his character" (657-8). Coenen attributes Pope's erotic style to "self-posturing" and argues that his letters as a whole, and particularly those to women of his own age, are an effort to define himself in contrast to the circulating negative depictions of him:

> "The publication of these letters [to Lady Mary and Martha Blount] enabled Pope to demonstrate that, contrary to popular belief, he indeed enjoyed close, romantic relationships with women, and it further allowed him to present himself as a kind, warm, and loving man who did not deserve to be spoken of in such cruel terms" (Coenen 48).

Winn too sees Pope's motivation for publishing the letters as a result of the "contradictory and powerful impulses toward self-exposure and imaginative disguise" (41) and out of a "subconscious desire to have his cleverness eventually recognized and appreciated" (Winn 41)—quite overlooking the sexual aspect of the letters.

Plausible as a simple psychoanalytic interpretation might be, Raymond Stephanson's chapter on Pope in his longer volume, *The Yard of Wit*, on early eighteenth century masculinity and creative production begins to point us to the equally important second function of Pope's

published letters: to affect the market logic. Stephanson argues that Pope's rakish performances and his reference (explicit and wittily otherwise) to body, sexual, and (mostly male) genitals is both an economic ploy to win him readers in the popular arena, and also a means to enter into homosocial literary spheres: "More dramatically than any other writer of the period, Pope's head and groin were put up for sale, a commercial testimony to the newer definition of masculinity as sexualized interiority" ("Yard" 159). Yet Stephanson's analysis is primarily focused on the development of masculine interiority, rather than on the market. This (warranted) examination of Pope's production of a masculine interiority as creative well-spring nonetheless misses a central tenet of epistolary writing: its dependence on an audience in a posited reciprocal role (see chapter 2 for more discussion of the reciprocal reader in epistolarity). In fact, when it comes to the effects of Pope's virile performances, Stephanson dismisses their potential effect on an audience, particularly on an audience of female readers. Instead he focuses on the letters as productive of Pope's persona, thereby missing the oddity of publishing the letters to Montagu. He says of the letters Montagu that they are, "Hardly worthy of elaborate analysis, these teasings are still useful in suggesting the extent to which male privy members represented an available inventory of imaginative play even in Pope's long-distance courtship" ("Yard" 203).

If Mack, Winn, Coenen, and to a large extent Stephanson's *Yard of Wit* err on the side of subjective motivation, then McLaverty, Rose, and Hudson favor attention to market logic and legal persuasion as Pope's purpose.[18] McLaverty explicitly names his difference from the personal motivations commonly noted: "Pope has been portrayed as motivated purely by vanity (with regard to his letters) and by vindictiveness (towards Curll), but a little further

[18] For background on copyright, see Deazley et al *Privilege and Property: Essays on the History of Copyright*, Deazley *On the Origin of the Right to Copy*,

bibliographical investigation and a re-examination of contemporary accounts presents us with a different picture" (264). "I believe" McLaverty explains, "Pope designed the whole scheme with the Booksellers' Bill [of 1737] in mind: he did not want to publish his letters, and he was happy to frighten Curll; but he particularly wanted to create an episode which would serve to illustrate the scandalous behavior of a section of the book trade tolerated by the rest" (275). That "scandalous section" was the booksellers, who at the time were licensed to own, print, and reprint any documents they had in their physical possession without the permission of the author. This is exactly the situation Pope animates by slipping Curll his letters. McLaverty summarizes the affair by pointing to Pope's own *Narrative* in the preface to the 1737 edition of the letters (i.e. an authorized version): "The first paragraph expresses the hope that the affair will be a flagrant enough example of a bookseller's abuse of freedom as to enduce the legislature to take action" (McLaverty 275).

Rose tells a similar story of Pope's motivations for publishing the letters by looking to the 1741 court case *Pope v. Curll*, "in which the rule was established that copyright in a letter belongs to the writer" (Rose 197). This case is, Rose argues, "an important transitional moment tin the concept of authorship and of authors' rights, and a transitional moment, too, in the conception of literary property" (198). Through the trial, Rose demonstrates, Pope makes the case and sets the standard that has developed into contemporary parameters for what can be copyrighted as extended and abstracted. From ownership of the 'copy,' which accorded rights to the printers who owned the ink-and-paper copy, this 1741 case conferred ownership rights to "pure signs, separated from any material support" (Rose 210). This differentiation of ownership over paper copy and ownership of words strung together is revealed in particular by the question of the letter. The letter is written by the author and intended for another; the words and the paper

together are to be sent off to the recipient. So who owns the letter? The answer to this is, Rose argues, the most significant outcome of Pope vs. Curll:

> perhaps more fundamental than the ruling about letters coming under the statute [of Anne] was the distinction that [Judge] Hardwicke drew between the receiver's property in the paper and the writer's property in the words, for in this moment the concept of literary property as a wholly immaterial property in a text might be said to have been born. (Rose 215)

Hudson also emphasizes the role that Pope's publication tussles with Curll play in the development of copyright. In Hudson's account, copyright was a disputed legal right amongst authors themselves. To lay a claim to 'rights' and thus also to financial recompense for the literary products is to reduce the author from "Genius" to mere mechanical inventor. This was a double bind:

> On the one hand, authors had argued that they deserved adequate recompense for their 'useful' product, like any inventor. On the other hand, their claim to greater 'nobility' than mere mechanics implied that they should be inspired by nobler motives than the desire for money. (Hudson 1586)

And one that Pope himself was caught in when he published his letter nefariously and then took Curll to court (Hudson 1585). Hudson ultimately argues that though Pope's own stance on whether to consider authors as members of the gentry or "the City" (1690), the 1741 court case was one of the significant moments that went towards constructing the role of the author as neither one nor the other. Instead, his case and others in legal and public debate contribute to the creation of the author as "classless"—that is, outside of the social/economic class markers and

therefore able to critique capitalism—an authorial role of increasing import and self-identification moving into the late 18th and 19th centuries (Hudson 1587, 1592). Hudson's article, like McLaverty and Rose's, focuses not on the content of the letters but on the role they play in legal and market transformations.

6. Moral model or rational influencer? Pope's stylings as public stylings.

Whether scholars lean towards analysis of persona building or analysis of market manipulation, all concur that Pope is a uniquely public figure—one who was attuned to the public discourse (even if that attention is largely focused on Pope's concerns about his image) and keenly interested to make a mark and in need of garnering commercial success. Whether success in the public market of book buying comes as a result of readers compelled by personality and scandal or as a result of the courts influenced by the problems raised by the same scandal, there is no doubt that Pope's works are indeed public facing. But I'd like to suggest that each of the two dominant threads of interpreting Pope's letters misses a key aspect of the public intervention Pope made in the drama of their publication—we need a perspective that can encompass both.

Reading Pope's letters for content of biographical, psychological, and subjective construction misses the interventions the letters make in the parameters of public sphere; while reading for the legal and public ramifications favors the context of the public sphere at the cost of the stylistic arguments for the relation of persons within those legal and market strictures. When scholars like Winn, Coenen, Jones, Wall, and Stephanson focus on psychological, biographical, and persona building as the motivation for publication and as the appeal to the public audience, they posit a reading public that is compelled by figures. Jones spells this out in her description of how posthumous letter collections are read, as "models" for morality (18).

Jones' focus on the content of the letters is also exemplary as an interpretive strategy that misses Pope's investment in contemporary political affairs (such as those Rose, Hudson, and McLaverty present). Jones writes, "If, by and large, Pope was very much a letter writer of his age, echoing its commonplaces and conventions, his correspondence is anomalous in one important respect: its indifference to current affairs" (30). Interpretations that put Pope's epistolary significance in the realm of "moral model" are placing him in a style of public discourse that assumes influence and public performance are the key shapers of the public sphere. This is a model of the 'public' that precedes the transformation to the 'rational-critical' of the bourgeois public sphere.

We would do well here to remember that the bourgeois public sphere is at best nascent and unformed at the time Pope came into prominence with his poetry, when he was writing the letters and forming his agenda to become known for them. Even when he initiated the scandal of the unauthorized publication through Curll, the public sphere as a realm of 'rational-critical' debate was nascent in Britain[19]. Recalling with Habermas that the public sphere is not a new-born construct in the 18th century, but rather that the 'bourgeois public sphere' aka the 'rational-critical' public sphere is a transformation of an earlier existing public, it follows that Pope published his letters in a context of flux, when multiple versions of public discourse and styles of

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[19] Habermas notes that three events in 1694 and 1695 "mark the beginning" of the "appeal to the new authority of the public" and includes in this the expiration of the Licensing Act of 1695 which ended the power of the monarch's censorship over publishing houses (Habermas 58-9). The expiration of the Licensing Act is one of the precursors to the development of copyright law (see Deazley). Habermas places the full formation of the rational-critical public sphere in 1742: "Two years after *Pamela* appeared on the literary scene (pub. 1740), the first public library was founded; book clubs, reading circles, and subscription libraries shot up….[T]hey made it possible for the reading of novels to become customary in the bourgeois strata. These constituted the public that had long since grown out of early institutions like the coffee houses...and was now held together through the medium of its professional criticism. They formed the public sphere of a rational-critical debate in the world of letters within which the subjectivity originating in the interiority of the conjugal family, by communicating with itself, attained clarity about itself" (Habermas 51).

public are at play. There is a "multiplicity of concurrent meanings" that are at play in the term "public". Scholars who read Pope's letters as biographical are missing some aspects of public (the parameters of the market and the laws of copyright), but they are also highlighting for us the style of public address that preceded the bourgeois public sphere of the second half of the eighteenth century. Pope's publication of the letters (as Jones points out) rests on the model of exemplarity in presenting a life to the public in a mode that Habermas calls "representative publicness" (5). This mode is one that Habermas suggests reaches its ultimate form in the "courtly-knightly publicity…at the French and Burgundian courts in the fifteenth century" (9)—a call back to a history that is also the root of gallantry. Is it any surprise, then, that a scholarly focus on the personal elements of Pope's letters results in an emphasis on his gallant style? But we cannot forget that this is only one of the concurrent meanings at play. As scholars focusing on the publication history highlight, Pope is invested in the development of the legal-economic sphere of literary publication and authorial identity. These scholars (Hudson, Rose, McLaverty as discussed in this chapter) are working with another model of the public sphere—the mode of the rational-critical aka bourgeois public sphere) that we more readily associated with the term. Habermas' formulation of this second form of the public sphere is now widely familiar:

> "The bourgeois public sphere may be conceived above all as the sphere of private people come together as a public…to engage…in a debate over the general rules governing relations in the basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labor. The medium of this political confrontation was peculiar and without historical precedent: people's public use of their reason" (27)

Though this mode of publicness does not, in Habermas's account, come to full fruition until the end of the 18th century in Britain (Habermas 25), its roots are evident as early as 1694 (58). For

those who read Pope's motivation as economically or legislatively oriented, the rational-critical public sphere is what undergirds their interpretation of the letter publication scandals. If as McLaverty adamantly posits, Pope's publication of the letter is with the aim of creating an event sufficiently scandalous to persuade the legal courts to legislate in favor of extending protections to authors, then we must read Pope as operating in public discourse that aims to influence law-makers. This interpretation of Pope's public engagement is also partially, but not wholly, sufficient. Pope seems to have success with his scandalous publication, given the prominence of his 1741 court case against Curll (discussed by Rose) in advancing the legal concept of copyright for the following centuries. But if we take this Habermasian conception of the public sphere that pervades this interpretive model, what do we make of the content of Pope's letters, particularly those to Montagu? His letters are not a model use of 'reason,' either in their original form to Montagu or even in their published form where he continues to promote irrational zeal for increased intimacy with Montagu as her distance grows from London. As Warner points out, the Habermasian public sphere as we now understand it to have been developing in the early eighteenth century is one that rests on the notion of "bracketing" off of the private self:

> To be properly public required that one rise above, or set aside, one's private interests and expressive nature. (This notion of a separation between public voice and private selfhood is often called "bracketing"; a closely related idea in John Rawl's liberal legal theory is called the "veil of ignorance."). (Warner 40).

7. Pope's Public Discourse Model

If we take seriously that Pope publishes his letters in order to intervene in the politics (legal rulings plus conditions for the economic market) of the literary public sphere, and also take into

account the content of the letters, we come up abruptly on the expressive appeal to the place of the presumably "private" in the letters. Pope may not himself be 'authentic' or 'sincere,' and if he ever is it is nearly impossible to tell past the play of wit and satire. But his insistence on the place of the 'improper' in the letters suggests that he is both aware of the polite forms of public discourse (courtly-gallant and civically polite) and opposed to their rules of engagement. While the intimacy he seeks is beyond the bounds of propriety, the fact of his seeking it is a divergence from the kinds of public-sphere interventions understood to be properly part of the rational-critical sphere.

Rather than reveling in intimacy and plumbing subjectivity, Pope's acclamations of revealing himself on paper are provocations to his readers. He is not trying to reason with his readers, nor is he attempting to create intimacy with them. He is instead trying to incite responses from them that do not fit into the norms of polite society, pre- or post- the Habermasian divide. This is evident in Pope's repeated insistence to Montagu that she reveal herself to him, and in the two instances in which Pope writes that he is 'pleased' by her letters to him.

8. Hermeneutics: Pope's First Pleasure

Pope expresses pleasure first in Montagu's plan for writing to him from her consciousness, and secondly in her explanation for how she reads his letters. In a letter that appears to have been first drafted in November of 1716, Pope writes, "You have contrived to say in your last, the two most pleasing things to me in nature; the first is, that whatever be the fate of your letters, you will continue to write in the discharge of your Conscience" (*Correspondence* vol. 1, 383). The preceding letter in which Montagu promises to write to "discharge [her] Conscience" is not evident in the now extant letters, which she had written to him on September

14 and October 10. Pope notes a third letter received from her from Dort. But whether or not Montagu promises to write to him, and whatever reasons she may have given for her decision to write to him, we can take his 'pleasure' as a sign of what it is he wishes for in his letters from Montagu. We might also read his signs of pleasure in her response as signs of what he might wish for from the readers of his published letters. Here, the motivation for response is to "discharge Conscience," that is, to fulfill a duty or an obligation that has accrued and can be removed by writing. While Pope had already expressed in his very first letter of 18 August 1716 that Montagu reveal herself to him in her letters, this mode of "discharging" herself has on its surface a very different sensibility than the earlier requests. In his August letter, Pope implies (very thinly veiled by a turn of grammar) that he wishes to see Montagu naked in her letters to him. But nakedness in writing letters is a compromise from what it is he really suggests ought to occur in letters. Let us look closely again at the model he proposes—and then I think it might be possible to read his pleasure at a "discharge" of conscience as indeed superior even to nakedness when it comes to conversation.

Pope begins with the appeal to the Augustan and Voiture-ian model of 'talking on paper'. "The freedome I shall use in this manner of Thinking aloud [(as somebody calls it) or Talking upon paper,] may indeed prove me a fool, but it will prove me one of the best sort of fools, the honest ones" (353). But Pope rejects immediately such an aspiration of merely "talking on paper" as a model that is inadequate, because Folly will inevitably arise, "And since what Folly we have will infallibly Buoy up at one time or other, in spite of all our art to keep it down; tis almost foolish to take any pains to conceal it at all, and almost knavish to do it from those that are our friends" (353). This sentence follows immediately on the conclusion of the first quoted. Though "Talking on paper" may make him appear to one of the 'honest ones' he realizes he will

inevitably reveal his ‘Folly’. We can see here the dilemma of the Augustan model: Thinking aloud is either going to prove the writer a fool with ‘follies’ of probably impolite sorts, or the writer will have to compose knavishly and artfully to hide those selfsame foibles. Pope goes on to suggest a more extreme version of communication, but one which is actually not possible:

> “If Momus his project?? had taken of having windows in our breasts, I should be for carrying it further and making those windows Casements: that while a Man showd his Heart to all the world, he might do something more for his friends, e’en take it out, and trust it to their handling. I think I love you as well as King Herod could Herodias, (tho I never had so much as one Dance with you) and would as freely give you my heart in a Dish, as he did another’s head” (*Correspondence* vol. 1, 353).

This passage is certainly the kind of talk that scholars like to call Gallant—he protects himself with Biblical story and Classical Myth—marks of cultivation. He uses these to claim great care for his correspondent while exaggerating his feelings in a way that is obviously impossible and therefore readily dismissed as gallantry—obviously he cannot give his literal heart away. The chosen references though, belie the sincerity of affect: Momus is god of satire, who judged the Haephestus’s creation of man deficient because there was no ‘window in the breast’ to view the sincerity of a man’s thoughts. Aesop’s fable was criticized by Lucian as ridiculous on the surface “Momus must have been blear-eyed” (Lucian 20), and any many with sharp eyes would have the sense to tell the sincerity of another man’s meaning. As for the Biblical story, Herod wed Herodias only after divorcing his first wife; the “head” delivered reference is to John the Baptist’s—the disciple had disapproved of Herod’s divorce and remarriage, and when Herod offered to Herrodias’ daughter Salome anything she wanted as reward her pleasing dance on his birthday, she asked for John the Baptist’s head on a platter—a request suggested by Herodias.

Herod had John the Baptist beheaded, but he disproved of the request. He executed Salome as well. Pope professes to desire to give over his heart to prove his sincerity: the reference to Momus should alert us that this is satiric; Lucian's commentary (with which Pope would have been familiar) suggests that his reader should have the sense and sharp eyes not to need the heart on a platter as proof. Pope would, if requested, give his heart and sincerity as "freely" as Herod gave Herodias and Salome the head of John—but Herod gave it grudgingly, killing Salome after.

Having insincerely offered to open the casement of his chest and deliver his heart on a platter, Pope continures the paragraph an improper finish. He proposes nudity as a second best option to literally handing organs to one's friends: "But since Jupiter will not have it so, I must be content to show my taste in Life as I do my taste in Painting, by loving to have as little Drapery as possible. Not that I think every body naked, altogether so fine a sight as yourself" (*Correspondence* vol. 1, 353). Nakedness is a substitute for the impossible sharing of one's 'heart' or 'true self.' If the compromise to sincerity is nudity, this is hardly gallantry—a courtly discourse of elaborate drapery. It is a provocation to the letter reader, to respond either coyly, which in the extended metaphor is to be well dressed, Draped, and thereby tasteful in the common sense, but distasteful in the terms of the letter. Or the correspondent might respond 'nakedly', which is to say second best to honestly but more truthfully than merely writing thoughts on paper. With these options arrayed, Pope's 'pleasure' at Montagu's plan to write him to "discharge [her] Conscience" to him, we can see that he is praising a model of communication that does more than ruminate and more than reveal—it is a metaphorical transfer of conscience. The correspondence is literally a sending off where one's words are no longer in one's possession but given to another who is expected to sharply make sense of them and respond on their own terms (one wonders: is Salome's offense that she asked for the head, or that she did not

ask what she willed but what Herodias did?). More, it is not a revelation of impropriety or folly, but a moral duty to do so—responsibility of the conscience.

Why would Pope find pleasure in this—a pronouncement he makes in the published letters as well as in the originals? Especially given, as Rose argues, that the 1741 court case resulted in granting the rights of words and ideas to the author, and the ownership of ink and paper to the recipient. If writing is a 'discharge', we can tentatively read this as an argument that the self should not be bracketed. Like folly, the self buoys forth and must be relieved by writing to another. Pope is pleased that Montagu concurs. Unlike politeness and rationality that require the self to be kept 'dressed' and separate from discursive relationships, Pope's model of communication includes a self that cannot be contained but must burst forth into interpretive indeterminacy.

9. Hermeneutics: Pope's Second Pleasure

The second pleasure Pope professes is in Montagu's willingness to take his Wit seriously, rather than taking it as Raillery. Montagu's letter (as published in her *Turkish Embassy Letters*) reads

> Perhaps you'll laugh at me, for thanking you very gravely for all the obliging concern you express for me. 'Tis certain that I may, if I please, take the fine things you say to me for wit and raillery, and, it may be, it would be taking them right. But I never, in my life, was half so well disposed to take you in earnest, as I am at present, and that distance which makes the continuation of your friendship improbable, has very much encreased my faith in it. (qtd in *Correspondence* vol. 1 361)

She explicitly notes that she could fall in line with the appropriate response to a gallant letter, to play off Pope's rudeness as so much "raillery" and wit. But she does not do so. She takes him "in

earnest." Montagu's response aligns with Pope's proposal in his first letter that the distance between them actually enables and "encrease[s]" the conditions of friendship—contrary to her prior anticipation that it would have made the "continuation" of their friendship "improbable." Wall's analysis of Pope's *modus operandi* reads Montagu's responses to Pope as "implicitly resistant" (232), while Grundy takes in the larger scope of Montagu's relationship to Pope and notes that her "letter[s] as in person…angled for Pope's intellectual rather than his sexual admiration." (Grundy *Comet* 127). Montagu's own motivations for engaging with Pope are not the subject of this chapter—but I would like to suggest that her correspondence with Pope is neither as wholly separate from Pope's experiments as Wall concludes, nor is it so oblique in refusing Pope's games. Montagu may rebuff his sexual advances, but she does not do so in an obvious or generically approved way—and this divergence from the available genres of social letters (as outlined in letter manuals) and gallant epistolarity (as described by Runge, Mack) is a thin wedge that prompts an alternate reading mode that Pope then capitalizes on in his publication of the letters.

10. Montagu's Reply

Montagu's claim to take "the fine things" Pope says to her as "earnest" is notable not just because she does not play the game of gallantry, but also because she does not deploy the standard responses to social letters that have stepped beyond the boundaries of politeness. Epistolary manners of the time offer a wide array of acceptable responses to improper correspondence, including unequivocal condemnations[20]. Take for example the lengthy

[20] This section, in which I read Montagu's response in the context of standard-letter genre moves is highly informed by Bannet's examination of "responsive reading" in *Empire of Letters* pages 80-89): ""to look below the charming or cleverly phrased surfaces of letters to read them in terms of what is commonly said in the class of letters to which they belong, as well as in terms of what they have omitted from or added to the expected forms" (Banner 88)"

condemnation and detailed description of transgression given in a model titled "A Letter of Complaint" in the widely circulated *The Young Secretary's Guide* (1696)[21]:

> Sir, Notwithstanding the Injury you have done me against the very Laws of Friendship ; yet you may you see my good nature is such, that I cannot slightly shake off, on my part, the Bonds of Amity ; but must with gentle Reproof, instead of complaining to others, softly, and in silence, complain to yourself, that you may be the more sensible what Kindness you have abused and slighted; nay, I will make the moderatest construction, and think that what was done proceeded from Rashness or some Misunderstanding created by false Report. However, the Fault is not so great, as to make me cast off a Friend, whose unfeigned Acknowledgement, and moderate Repentance, may attone for his Fault : And where the Offended is of so facile and mild a Disposition, the Offender surely can do no other than relent : Wherefore, Sir, in hopes you will answer my Expectation, I close my Letter, subscribing myself, As Yet Your Friend" (Hill 37-8)

Another example from La Serre's *The Secretary in Fashion*—first translated into in English in 1640, and the basis for many of John Hill's letter manuals at the turn of the eighteenth century (Bannet 105 and 110-22) also offers a description of the variety of possible ways to pen a reproach to a correspondent with whom one does not wish to sever all ties by offending in return. The suggested methods include opening with praise and esteem, allowing that good people can do bad things and that nobody is perfect, and condemning said bad deeds on the grounds that they expose those aspects of a correspondent's character that are praiseworthy. An even lighter

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[21] See Bannet for summary of John Hill's instigating role in the boom of letter manauls at the end of the 17th century (pages 3-4).

touch, when the writer fears she cannot speak freely, is to transfer the critique to hearsay by explaining that other friends are upset with his behavior, and that sharing these reports is out of the deep friendship and esteem the writer has for the correspondent, and even suggesting that the reproachable behavior is not in his nature, but is caused by "evil companie" or some other outside cause[22]. Whatever the method one takes, La Serre makes evident that the epistolary goal of remonstrance is to solicit apology in order to continue the correspondence; he titles the section of advice, "Letters of remonstrance to such as have committed some fault to cause them to acknowledge it, or induce them to make amends for it."

Montagu's letters do not conform to these generic remonstrances, and though she certainly indicates that offense is a plausible reaction to Pope's letters, her reply does not demonstrate that she is in fact offended. Rather, she recognizes that she is stepping outside of the boundaries of usual epistolary relationships ("Perhaps you'll laugh at me"), and takes Pope seriously. Interpreting Montagu's explanation of her strategy for reading Pope's letters, Grundy

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[22] from La Serre: "First, we must commend his Laudable qualities, and testifie to him how much we esteem him for them. Then we may tell him, that as there is nothing perfect in this world, so the lustre of his virtues is much obscured by the vices which he is addicted unto. Or if we esteem that to be too rough a proceeding, and that we dare not speak so freely to him, we may say, that his best friends judge so of him, being verie sorrie to see him given over to such lewd courses. Then we may add, that if it were another whom we did not affect, we could have been silent; but that the love we bear to him obligeth us to reveal unto him the evill reports which run abroad of him; being sorrie to hear those commendations which are given him so limited with exceptions, were it not for such and such vices. We may also desire him to use the same freedom towards us in the like case, assuring him, that we shall be much bound to him for it, if we may find the sincerity of his love by his not flattering us. Then we may excuse him, by imputing his vices either to his youth , or evil companie which he frequents, saying, we are fully perswaded, he would not of his own nature and disposition run into such errours. We may at last conclude with laying before him the honor & profit which will redound unto him by forsaking //of vice, how God will love him, and good men respect him for it. And how we are fully perswaded he will give way to our remonstrances, and make then in good part, hoping shortly to hear of his amendment; wherein we shall alwaies pray the Lord to be assisting to him with his holy Spirit."

emphasizes the “hope” for sincerity: “[Montagu] wishes and hopes his admiration is real.” But her letter (as published) does not indicate hope or appeal to Pope to write to her differently. She allows that his wit and raillery might be themselves sincere (not just a mask for sincerity or a game to be played). While Montagu does not deliver to Pope the story of herself quite as he asked for it (as Grundy and Wall both observe, she is ‘resistant’ to his pleas for her to reveal herself to him), neither does she rebuff him wholly. Pope’s experiments in rudeness yield a different move in communication than the rules of either gallantry or civility would suggest. And it is this, I think, that has pleased him. He writes,

> The other [pleasing thing] is the justice you do me, in taking what I writ to you in the serious manner it was meant. It is the Point upon which I can bear no suspicion, & in which above all I desire to be thought serious. It would be the most vexatious of all Tyranny, if you should pretend to take for Raillery, what is the meer disguise of a discontented heart. (*Correspondence* vol. 1, 383)

There is here, again, the temptation to read Pope’s raillery as a mask for his ‘true feelings’, but he asserts that it is not a mask but a true presentation. Winn takes it this way; and if we follow Mack into gallantry we would need to read this as an ambiguous moment—where it is unclear if Pope is seriously mocking Montagu, or if he is serious in his professions of the heart. But Pope’s pleasure is in the fact that she takes his Raillery seriously. That is: both the mocking front and the feelings it conceals are sincere. Pope’s pleasure is that the difference between sincerity and raillery is utterly erased. There is no longer a dividing line between what is the game of the letter and what is the bracketed truth of the self.

11. Pope’s Pleasure: A Public Proposal

To read Pope's letters well, we similarly ought not to divide between the "games" that Pope engaged to manipulate the reading public and influence the court, and the "sincerity" or significance of the content of the letters. The legal and economic workings of the 'public sphere' are but one part of the public. The self entering into the public sphere is but another. But the third, the crucial element, is the style in which the self and the 'public' engage. Joshua Branciforte argues that Pope's poems set out to generate a social order based on "tastes without norms" (273), guided by "an exciting or irritating excess that can steer a system of communication without telling it exactly where to go" (Branciforte 278). This guiding excess is the "ruling passion" that operates as a tastemaker, "managing the preferences of others without dictating what they should do or like. Unlike normative laws of good taste, which strive to naturalize their authority, the tastemaker's power is not natural but magical" (Branciforte 277). Branciforte defines the magical power of the tastemaker through Pope's poetic theorizing in *Essay on Man*, and suggests that Pope's mode of rhetorical influence as one that "bypass[es] reason" (279) and instead "managing the preferences of others without dictating what they should do or like" (277). In the subtle exchanges of his letters with Montagu, he is experimenting with provocation to see if he can manage Montagu's response, and she pleases him when she does not respond either in the norms of common epistolary rationale (that is—she doesn't issue a letter of remonstrance), nor does she accept his gallant flirtations. She does as she wishes, which Pope then says gives him pleasure. Pope's letters to Montagu are, like his poetic works, phrased in terms of taste. He says to Montagu, "I must be content to show my taste in Life as I do my taste in Painting" (353). And "taste" is—as Branciforte cites Bourdieu to remind us—a potential site of normativity not just aesthetically but socially:

> "Norms consist of symbolically articulated rules, laws, or models designed to achieve homogeneity in behavior and cultural selections….Pierre Bourdieu's critique of taste shows a circular relationship between normative aesthetic judgments and the homogeneous social hierarchies they tacitly uphold." (Branciforte 269).

By writing letters that go beyond the pale of social politeness and that violate even the norms of gallant flirtation, Pope subverts the norms that regulate epistolary communication. These subversions move past the realm of personal communication when he publishes them. By publishing his letters, he suggests a mode of reading that might enter into public discourse. By heeding not only the circumstances of the cloak-and-dagger publication and the uses of the scandal to influence the public courts, we can see that the content of Pope's letters offers a style in which to engage in discourse that diverges from the courtly graces and from the burgeoning rational-critical public sphere. The game is, ultimately, neither to enforce the norms of civil communication nor to flout them for the sake of gaining scandalized attention. The 'game' of Pope's letters is to remove the authority of interpretation from the writing itself: the answer is not to seek for proof of either civility or incivility, gallantry or sincerity. The solution is to accept both and to write back 'discharging' one's own conscience—to launch one's own assessments back into the public sphere. Montagu does not oblige by baring her breast to Pope (metaphorically or literally). She denies him stories of herself. Nonetheless, she briefly 'pleases' his aims by doing as she sees fit while recognizing that he is entirely sincere in his provocations. While the epistolary style proposed on letter manuals relies on a careful game of anticipating reader response, of modulating tone, of imitating models of polite letters, Pope's proposed epistolary style is one that makes the game itself impossible. If the constitutive dilemma of the Augustan letters (and perhaps all letters) is to be sincere without being impolite, to be polite

without being inauthentic, to be well written but not over-styled, then Pope's letters to Montagu offer a solution; be sincere and impolite, be polite and inauthentic, throw the self on paper without design and do it in elaborate style with mixed metaphor and grand drapery. The creation of a public sphere will not be polite, and it will not be controlled by the careful arrangement of the self—it will be possible only with the reader's embrace of the contradictions.

So, too, the public sphere need not be understood as an arrangement into which the self can enter only under particular (bracketed, disinterested) circumstances. The subjects engaged in public discourse—reading, writing, critiquing, lobbying the court—do so unbracketed, highly interested, and also well aware of the social rules. As Pope puts it in another letter to Montagu, the individual is highly significant to the collective:

> Private Virtues one can be sure of. I can therefore judge/know what particular person deserves [has desert enough] to be happier than others, but not what Nation deserves to conquer [or oppress] another? You'll say I am not Publick-Spirited, Let it be so; I may have too many Tendernesses, particular regards or narrow views; but at the same time I am certain the Man who wants these can never be Publick-Spirited. For how is it possible for Him to love a hundred thousand men, who never loved One? (*Correspondence* vol. 1, 357).

The narrow personal passion is the basis for the broader public spirit; the personal letter is a public address; the style of the private communication is the key to the style of public discourse. If we take Michael Warner's description of public discourse as that which is "taken two ways [at once]: as addressed to us and as addressed to strangers" such that "the trace of our strangerhood remains present in our understanding of ourselves as the addressee" (Warner 77). Pope's admonition for good reading—to take raillery sincerely—makes the author into 'two at once': a

stranger revealing his heart. It is necessary, Pope's letters to Montagu suggest, that both writer *and* reader be understood as at once private and public. There should be no parsing of which interest is at play, but a recognition that both the private and the public, the sincere and the satire, the polite and the rude are all simultaneously present.

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Chapter 2: Upon Consideration: Mary Wollstonecraft Rewriting the Politics of Place

1. Introduction

Mary Wollstonecraft's *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* is generally not either read formally as letters (as the title suggests it should be), nor is it read as a work of political philosophy, as Wollstonecraft's longer publishing career is. This chapter endeavors to address both of these gaps in the literature on the last book Wollstonecraft herself published during her lifetime. When designing the project of this dissertation, I selected Wollstonecraft's *Letters Written During* as a generic example fitting my constraints of 'private letters published by their author,' as part of an investigation into the structures of public imagination as a private device of navigating social relationships and also a rhetorical method of creating that very public in which the private imagination must relate to others – known and unknown alike. As this dissertation was conceived, I wanted to look at moments when the shape of the public sphere was undergoing transformation. Wollstonecraft's *Letters* fit the bill more suitably even than my first selection of Alexander Pope's letters; she published these letters in the aftermath of the French Revolution, following the pamphlet wars of the years prior when everything was up for debate and the revolution in France promised an entirely new way of organizing the body politic, social and economic alike. With the end of the French Revolution in the Terror, Wollstonecraft's own enthusiasms in print were necessarily tempered and her own political ideal along with those of all political philosophers was reconsidered, either to be vindicated (as Burke must have felt he was) or to be revised in some fashion to account for the descent into tyranny after the revolutionary attempt to end a different tyranny.

In keeping with my dual aims: to read the *Letters Written During* as letters and to read them as political philosophy after the French Revolution, this chapter is structured in two parts. The first takes up the question of what formal significance the epistolary has in Wollstonecraft's volume. After establishing that the epistolary is not an accident, nor a thin veneer of style papering over another genre (such as a memoir or diary), I turn to consider what political ends she seeks to achieve through her epistolary addresses. This second half turns more concretely toward the political content of her argument, and I look closely at Wollstonecraft's aesthetic and historical arguments presented in the travel letters—particularly in the nineteenth and twentieth letters, in which Wollstonecraft describes gothic encounters in Copenhagen. If the first half of this dissertation is rhetorical in methodology—that is, arguing that Wollstonecraft's mode of composition and argument draws on the epistolary in significant ways—the second half is hermeneutic, arguing that Wollstonecraft is presenting to her readers a method of reading that will enable the kind of collective and responsive political body she has sought to create through the letter form. The first half and the second half can nearly be read as two separate pieces, but I have maintained a single chapter because the stakes of epistolary writing are fulfilled by the political stakes of her epistolary invitation. By attending to the letter form of *Letters Written During*, I argue that this volume—in larger part through its epistolary address—is an extension of Wollstonecraft's durable commitment to engaging in political reason as a path to social and economic liberation for women and all humankind.

Letters Written During(1796) is the last volume of writing that Mary Wollstonecraft published during her lifetime. She began her writing career with a politically hued pedagogical text, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787), and in 1788 went on to write her first novel (*Mary: A fiction*), and a collection of stories for children (*Stories from Real Life*), translations from

the French, including Jacques Necker's *Of the Importance of Religious Opinions*. She continued in this vein through late 1790s, producing a number of works in different genres, gaining "some minor recognition as a woman writer" (Taylor 36), and was making a living from her pen (Godwin 72, Lorch 4). In November of 1790, Edmund Burke published his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, and in December Wollstonecraft anonymously published her quickly written, polemical response, *Vindications of the Rights of Men*. This was the first published response and rebuttal to Burke's *Reflections* and received significant public attention. When the second edition was published bearing her name, she became more widely recognized, garnering a place in literary history for the first time (her fate has varied over the centuries since her death). *Vindication of the Rights of Men* was Wollstonecraft's entry "into the conversation of political theory" (Gunther-Canada). She built on her reputation and her argument in the first *Vindication* with the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in 1792—a volume which is in the 20th and 21st centuries recognized as her most significant and polished work of political thought.[23] Wollstonecraft was always a political thinker in some sense—beginning with the school for girls and boys in 1784, which she opened with her sister Elizabeth and her close friend Fanny Blood, and developing through her assessment of the place of women in 18th-century society, which transformed into the feminism of her later

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[23] Shiela Rowbatham's 2010 edition of *Vindications of the Rights of Woman* gives a hint to the fate of this text: "Regarded warily by many nineteenth-century feminists, *A Vindication* survived as a subversive, semi-underground text which was rediscovered and cherished by radical women in the twentieth century. It has retained its power" (Rowbotham ix), and is described in more detail in Lorch (102-119). Gunther-Canada notes in *Rebel Writer* (2001): "For years Wollstonecraft's reply to Burke has been overshadowed by the fame accorded *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*" (75).Timothy Michael, who reads the first vindication as "among the most spirited defenses of political rationalism of the period…[and] a remarkable rhetorical achievement" (92), seems to be fighting an uphill battle in the common assessment of the earlier political text, which critics of various stripes from 18th century figures including Horace Walpole and William Godwin to 20th century Christine Solnik view as hasty, contradictory, un-edited, and incoherent (Michael 92).

years[24]—a feminism that insisted not on the individual rights of woman,[25] but on the radical revision of political and social order, the necessity of which is evident through consideration of the rights of woman (and lack thereof in the late 18th century). Though scholars routinely recognize Wollstonecraft's radical vision as developed particularly in the middle part of her career with the two *Vindications* (Gunther-Canada, Lorch, and Taylor are but three examples), the *feminist* portion of her political view nonetheless often obscures the trajectory of thought that continued into her last nonfiction work, *Letters Written During*. Scholars including Gunther-Canada, Jennifer Lorch, Ashley Tauchert, Simon Swift, and Barbara Taylor all, to varying degrees, differentiate the last complete published volume of Wollstonecraft's oeuvre from her mid-career political tracts. This neglect can be partially attributed to the multi-genre style of the work—it is a volume of 'letters' but the recipient is not directly named and though the letters address a 'you,' it is a 'you' who varies from a general address to the person who is father of Wollstonecraft's child; it is also a travel narrative, which includes reflective scenes of Romantic, beautiful, picturesque, and sublime landscapes, as well as remarks on the history and politics of the regions to which she travels. Though most scholars do not focus on the political elements as connected to Wollstonecraft's revolutionary era replies to Burke, there are a few who do see this work as a particularly political tract, including most notably Mary Favret, in whose steps I follow, seeking to read the rhetoric and politics of *Letters* rather than getting pulled into the personal[26].

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[24]See Gunther Canada, whose book traces Wollstonecraft's literary life from "her adolescent letters to her final fiction, …. [from] a female reader into a feminist author (157).
[25] Lorch writes, "For Mary Wollstonecraft, feminism was never a matter of 'adding' women to a political analysis. Her thinking began – and ended –with women" (2-3).

[26] My argument actually tracks quite closely to the Mary Favrets: first arguing that the "you" in the *Letters Written During* was not written as a personal address, and was not read as such either. Favret points to antecedent genres of the popular romance (112) and the open political letter (115), while I look more to the genre of the personal epistolary as a social activity. Favret also

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Wollstonecraft traveled to Scandinavia as a business envoy—but also, Janet Todd avers, as a way to ease the tensions that were growing between her and Gilbert Imlay—her American lover in France, and the father of her daughter Fanny (*Revolutionary Life* 303). Wollstonecraft did indeed write letters to Imlay while she was in Scandinavia, but the volume she published as *Letters Written During* bears only the faintest traces of the letters she wrote to her lover. The letters were ostensibly private correspondence published for general reading—and it is the 'private' that is most often considered, either as evidence of biography, or somewhat more politically in the form of seeing the "personal as political" to read Wollstonecraft's narrative as an assertion of the experiences of the mother, the scorned lover, or the single-woman traveler as a political issue. However, in this chapter I'd like to suggest that Wollstonecraft's final text is more politically and socially focused, and that she builds a public audience through the second person, and that she does so in order to continue her interventions in political philosophy begun in the Burke debates of the early part of the 1790s. Following the Terror that came after the French Revolution, though, her defense of rationalism as a core protection against tyranny and unthought, chaotic anarchy alike (contra Burke who saw Rationalism as precisely the proximal cause of tyranny and terror), has been shaken in the public eye and perhaps also her own. Her political philosophy, it seems, would not hold. So what is she to do, as a political philosopher, independent woman, and seemingly disgraced in her political professions? What she does is write a collection of letters that – I argue – seek to reconstitute her political philosophy through the constitution of a reading public that

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presents an argument for Wollstonecraft's deliberate construction of a national English character through the *Letters Written During*, but where Favret is interested in the individual characteristics Wollstonecraft seeks to create through her view of particular actors and roles (e.g. Queen Matilda), I look at the historical narratives that Wollstonecraft derives as a means to create a social commonality amongst her English readers. We both conclude that *Letters Written During* is engaged in a project of creating an 'us' (Favret 118).

engages in consideration as a mode of political thought.

2. What Genre is *Letters Written During* a Short Residence anyway?

Letters Written During is titled as "letters" but the epistolary title is given to many genres that have only the faintest of shared characteristics with correspondence[27]. The ambiguity of the genre of Wollstonecraft's *Letters Written During* opens, for several scholars, the question of how to read the *Letters*—that is, how we in the 21st century can read her letters as part of literary style and history, and also how her genre choices were read by her contemporary readers. In the absence of genre clarity, scholars suggest several approaches to understanding the rhetorical or literary techniques and function of the text. Chaney joins Favret in favoring a rhetorical strategy—one that is, though, focused on the ethos of the author, while I want to look at the epistolary address of the 'you'—and suggests that the most effective way to read the text is as a "literary self-narrative" or "literary autobiography"; Sydney M. Conger, too, characterizes "Wollstonecraft's 'lifelong project' as "life writing" (43), and suggests that the *Letters* "can be seen as the final contribution to these lifelong projects of literary confession and self-fictionalization." Peter Swaab reads the residence as both "travel writing" and as "an experiment in autobiography" (Swaab 14, 28, qtd in Heng 368); and Heng suggests that the text should be read as a "creative nonfiction", two hundred years before that genre was named as such (Heng 368). Özdemir, whose Bakhtinian approach to the text focuses on the polyphonic uses of genre and who names the 'epistolary mode' (321) of the text as part of its dialogic features, draws on

[27] See Thomas O. Beebee for discussion of how even within the genre of the epistolary novel there is divergence of novels that rely on genre expectations of sent mail and those that use the form cursorily (Fanny Burney's *Evelina* is a good example of the latter).

the genres of sensibility, sentimentality, Enlightenment progressive histories, and Romantic writing to trace Wollstonecraft's hybrid approach to articulating a 'self' or a 'subject'.[28] Özdemir is not alone in leveraging the study of genre as a means to investigate the subjectivity, and the philosophy of the subject, presented in the *Letters*. Chaney and Heng similarly use study of the genre to examine the construction of a self that appeals to an audience for political ends; and Conger suggests that Wollstonecraft's *Letters*, like all her work, "is always constituting or revealing the authorial subject… whatever [other] ostensible subject…it pursues" (Conger 43). As Chaney puts it, Wollstonecraft constructs a self to "promot[e] what she sees as right ways of judging society and women's roles within it, and … seeing selfhood as a communal confessional project" (279). For Heng, it is the employment of the first person expression in the "new form of expression, creative nonfiction" that "enabled Wollstonecraft to express her feminist ideals with far more success than her forays into fiction and straight essay writing" (Heng 368). Yet I'd like to suggest that it is not the self alone that enabled Wollstonecraft's success, but her deployment of the self in an epistolary form which addresses an audience through a genre that summons a return address—a response that is also full of first person narrative and reflection, but that is articulated in correspondence with another[29].

In the above cited texts on Wollstonecraft's generic hybridity and search for a relational, rhetorical self—two issues fundamentally related to each other—there is acknowledgement of

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[28] See Mellor, Anne K. *Romanticism & Gender*; Yousef, Nancy. "Wollstonecraft, Rousseau and the Revision of Romantic Subjectivity"; and Bode, Christoph. "'Imaginary Circles Round the Human Mind.'"

[29] Eve Tavor Bannet describes "responsive reading" as the widely practiced method of reading letters, to "read below the commonplace surfaces of letters" (80). She also draws attention to the failures of reading letters as if there is no interlocutor: "reading them merely as texts ignored that the interlocutor was everywhere inscribed in the text, as well as the eighteenth century's constant identification of correspondence and conversation" (78).

the fact that she writes this text as letters, but there is very little analysis of the genre of the letter as a style that would be widely recognizable to her audience. [30] This is certainly understandable—and in one view even necessary—Wollstonecraft's *Letters* were written almost whole-cloth for the purpose of publication in a book form, and were not sent as letters. They bear little resemblance to the letters she actually sent to Imlay while she was in Scandinavia on business for him (Todd *Collected* 306-327)[31]. And, because they were written to be published, rather than written to be sent, a number of crucial features are absent from them (Favret[32]). Mary Wollstonecraft suggests herself, in the Advertisement to the *Letters*, that what follows are not letters per se.[33] These letters (*Letters*) were written for publication, and are not written in the medium of the letter—a medium that includes the apparatus of the post and on the potential of the reader to write back. Wollstonecraft also removes the apparatus of the letter genre that would mark it as correspondence—such as an opening salutation and closing signature ("Dear____" and "ever yours"), or the structural elements of oratory that had been adopted for letter writing such as the exordium establishing and recognizing the relationship between author and

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[30] Favret is a major exception to this. In *Romantic Correspondence* she argues (and I follow her in this) that "by the end of the correspondence, Wollstonecraft's letter-writer clearly responds to the demands of her imagined public, not to a unique "friend," nominal "husband" or lover" (89).
[31] Favret compares the sent letters with the published letters in *Romantic Correspondence* and notes that differences include the removal of careful in-text accounts of who has sent how many letters to whom on what timeline. Nonetheless, some 20th century scholars persist in reading the volume *Letters written During* as self-evidently addressed to a lover. See, for example, Moskal.
[32] Regretfully, I am unable to ascertain a page number to include in this reference due to library closures during the COVID-19 Pandemic.
[33] Deborah Weiss identifies Wollstonecraft's husband Godwin, in his writing of Wollstonecraft's posthumous "memoirs", as the original propagator of an interpretation of Wollstonecraft's *Letters Written During* as sentimental and redirecting attention from its politics. Weiss reads Wollstonecraft as a master of double-speak, seeing her sentimentality co-existing with and amplifying the social and economic arguments. I don't take up the sentimental and romantic moves of Wollstonecraft's text, and instead focus on the less well attended to politics of Wollstonecraft's epistolary text.

correspondent (Bannet 74-6). She introduces the style and form of her book as follows:

> The writing travels, or memoirs, has ever been a pleasant employment; for vanity or sensibility always renders it interesting. In writing these desultory letters, I found I could not avoid being continually the first person—"the little hero of each tale." I tried to correct this fault, if it be one, for they were designed for publication; but in proportion as I arranged my thoughts, my letter, I found, became stiff and affected: I, therefore, determined to let my remarks and reflections flow unrestrained, as I perceived that I could not give a just description of what I saw, but by relating the effect different objects had produced on my mind and feelings, whilst the impression was still fresh. (Wollstonecraft *Letters Written During* 51*)*

Wollstonecraft here identified her writing as first, 'travels' and second, 'memoirs'. She is perhaps, like her 20th century readers after her have done, feeling about for a genre category that might fit what she's written, or perhaps fitting the text into the popular genres of the day—travel writing, memoir, and letters topping that list (Todd *Revolutionary Life* 36). She only then refers to the sections of the book as "desultory letters". These are letters that skip about, flit from one thing to another, are devious, irregular, and unmethodical.[34]. This is true, she says, of their style "I…let my remarks and reflections flow unrestrained" and of their content "relating the effect

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[34] Chaney also points to this 'discontinuous' feature of the letters as a formal issue that prompts her to characterize *Letters* as a literary autobiography, by drawing on theorists Michel Beaujour and Reda Bensmaia, who highlight the patchwork and non-continuity of texts as a means of writing the self that is distinct from traditional autobiography: "The self-portrait is "metaphorical or poetic" and not linear or teleological" (Chaney 291). Wollstonecraft herself seems to be also calling our attention to the mixed and discontinuous nature of her writing herself when, in Letter Nineteen, she follows up on one of her most intensely confessional passages, a multi-layered and passionate discourse on the sexual oppression of women in general and her faithless lover Gilbert Imlay in particular, with an abrupt paragraph change and a shift in tone announcing a "return to the straight road of observation (Wollstonecraft *Letters Written During* qtd. in Chaney 291).

different objects had produced on my mind and feelings, whilst the impression was still fresh." This kind of free flowing discourse that she aspires to is also the aim set by letter manuals of the eighteenth century. As Whyman puts it, "though there was always a tension between the form's conventions and the impulse of the writer… the epistolary balance between self-expression and controlled use of norms tipped towards more freedom" (Whyman 23)[35]. In this sense, too, the lack of epistolary formatting (salutation, inquiry after the correspondent's well-being, summary of the chain of letters last written) does not disqualify Wollstonecraft's letters from the genre. The quandary of writing "to the moment" (Samuel Richardson's fundamental phrasing) versus writing in formal arrangements is one of the constitutive dilemmas of the letter (see Chapter 1 for early 18th century letter manuals on this very problem). Wollstonecraft's demurrals on the qualifications of her 'letters' present the very qualities that qualify her letters as engaged in the genre of the letter. And her readers would have recognized this. Wollstonecraft's titling of the whole volume as one of *Letters Written During*, and the titling of each section as a Letter (Letter I, Letter II, etc. up through Letter XXV) clearly indicate that these letters are to be read as such: conversationally, responsively, socially.

Given Wollstonecraft's clear demarcation of her writing as letters, I am led to wonder what it is that this form offers that some other mode would not. She does not call her book "memoirs" or "travels," nor is it a "vindication" or a "history."[36] Unlike her previous

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[35] See also Bannet, who cites several letter manuals that make this point—including the injunction that "Letters must show ease and [yet] not be "too highly polished,"" (46).

[36] Chaney's take on the rhetorical choice to write in the form of letters rather than as an essay, history, or a novel: "Rather than simply arguing from a position of a knowledgeable and persuasive speaker alone, as she did in the two *Vindications*, or as a fictional alter ego called "Mary" or "Maria," as she did in her novels, in the *Letters* she herself emerges as the autobiographical "I" of a narrative that is profoundly emotional and confessional in its framework" (Chaney 288).

Vindications and her *Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution*, however, the *Letters* were written and published after the potential of the French Revolution had ended and the Terror had begun. Wollstonecraft's favorable position on the Revolution and her belief in its beneficence in France and the need for a similar social and political change in England was widely known. Because of her radical political position and her apparent wrongness in historical judgment,[37] Wollstonecraft had largely fallen out of favor[38]. Despite this, Wollstonecraft's *Letters* became her most popular and wide-selling book[39]. Heng argues that this success is in large part due to Wollstonecraft's care in rhetorically crafting her persona: "Using the strength of a direct, intimate appeal to create a new public image for herself and she chooses one suited for winning the hearts—and minds—of her readers" (Heng 377). She does this, Heng argues, by

> likening herself to women in her audience, Wollstonecraft erodes obstructions erected by her reputation. After readers have supplanted their mental images of Wollstonecraft as revolutionary with Wollstonecraft as woman-mother, a second, subliminal inference follows. In an unconscious mirroring, readers are forced to ask themselves a question: If Mary Wollstonecraft was a typical mother like themselves, was it not possible that they could share her outlook on feminism and social structure? (Heng 378)

Wollstonecraft is an artful and powerful rhetorician, and this book in particular—a book written

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[37] For a more thorough analysis of the political and philosophical reconsiderations undertaken by major thinkers who had written both before and after the French Revolution, see Timothy Michael's. *British Romanticism and the Critique of Political Reason.*

[38] For more on the Burke/Wollstonecraft differences over the French Revolution see James Connif "Edmund Burke and His Critics: The Case of Mary Wollstonecraft." See also Williams Stafford's "Shall We Take The Linguistic Turn? British Radicalism in The Era of the French Revolution."

[39] Lorch calls it Wollstonecraft's "most popular text" (52) and cites other critics (Ralph Wardle, Emily Sunstein, and Richard Holmes) as concurring 20th century voices.

and sold as *Letters*—was contemporarily her most successful.[40] Chaney also suggests that her success is due to her method of "gain[ing] authority for her writing by inviting readers to an "intimacy" with her that simultaneously prompts the personal and affectionate responses noted above while also grounding her rhetorical authority in the trustworthy and admirable characteristics she exhibits along the way" (279).

While I find Heng's, Chaney's, and Özdemir's analyses of Wollstonecraft's generic and rhetorical stylings convincing, I wonder why it is that the letter as a form is (largely) left out of or minimized in studies of Wollstonecraft's style, especially given Wollstonecraft's many cues that this is one element of her rhetorical form. Heng goes so far as to say, "A *Short Residence* must be interpreted not as epistolary fiction, but as a calculated use of stylistic devices that allow Wollstonecraft not to twist the truth but to reframe truth through the eyes of a woman and create a valid alternative reality, one previously shown only through a patriarchal lens" (Heng 370). In the following sections of this chapter, I will look at some of the formal features of the letter that were available to Wollstonecraft and to her readers to suggest that her selection of the title and genre of *Letters* makes available stylistic devices that also contribute to the "reframing truth" for and with her readers. By taking into consideration the role of the reader as one practiced in responsive epistolary hermeneutics, the epistolary' s stylistic devices do more than invite the reader to 'see anew' or 'see through Wollstonecraft's gaze' (as Heng suggests), but to reorient themselves as agents of writing history and therefore authors of a socius that creates and

[40] Jane Moore, cites *Letters Written During* as Wollstonecraft's most popular work in her lifetime. Janet Todd reports the volume was also translated into Swedish, German, and Dutch, Todd reports (*Revolutionary life* 370).

intervenes in political events. What follows is a look at the role the epistolary plays in Wollstonecraft's construction of a 'you' reading her letters; in the second part of the chapter, I turn to look at the devices she uses to leverage her epistolary audience into one that is rationally informed, radically oriented, and (she hopes) capable of conceiving themselves as political actors in much the same way that they are active respondents to her letters, despite their presentation as a published volume.

3. Features of Letters in ***Letters Written During***

There are structural, formal features of the letter that are significant for reading Wollstonecraft's *Letters Written D*. First, letters are written from someone to someone (or to multiple someones). They are *addressed*. A second meaning of "addressed" follows from the formal element of the letter: it is sent across space, and in the time of the early post office, horse and rider, or horse and buggy land-delivery, and wind-powered frigates from abroad, letters were also sent across space (distant—across continents, or near—across town or even from upstairs to downstairs[41]). This time-space dimension of the medium also affects ways of writing in the genre, making a temporally non-linear, disjunctive, style of writing and reading common in letters. Because letter writers are writing about past events, to a reader who will read in the future, the nature of the shared time is more complex than we might see in, say a newspaper or a novel (à la Benedict Anderson). The importance of a time relationship that weaves together past, present, and future in overlapping braids is important for what will be the second part of this chapter—a look at the relationship to history that Wollstonecraft asks her readers to engage. A third element of letters, following in turn from the time-space play of the genre, is meta-

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[41] see Bannet, 63-69.

commentary on the purpose and style of writing that is used specifically for relationship building with the recipient who will write back—metacommentary is of course common in many texts, but it is notable in epistolary writing for its uses in constructing a social relationship between writer and reader.

Wollstonecraft and her readers—immersed as they were in an epistolary culture of letters between friends, and acquaintances and of epistolary novels whose plots play on address, time, and space—were keenly aware of the common tropes of the letters, so Wollstonecraft's designation of her text as *Letters* would have suggested to them to read this text as they would read letters. In other words, they were primed to seek generic characteristics: to read the text as though 1) they were directly addressed as the intended recipients, 2) they were engaged in the peculiarities of time-manipulation and interleaving time-travel mandated by the vagaries of the post and the facts of distance. The *Letters Written During a Short Residence* takes these readerly expectations (this readerly expertise) and uses it as a way to redirect, reshape, and reform the readers' sense not only of the author, but also of themselves in relation to one another in society, and their society—English society—in relation to the past. The purpose of this reshaping/reforming of a readerly society is, for Wollstonecraft, to enable a reorientation towards the future so that English society might continue along the lines of perfectible, progressive history to a more equal, liberated, stage of existence.

4. Address: who is the 'you'?

Scholars who address the role of the second person in the *Letters Written During a Short Residence* generally identify the effect on readers to be one of eliciting empathy and thereby better building the ethos of Mary Wollstonecraft. (See Chaney 279 above on page 6 for an example). Syndy M. Conger rightly draws our attention to "The Power of the Unnamed *You*," the

fact that "the *you* is lassoed into the text" (49), but she, too, focuses on the ways in which Wollstonecraft's text works to "please it [the *you*], to elicit pity from it, to chastise it, but also, almost always, to woo it" (49). The power of the unnamed you, she argues, is that it is "a disconcerting intrusion of the discourse of narrative context…into the discourse of the literary text itself" (46) and that the presence of the second person pronoun "can temporarily distract readers: they might comb the context for clues about that *you* even as they find that the *you* casts new light on the context" (47). Conger's description of the ambivalence of the you—at first ambiguous in its address and through reading deducible to be (at times) referring to the absent father of Fanny and (at other times) referring to some other 'you'—is accurate but incomplete. Left out of Conger's (and others') assessments of the role of the second person in the *Letters Written During* is the facility contemporary readers had with the epistolary form. Epistolary novels, posthumously published letter collections, and, of course, correspondence of their own, were central to reading habits[42] of the late eighteenth century. Rather than being "distracted" or "disconcerted" by the ambivalence of the you, 18th century readers would have brought to bear common readerly practices to navigate the potential referents of the second person.

While all communicative exchanges bear out a relationship between an 'I' and a 'you', implied or explicit, a very specific and distinctive address from the writer to the reader is one of the distinguishing features of epistolary discourse. [43] The epistolary form establishes a relationship between the writing I and a particular you, either implicitly or explicitly, in a way

[42] For more on reader-response, and social practices of reading in the Romantic era, see Newlyn, Lucy. *Reading, Writing, and Romanticism : the Anxiety of Reception*. Oxford University Press, 2000.
[43] One might say that letters are on the high end of Wayne Booth's "measures of literary friendship" with a maximum number of requests for engagement in the material see *The Company We Keep*, pages 179-80.

that, as Altman argues, "is…distinguished from both memoir and diary narrative, where there is no reified addressee, [and] from rhetorical works, where the addressee is anonymous and could be anyone" (117). The "you" of the letter is a reader who "plays a role; he is able, and is expected, to initiate his own utterance" (117). Readers of the late eighteenth century had an appetite for published letters that invited them to allowed them to engage in empathy, that allowed readers to "imagine *ourselves* their friends and correspondents" (*Letters by Several Eminent Persons Deceased* 3 vols, 1772, Vol. 1 qtd in Brant 55-6, Brant's emphasis). Brant highlights the transition made from the early eighteenth century—when published letter collections of Pope, Swift, Gay and Bolingbroke were consumed by audiences interested in wit—to the late eighteenth century when readers sought (and often found) a feeling of friendship in reading letters that were not specifically addressed to them. Conditioned by their own familiar letter writing exchanges and encouraged by the narrative plotting of the epistolary novels since Richardson's *Clarissa* and *Pamela*, readers were accustomed to taking on the role of the second person, even when the particular addressee is known to be someone else—say, a fictional person.

The close intertwining of reading and writing practices of the 'authentic' letters (which present reality or the experience of the author in an unpolished manner), the 'model' manual letters of proper style and order, and the 'fictional' correspondence of novels (or even in 'real' letters where the possibility of falsehood always haunts) is part of the genre of the letter—that is, readers anticipate that their role will be to read fictional letters as though they are real and to read real letters as though they are not wholly factually representative. The letter genre is, Beebee demonstrates, not only a "document" or "reflection" of life (14); it "not only records social reality but also helps constitute it" (15). So when Wollstonecraft selects the letter as the form for her travel writing, her literary autobiography, her recuperative polemic on the future of society in

the wake of the French Revolution and the Terror, she is selecting a genre that cues readers to "join her in a sustained critique" (Favret 100), to participate in constituting the significance of the letters, and to join in creating a society through their reading as a you with the imminent prospect of writing as an *I*. In other words, if readers think of these as letters address to them, they would think of writing back.[44]

Wollstonecraft chooses to write in letters, and she selects her audience to be the reading public. Readers would have been comfortable with, maybe even eager to read, letters between the notorious (amongst those who followed the revolutionary controversy) author of the *Vindications of the Rights of Woman* and the father of her child; even without the information that she and Imlay were not married,[45] even without the identification of her interlocutor, such a correspondence would likely have been well received. Rather than speculate on what she *could* have done by making her correspondent more particular, I'd like to point to some of the ways she does use the second person to address readers[46]. Conger recognizes the importance of the second person address in Wollstonecraft's *Letters Written During a Short Residence*, but reads the text as keeping the reader at a distance from the *you* addressed in the writing: "Readers, both real historical and imagined critical respond by speculating about or identifying with the writer in her relationship to the absent, silent, and mysterious addressee" (Conger 51). That is, Conger's

[44] Note the difference from an *open letter* where the addressee is a single public figure with readers as witnesses seeing the address, or as signers-on to the original letter, and also differentiates from epistolary novels and published personal correspondence where the you is a clearly demarcated other recipient, for both of which the public reader would engage in speculation on how the recipient might write back.

[45] Richards notes that the Imlay's identity is not revealed when the volume was published, but only known after Wollstonecraft's death. It was actually Godwin (Wollstonecraft's husband) who got her in trouble for the 'affair' with the American in France.

[46] My attention to the use of the second person is influenced by Fitzmaurice's approach to studying letters in *The familiar letter in Early Modern English: A pragmatic approach*.

assessment of Wollstonecraft's readers does not see them displacing (see Suleiman, footnote above) the you, but wondering about it.

Conger points to the first line of the *Letters* as a disconcerting alienation of readers:

> Already in the first letter, readers meet, but then only fleetingly, this second person—a shadowy, unidentified *you* to be reckoned with….The *you* addressed in these lines is one whom readers cannot elide with themselves because this *you* has prior knowledge ("sufficient acquaintance") of both a melancholy narrator and sad circumstances that they are not privy to. They must conclude that this *you* refers to someone beyond the verbal limen of the text; and they can only hope that, eventually, this *you* will constitute itself within the text. (46)

The line Conger refers to is this:

> "Eleven days of weariness on board a vessel not intended for the accommodation of passengers have so exhausted my spirits, to say nothing of the other causes, with which you are already sufficiently acquainted, that it is with some difficulty I adhere to my determination of giving you my observations, as I travel through new scenes, whilst warmed with the impression they have made on me. (Wollstonecraft *Letters Written During* 52).

This is, indeed, a funny way to start a collection of letters. It is even labeled "Letter I" so there can be no mistake that it is the first letter and not the second or third, with the implication that the first might have been lost in the mail. Even stranger is that Wollstonecraft's advertisement explicitly identifies the readers of the published work as her intended audience: "I found I could not avoid being continually the first person—'the little hero of each tale.' I tried to correct this fault, if it be one, for they were *designed for publication*" (Wollstonecraft 51, my emphasis).

Conger interprets the position of the public readers to be that of witness—not addressed directly, nor ratified by the text, but known of by the writer: "The readers…invited to be voyeurs, can witness these shifts but cannot understand them in the absence of solid information about the you" (49). But rather than taking the Letter I as the determining factor for interpreting Wollstonecraft's use of *you* in the letters, I take the advertisement as the starting point. This makes the public readers the primary addressees: addressed, ratified, and known by the author.[47] The few unmistakable addresses to Imlay are not a distraction from the primary addressee, but what I will call a "supplemental address", used to continue rhetorically positioning and appealing to the primary audience of the public readers.

Rather than taking her first letter as the determining factor for interpreting the use of the *you*, I'd like to take this advertisement as the starting point: what use is it to Wollstonecraft to establish for her public readers that they are her designated readers and to then immediately betray that design by referring to prior knowledge of the circumstances that affect her spirits? Readers would be pressed to wonder, to infer, what causes exhaust Wollstonecraft's spirits beyond the trials of travel. Conger is right: this deictic reference requires her contemporary readers to reckon with the 'you' and her scholarly readers to interpret the text in its context, not in "purely decontextualized, structural terms" (45).

What would readers have known of Wollstonecraft's circumstances? What might have

[47] I'm drawing here McCormick's charting of four types of audience that might be addressed in the letter form: 1) Addressees who are addressed, ratified and known by the author (and known by the author); 2) auditors who are ratified and known (e.g. cc lines in an email, or references to specific friends who will also be apprised of information); 3) witnesses who are known but *not* ratified (e.g. an open letter that bears weight because it is known by writer and reader that it has been seen by a third party, though that third party is neither a signatory nor a named audience); and finally 4) eavesdroppers who are merely reading and not known of by the writer. *(Letters to Power*, Introduction, with my parsing of the four categories)

been dispiriting to her as an author? as a public figure? Readers would certainly be aware of the circumstances in France—the civil war and counter-revolutionary events of the Terror. Readers would likely also be familiar with Wollstonecraft's prior allegiance to the French Revolution as well as with the debate between her and Burke, whose 1790 *Reflections on the Revolution* could now, in 1796, be said to have predicted the inevitable direction of the Revolution. Or perhaps readers sympathetic to Wollstonecraft's feminism may have found dispiriting the ongoing condition of women in society. At least one contemporary review did speculate on the state of Wollstonecraft's spirits: in "these letters…[we] also discover, that her feeling heart has suffered deeply from some recent affliction" (*Analytical Review*, qtd in *Letters Written During* Broadview edition 237), and "these reflections we consider as the effusion of wounded sensibility, rather than as the dictate of calm sensibility" (237). These sensible, sentimental afflictions, in the eyes of the *Analytical Review*, affect the reader's assessment and interpretation: "We are certain that no reader, who possesses any portion of sensibility, will be able to peruse the preceding passage, without deeply deploring that state of society, in which it is possible that such a mind should be loaded with distress, —without exclaiming, '*O world, thy slippery turns*'" (238).

Wollstonecraft's work on the reader as the addressed subject of her letters is evident also in her use of the second person. Of the approximately 85 passages in which Wollstonecraft addresses the second person,[48] the vast majority of references are to a generic/indifferent you, a rhetorical positioning of the reader absent extra-textual relationships,[49] or metacommentary on

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[48] I have counted passages—some of which are a full paragraph long—rather than singular instances of the second person. I have also excluded imperatives and implied second person addresses in this stage of the analysis to focus solely on the direct address of "you" or "my friend."

the planned proceedings of the writing[50].

The generic or indifferent 'you' is the use of the second person pronoun as a generalization, "not referring to any one person in particular," (Cambridge Dictionary) as in "All you need is love." Wollstonecraft uses 'you' in this way frequently (over 20 times). Here are a few brief examples. Speaking of the Swedes: "So far, indeed, from entering immediately into your character, and making you feel instantly at your ease, like the well-bred French, their over-acted civility is a continual restraint on all your actions" (62); "Arrived at the ferry, we were still detained, for the people who attend at the ferries have a stupid kind of sluggishness in their manner, which is very provoking when you are in haste" (116); "It is, in fact, scarcely possible to stir out without meeting interesting countenances, every lineament of which tells you that they have seen better days" (173). It could be argued that this category of second person usage is ancillary to the question of who the 'you' is, but though it is recognizably generic and grammatical rather than addressing a particular you, this stylistic choice in Wollstonecraft's style choice provides a consistent context of address that is explicitly not alienating, but simply part of the grammar/structure of her descriptions. Some of Wollstonecraft's *you*'s are more particular and some more ambivalent, but all must be read in the context of a style that makes generic invocation of the 'you' a commonplace.

Wollstonecraft also uses the impersonal 'you' for Romantic/descriptive effects—at times using the second person address to invite the reader into a sublime scene:

[50] For an even more fine grained analysis of grammatical choices in Wollstonecraft's *Letters Written During*, see Horrocks "-----Pugh!": Rereading Punctuation Through Wollstonecraft's Letters Written During a Short Residence."

> How I am altered by disappointment! When going to Lisbon, the elasticity of my mind was sufficient to ward off weariness, and my imagination still could dip her brush in the rainbow of fancy, and sketch futurity in glowing colours. Now—but let me talk of something else—will you go with me to the cascade? (131-2)

At other times, she uses the 'you' to separate the reader from the scene, thereby implying the intensity of the experience of being present by making it inaccessible to the reader, e.g.: "We entered by a narrow pass through the rocks, from which this abode appears more romantic than you can well imagine" (113). These uses of the impersonal 'you'—are not only to the effect of giving information and laying the ground work for inclusion of the reader, but actively positioning the reader as a means for conveying the experience of travel.

Distinct from this usage, though, is a second, more intimate one. As the *Letters Written During* progresses, Wollstonecraft increasingly uses the 'you' as a rhetorical address. By 'rhetorical address' I mean that she uses the second person to project a response for the reader to take up (i.e. she crafts the uptake for the reader in the text itself) and provides for them a stance from which to read her letter, often to her own advantage. She is not only rhetorically crafting herself, but rhetorically crafting her reader. For example, she writes in her 19th letter, "Still harping on the same subject, you will exclaim—How can I avoid it, when most of the struggles of an eventful life have been occasioned by the oppressed state of my sex? We reason deeply when we feel forcibly" (153).

Some of Wollstonecraft's rhetorical positioning of the "you" are open to the ambiguity that Conger highlights—ambiguity, that is, over whether or not the reader is positioned as the addressee or as a witness or eavesdropper – seeing the text but not addressed by it. Take this passage where Wollstonecraft projects on to her readers pre-existing knowledge they are

assumed to have: "You have sometimes wondered, my dear friend, at the extreme affection of my nature" (97). This might well be understood as alienating, as presuming prior knowledge of a reader that the actual reader explicitly does not have as there is not an extra-textual relationship between the two. However, taking into consideration the readerly practices of displacing the particular addressee with themselves, and given that this use of 'you' is not necessarily hinged on particular awareness, such uses ask the reader to construct a relationship with Wollstonecraft. The 'you' that asks the reader to recall or remember her character is an active construction of character. Readers are asked to collaborate in the present rather than to feel alienated from her. Some of these rhetorical positionings are more intensive, creating what appears to be a dialogue between her and the reader. She frequently projects not only how 'you' might receive her writing, but the question a reader might ask of her: "Enough, you will say, of inanimate nature and of brutes, to use the lordly phrase of man; let me hear something of the inhabitants" (99). The reader is projected as part of the creation and order of the letter.[51]

Thirdly, Wollstonecraft also uses a rhetorical 'you' to explain her intentions as a writer—to give metacommentary. Some of these insertions are fairly neutral descriptions of the plan of her writing: "I will give you a short account of my journey from Gothenburg" (144), and "I

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[51] Altman identifies the creative role of the "internal" reader—the one projected by the text—as another one of the fundamental generic features of epistolary writing, along with 'particularity of the i/you relationship' and a few others.: "The internal reader's role in shaping epistolary narrative cannot be overestimated. Addressee-consciousness informs the act of writing itself, and acts of reading constitute consequential narrative events. Epistolary mythology tends to locate power with the reader, as its regular creation of a Super Reader figure reveals. The external reader's experience is partially governed by the presence of his internal counterpart; we read any given letter from at least three points of view—that of the intended or actual recipient as well as that of the writer and our own" (Altman 111).

intended to have remarked to you the effect produced by a grove of towering beech" (109). And "I will relate two or three other anecdotes to you" (91). Though these passages have little persuasive or affective effect, they are nonetheless important as a stylistic orientation to the reader: Wollstonecraft's *Letters Written During*, for all their lack of planning and their "unrestrained" flow (51), are working to position the public reader in her texts; the public reader is not a mere eavesdropper—a third party who happens to have gotten hold of love letters or business correspondence. Other meta-commentary passages in which Wollstonecraft iterates the purpose of her writing more clearly, imperatively, position the reader in relation to the *Letters Written During*:

> Do not forget that, in my general observations, I do not pretend to sketch a national character, but merely to note the present state of morals and manners as I trace the progress of the world's improvement. Because, during my residence in different countries, my principal object has been to take such a dispassionate view of men as will lead me to form a just idea of the nature of man. And, to deal ingenuously with you, I believe I should have been less severe in the remarks I have made on the vanity and depravity of the French, had I travelled towards the north before I visited France. (154).

This third form of 'you' might be called the 'imperative' you—a form of hailing that interpellates (with some force) the reader into an active and clearly evaluative reading of the text: "Do not forget" is an apt imperative—the reader must not passively let the text flow by, but remember the flow of ideas and scenes that Wollstonecraft is constructing.

These categories of second-person use are dominant: impersonal 'you' (sometimes to romantic/sublime effect), rhetorical address, and imperative metacommentary. I have given these examples above to demonstrate how pervasively and significantly Wollstonecraft builds her text

around the 'you' for whom the text was designed. By the time she makes a direct reference to a person who must be a particular correspondent in letter twenty-three, Wollstonecraft has already built a relationship with her readers, and crafted for and with them a readerly position that gives them a positive rhetorical presence in her text as legitimate interlocutors. The first unmistakable reference to an extra-textual relationship that excludes the public reader from placing themselves as the addressee is a reference to "an acquaintance of yours, the author of the American Farmer's Letters," (173, Letter 23). And in three other places in the *Letters Written During* she summons a 'you' who has familiarity with America and with France[52]—a familiarity her posthumous readers and scholars know is explicit to the American Revolutionary George Imlay, with whom she spent time in France. But her contemporaries—prior to the publication of Godwin's *Memoirs of the Author of the Vindication of the Rights of Woman*—would not have known whom she addressed. These references to a person familiar with the politics and life of two revolutionary countries may alienate readers, but they also serve to position *Letters Written During* as a work, in part, of political theory. Not one that merely theorizes, but one that asks for readers to become participants in the political landscape. The form of address considered as a feature of the epistolary form draws our attention to the way that Wollstonecraft rhetorically addresses the readers of her published writing.[53] She is seeking to persuade them of something, and by doing

[52] See Letter 4, page 70, Letter 9, page 108, and letter 10, page 113.

[53] Favret, *Romantic Correspondence*, on the nature of the second person address, that "The switch from the internal reader (the explicit addressee) to the external reader (the unnamed public) is responsible for much of the political power of the *Letters*. This switch is a common strategy of 'open letters," political critiques masked as letters to prominent individuals, which were ubiquitous in Wollstonecraft's day" (113). Favret goes on to argue, "The effect of open political letters depends primarily on the public's recognition of itself in the dramatis personae of the letter-writer. That writer plays *to* its audience; it does not play *out of* an individual self" (115).

so through letters she is inducing the genre expectations of the "you" to become a speaking and acting "I."

Given that Wollstonecraft had written persuasive, political tracts before, and that her novels were (and are) read as continuations of her common arguments for the rights of women, equality of all persons including abolishment of monarchy and church as forms of tyranny, and condemnation of commerce, why, from a rhetorical standpoint, is this argument effectively re-staged in a travel-logue to the north, written in the letter-style? I want to turn now to the question of how going north fills the ground prepared by Wollstonecraft's second person epistolary rhetoric.

5. Cultivating an epistolary "you" to create a political "we".

For what purpose does Mary Wollstonecraft cultivate an epistolary "you"? A political writer throughout her publishing career, the answer to this is political: she creates a collective epistolary 'you' through which politics might be conducted. As 'epistolary' you, it is not simply a declarative address but aspires to be an imbricative one: weaving together the 'you' and the 'I' through the genre expectation that the 'you' addressed will become a writing 'I', and vice versa (Altman). More than that, though, Wollstonecraft has crafted the readers into a shared position. Reading her letters as *published* letters, readers would be savvy to the fact of shared readership: they are addressed through a singular you which could also be a plural you. The reading 'you' might not become the writing 'I' but a responding 'we'. Wollstonecraft cultivates a sense of 'we' in her letters that includes herself as author in the collective pronoun.

Wollstonecraft's cultivation of an imbricated 'you', in which the readers are stitched together through the use of epistolary address, and the formation of a 'we' through socio-political judgment of anecdotal travel experiences is leveraged to a larger political-historical project. The

sense of a 'we' is the basis on which the grave question of the day is to be decided: What shall be the future of England in the aftermath of the French Revolution? The answer to this question rests on what is meant by "England". Politicians and historians alike answered this question in a two-pronged way: England as a nation is constituted by her people's history; the nation is a relation to history. Wollstonecraft intervenes in the commonplace descriptions of how the people of England are related to one another and how the history of their civilization has developed, thereby proposing a new comparative mode for understanding how history changes. The use of the 'you,' both singular and plural, is to rhetorically create a public who can think and act collectively as a potential revolutionary subject (but only potentially). The public Wollstonecraft proposes is historically determined, but also a site of freedom.

6. Reform or Revolution?

Wollstonecraft most directly states her position on the soundness of adopting revolutionary change in the final paragraph of the appendix of the *Residence*:

> "An ardent affection for the human race makes enthusiastic characters eager to produce alteration in laws and governments prematurely. To render them useful and permanent, they must be the growth of each particular soil, and the gradual fruit of the ripening understanding of the nation, matured by time, not forced by an unnatural fermentation. And, to convince me that such a change is gaining ground, with accelerating pace, the view I have had of society during my northern journey, would have been sufficient, had I not previously considered the grand causes which combine to carry mankind forward, and diminish the sum of human misery" (178).

This passage is quite perplexing. The final sentence in the paragraph is also the last in the book, and is convoluted in its claim of conviction. The grammar of the paragraph is elusive—the first

sentences accede to anti-revolutionary sentiment. The answer to the question, "revolution or reform" appears to be "neither—progress will occur naturally."

Jane Wendall I think misreads Wollstonecraft's historiography, as is evident in her exposition when she introduces the word "even" at the crucial turning point: "Mary Wollstonecraft concluded her *Letters…on Sweden* on a note of optimism, "a conviction of the increasing knowledge and happiness of the kingdoms I passed through", even if these were improvements to be "matured by time, not forced by an unnatural fermentation". Her journey, she says, would have been sufficient to convince her of this, **even** if she had not already studied "the grand causes which combine to carry mankind forward"" (Rendall 231, my emphasis). Favret also reads this passages and interprets it as an argument for a gradual model for social change (108-109). But I disagree—Wollstonecraft's concluding paragraph is not arguing for gradual social change, but for radical transformation—radical in the sense of dramatically changing society and in the sense of going back to its historical roots and transforming England's historiographic imagination.

The argument for radical transformation lies in the subtle turn in the paragraph around the past tense modal "would have." After first outlining the narrative of political progress that Burke (and many other 18th century historians and political thinkers) took for granted, and agreeing that this is a plausible description of the progression of society, she pivots on the 'would have' and argues that this description is only that—descriptive—it is not explanatory. The surface appearance can only be explained through deeper thinking, through "consideration." This final argument, submerged in the last paragraph of the appendix, rests on modes of historical and aesthetic thinking she has seeded throughout the text of the *Letters Written During a*, and the mode of thinking she proposes is ambivalently divided between enlightenment rationalism,

romantic experientialism, and a nascent public affiliation mediated through the epistolary genre.

Written as part of the editorial framing of the *Short Residence*, this final paragraph of the appendix works as commentary on the preceding series of letters. This provides Wollstonecraft with an ideal rhetorical moment to do the work of recuperating herself into English intellectual circles that have become more skeptical than ever of the French Revolution. As Heng explains,

> Wollstonecraft recognized that her social position and political ostracism placed constraints on her rhetorical power. Under siege and alone, she did what nonconformist writers have long done: she went underground, and quite successfully. *A Short Residence in Sweden* essentially is a primer for subversive texts, in which the author not only escaped personal attack but also earned praise, notoriety, and social acceptance. (367).

The opening sentences of the final paragraph of the appendix appear to soften the revolutionary threads in the final half of the *Short Residence* and concede to Edmund Burke and the immemorialists who opposed English sympathy for the French Revolution on precisely the grounds that it represented a break with history and an unnatural fermentation. For all of Wollstonecraft's published history of favor for the French Revolution, and her writing in direct response to Edmund Burke,[54] these first two sentences seem to accept that his view of historical change, and the limits of human intervention therein, is plausible. His position, commensurate with the school of legal 'immemorialists' (cf. Kidd), is that the law is native to the land and that it developed slowly with the people of the land over the course of time:

> Burke held—to summarize what may be found in a hundred text-books on the history of conservatism—that a nation's institutions were the fruit of its experience, that they had

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[54] See O'Neill, Daniel I. *The Burke-Wollstonecraft Debate*

> taken shape slowly as a result, and were in themselves a record, of a thousand adjustments to the needs of circumstance, each one of which, if it had been found by trial and error to answer recurrent needs, had been preserved in the usages and established rules of the nation concerned. (Pocock 202).

The immemorialist understanding of the law as native to the land is one that undergirds Edmund Burke's opposition to the French Revolution. Though he was a Whig whose prior positions on the American revolution—he was outspoken in opposition to what he saw as cruel taxation on the colonies—and on the limitations of the monarchy made him a political ally and friend to many literary intellectuals and radicals, Burke adhered to the dominant understanding of England's progress as a result of the core beneficence of the ancient constitution of England.[55] That is, he, like the vast majority of his peers and predecessors in politics, understood the warrant of English law to be firstly, the principles and character of the first peoples of the British Isle, and secondly, the centuries' long development and testing of laws over time. British law is just and true because it has been used and been tested by everyday use since the time of the Ancients. Moreover, the law is based upon the common and geographically specific customs of the people—it is the result of circumstances that have led to the need for a law, therefore, the law (including the ancient constitution[56]) is (constituted) by the people. The British Law, therefore, is acutely attuned to the English whom it governs.[57] So, when Wollstonecraft writes that "alteration

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[55] In "Burke and the Ancient Constitution," Pocock argues that what is commonly called Burke's "traditionalism" is in fact a common, indeed dominant, understanding of English Law in Burke's time, and not a feature of political theory that is unique to Burke.
[56] For more about English popular perspectives on the English Constitution post-French Revolution, and the challenges these perspectives posed to radicals, see James Epstein's *Radical Expression*.
[57] Pocock quotes Burke, who writes, "Our oldest reformation is that of Magna Charta. You will see that sir Edward Coke, the great oracle of our law, and indeed all the great men who follow him, to Blackstone, are industrious to prove the pedigree of our liberties. They endeavor to

in laws and governments….must be the growth of each particular soil[58], and the gradual fruit of the ripening understanding of the nation, matured by time, not forced by an unnatural fermentation," (178) she is drawing on the political logic that drives Burke's resistance to the French Revolution. Revolution, after all, particularly as seen in France, as the attempt to change abruptly the institutions that had grown and matured over time.

7. Rethinking her revolutionary position?

Wollstonecraft has good reason to rethink her position on the French Revolution[59] in light of the Terror—not only because of her pressing need to re-establish herself in London literary and intellectual circles now that her relationship with the American Revolutionary Imlay, with whom she had lived in France and had a child, has ended—but also because she had been in France and knew personally the toll of the terror on the country. She writes to Imlay (prior to departing for Scandinavia) about her horror over the events, her relief to be gone from there, and her sorrow over the turn taken: "This has been such a period of barbarity and misery, I ought not to complain of having my share. I wish one moment that I had never heard of the cruelties that have been practiced here, and the next envy the mothers who have been killed with their children"(*Collected Letters* 283).

She also writes of how the effect of her experience in France has affected her experience travelling in Scandinavia: "I gazed around with rapture, and felt more of that spontaneous

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prove, that the ancient charter, the Magna Charta of King John, was connected with another positive charter from Henry I, and that both the one and the other were nothing more than a re-affirmance of the still more ancient standing law of the kingdom." (Burke Reflections, 304-5 qtd in Pocock, "Burke and the Ancient Constitution" 206).

[58] Notice how material the 'root' (so to speak) metaphors are here—literally, or rather, strongly metaphorically "radical".

[59] Virginia Woolf opens her short essay on Wollstonecraft with an observation of how acutely Wollstonecraft was affected by the war.

pleasure which gives credibility to our expectation of happiness, than I had for a long, long time before. I forgot the horrors I had witnessed in France, which had cast a gloom over all nature, and suffering the enthusiasm of my character, too often, gracious God! damped by the tears of disappointed affection, to be lighted up afresh, care took wing while simple fellow feeling expanded my heart" (57).

And yet this concession to Burke is a rather drastic one—one that does not align with her arguments for the freeing of women from the social tyranny of men, enabled by the dual oppression of monarchy and church—positions which she clearly did not abandon as she went on to write drafts of *Maria* reflecting the miseries of woman at the hands of man in a society built against her. Even within the *Letters from a Short Residence*, these first sentences of the final paragraph in the appendix are surprising. This concession appears to align her with political principles that a) oppose the French revolution despite her remarks in the *Letters* that speak positively of it and b) reject individual reason as a basis for lawmaking, despite Wollstonecraft's longer publication history of advocating for education as a basis for improved society.

This concession to the immemorialists—to Burke, her primary public interlocutor, in particular—would seem to concede her entire political point by taking the warrants of slow growth from English indigenous roots over the possibilities of reason, radicalism, and most importantly revolution. Indeed, this final paragraph is read as exactly that kind of a concession by some scholars:

> The conclusion Wollstonecraft draws from her northern journey, then, confirms her sense that revolution, even hurried reform, results from a mistaken attempt to accelerate progress beyond its natural pace. While the ardent affection of enthusiastic characters leads them to make premature alterations in laws and government, it would be better

> simply to allow the general progress of Europe to stimulate home grown reforms that are suited to the particular soil of each nation. The example of the French Revolution has not dampened Wollstonecraft's optimism about the inevitability of gradual human improvement, but it has convinced her that revolution is not the best means of encouraging such improvement. (Furniss 79)

But though she goes underground with her commitment to the ideals of the French Revolution, she does not entirely hide it. She writes (as Heng argues) subversively. She allows that the French Revolution is not a model that can be forced onto England, but she does not concede that the ideals should be abandoned. She is almost, but not quite, convinced of the view that rejects "overenthusiastic characters" pushing for revolutionary "alteration in laws and government": "And, to convince me that such a change is gaining ground, with accelerating pace, the view I have had of society during my northern journey, would have been sufficient." The reason she gives for being insufficiently convinced of change occurring naturally (and at an accelerating rate), is that she has "previous[ly] considered….grand[60] causes." In order to follow this argument, I will detour from a close reading of this final paragraph in the appendix to examine the significance of looking to the north in 18th century political and historical debates, before returning to the paragraph to pick up what I see as Wollstonecraft's crucial intervention encapsulated in the word "considered"—an act that disrupts natural progression and also asks her readers to go 'underground' with her to find the roots of liberatory possibility through historical

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[60] See Labbe, J. *Romantic Visualities: Landscape, Gender and Romanticism*, page 62, for discussion of "grand" as a gesture towards the sublime, and another kind of argument with Burke—an aesthetic argument over the uses of the sublime and the beautiful, played out throughout the *Letters Written During*.

thinking, aesthetic judgment, and comparative reflection.[61]

8. Going North: Political Geography

Wollstonecraft's reason for travelling north is to observe the development of history in order to hone a concept of 'the nature of man'. It is an observational project that is to culminate in a summative definition. Here is how she puts it:

> Do not forget that, in my general observations, I do not pretend to sketch a national character; but merely to note the present state of morals and manners, as I trace the progress of the world's improvement. Because, during my residence in different countries, my principal object has been to take such a dispassionate view of men as will lead me to form a just idea of the nature of man. (*Letters Written During* 154).

Not only is she observing what she sees, but attempting to explain that which has come before—speculating as a form of reasoning about the current conditions. This mode of travel writing and political thought was widely engaged in during the 16th-18th century period. Palmeri, in his introduction to *State of Nature, Stages of Society*, gives the context in which I argue we should read Wollstonecraft's *Letter's Written During*:

[61] Timothy Michael observes, "[Q]uestions of knowledge in the Romantic period were almost always coupled with questions of freedom (it is difficult to find a consideration of one that is not, in some way, also a consideration of the other" (Michael 4). In what follows in this chapter on Wollstonecraft's arguments for English (Gothic/Scandinavian) roots for 'grand causes' such as liberty, I examine the epistemological methods she employs and asks her readers to employ as a means for achieving community and freedom. Note: Timothy Michael argues that the synthesis of romanticism/reason draws directly from the Continent—this does not contradict the arguments I attribute to Wollstonecraft as she 'goes north', her method may be influenced by the continent, but her argument for the English (non-French) roots of pursuit for grand causes uses the north as distinct from the continent to the south.

> As part of Enlightenment attempts to free thinking from the constraints of myth and superstition, these universal histories of mankind separated themselves from ancient poets' mythical accounts of a golden age, but also, more importantly, from the biblical account and all providential explanations dominant in Christian cultures. Based often on reports of travelers to societies that Europeans had not known before their voyages of the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries, and on observed patterns of human psychology, speculative or hypothetical histories worked out the stages that might or must have brought human beings from a posited original condition outside society to a state with recognizable institutions of religion, government, law, and exchange. (3)

Wollstonecraft's discussion of her travels to the north play on this common travelers' trope, while also relying on a narrative of English ethnic origin that grounds British identity and British politics in the genealogy of the Goths.[62]. In order to follow Wollstonecraft's invitation to go 'underground' with her subversive call to 'consideration,' we must first take a detour through the role that gothic history played in contemporary British debates over the role of law, and the prudent means of progressing through history.

Wollstonecraft, like many of her contemporaries, is interested in tracing a line of progress

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[62]See also Blom *Northern Antiquities* (particularly Hans Aarsleff's contribution). On economics ideas and perceptions of Scandinavia, see Staplebroek and Alimento's "The Wealth and Freedom of the North." For a near-contemporaneous account, see De Lolm *A Parallel Between the English Constitution and the Former Government of Sweden*. For a more literary history, looking at the history and transmission of Scandinavian myths to England, see Heather O'Donoghue *English Poetry and Old Norse Myth*, Rix *Norse Romanticism*, and Butler *Mapping Mythologies*. also of interest, but not as focused on English adoption of Scandinavian politics as it is weighing in on the Revolutionary impulses and theories within the northern countries themselves—see Pasi Ihalainen *Scandinavia in the Age of Revolution Nordic Political Cultures, 1740-1820*. For more on on revolutions in Scandinavia, see Barton, Arnold. *Scandinavia in the Revolutionary Era 1760-1815*. See John Pinkerton *A Dissertation on the Origin and Progress of the Scythians or Goth* (1787). See timeline of historical and cultural events vs Gothic Texts in Andrew Smith's *Gothic Literature* (Edinburgh University Press).

by locating an origin and speculating on the mechanisms by which one society grew into another. Unlike the more common origin stories that trace civilization back to classical Rome or to Africa, Wollstonecraft proposes that society has its origins in the North:

> So far from thinking that the primitive inhabitants of the world lived in a southern climate, where Paradise spontaneously arose I am led to infer, from various circumstances, that the first dwelling of man happened to be a spot like this which led him to adore a sun so seldom seen; for this worship, which probably preceded that of demons or demi-gods, certainly never began in a southern climate, where the continual presence of the sun prevented its being considered as a good; or rather the want of it never being felt, this glorious luminary would carelessly have diffused its blessings without being hailed as a benefactor. Man must therefore have been placed in the north to tempt him to run after the sun, in order that the different parts of the earth might be peopled. Nor do I wonder that hordes of barbarians always poured out of these regions to seek for milder climes, when nothing like cultivation attached them to the soil; especially when we take into the view that the adventuring spirit, common to man, is naturally stronger and more general during the infancy of society. The conduct of the followers of Mahomet, and the crusaders, will sufficiently corroborate my assertion. (*Letters Written During* 77)

Wollstonecraft is not alone in looking to the north for an origin story. Since the seventeenth century, debates over the constitution (character) of England as an ethnicity and nation featured an appeal to the lineage of the Goths, coming originally from Scandinavia and quickly populating northern Europe, particularly the Germanic areas.[63] Colin Kidd, in his compelling and

[63] "The significance of Gothic culture was cited in British political discussion from the mid-seventeenth century. Parliaments and legal system, it was believed, were derived from Gothic institutions and peoples who were free and democratic. The word was employed loosely,

detailed study of *British Identities before Nationalism: Ethnicity and Nationhood in the Atlantic World, 1600-1800* traces antiquarians' views of the source of the population of England, her society, and her laws, and, among a wide variety of arguments about the course of English (and then British) identity, "Antiquaries commonly ascribed similar manners, the same basic institutions, sometimes even a common descent, to some or all of England's 'different' constituent peoples. Most obviously, it was possible to embrace the Danes and Normans as Gothic kindred of the Saxons" (Kidd 77). Reasons for looking to the North to identify origin stories for literal genealogies of descent and ideological and legal histories were varied, and were leveraged to various political ends. Some uses point to the strength of pre-conquest society under the Saxon kings. Other uses of Gothic history relied on the genealogy to establish a "strictly ethnic definition of Englishness" (Kidd 87), while still others adopted membership in the Gothic genealogy on the basis of "the adoption of free Gothic institutions" (Kidd 87)—drawing on the notoriety of the Goths' successful sacking of the Roman Empire as a liberatory force.[64]

9. Conservative Political Gothicism: Immemorialism and the Ancient Constitution.

embracing Celtic and Germanic tribes. The native culture that it referred to was one composed of this indigenous peoples and invaders whose occupation preceded the invasions of the Romans. Any relics of non-Roman past were taken as evidence of a native and enduring tradition of independence" (Botting 42).

[64] "The loose association of Gothicism with the libertarian, democratic and martial manners of the barbarian peoples of ancient Europe also made it possible for some commentators to provide shelter of the pre-Gothic Germans and freedom-loving Celts described by Tacitus under the broad Gothic umbrella. Identities were not exclusively determined by ethnicity, nor were ethnic identities crudely confined by national categories. Indeed, Gothic identities could be based either on descent from these peoples or, in the case of a non-Gothic nation, on the adoption of free Gothic institutions. The Poles, for instance, were often classified as Gothic, on the basis of their rigorously limited elective monarchy' (Kidd 215).

Immemorialists, and to a certain extent, Burke, fall into the first camp, linking the ethnic origins of England to a continuity of legal development as the dual source of legitimacy for English law. There were divisions within this strain of thinking: seventeenth century Immemorialists saw evidence for the strength of the English constitution in its ability to embrace the Danish and Norman rulers and bring them under the consent-to-rule granted by the constitution of the English people. Later Immemorialists, such as Sir William Blackstone, viewed the Norman Conquest as an interruption in and corruption of the continuity of ancient law—a disruption that must necessarily be undone by lawmakers and jurists. Burke cites both Coke and Blackstone as exemplars of British political thinking. His own form of immemorialism adopts gothic political origins not as a way to re-establish a pure line of ancient law (as Sir William Blackstone does). Instead, Burke's model of constitutional legitimacy rests on both an ancient origin *and* on its continual testing and modification. How, exactly, this modification occurs is obscure in Burke's account: law develops not through reason of any kind but through tests in innumerable situations over time:

> The law does not consist of first principles and their logical consequences, the necessary connexions between which can be known by reason. It consists of a series of particular decisions, each of which was framed in circumstances no longer known and has been tested by experience in circumstances which may similarly have been forgotten. All that need—very often all that can—be known of it is that it survived an indefinite number of such tests, and this is enough to create a presumption that it is more efficacious than our intellects can comprehend. (Pocock "Burke" 220)

If a law does not prove its usefulness through these tests, it will be abandoned, or it will be supplemented with new law. Burke's ancient constitutionalism is a sort of natural/evolutionary

model of progressivism that allows him to reject artificial intervention by human action[65] ("enthusiastic characters" as Wollstonecraft says), while also rejecting Gothic barbarianism on the association of the term 'gothic' with a time before laws were tested and improved. This negative version of Gothicism is a common strain, derived in the middle ages from condemnation of the Gothic sacking of Rome, "which was interpreted as the displacement of classical genius by a barbarism that had heralded the onset of the Dark Ages" (Groom *Reliques*, 68-9). This is not an argument for a return to classical models of rule, so much as locating England in a genealogy that was unique and separate from Catholic Europe; and even more potently, differentiated from the Normans, whose conquest disrupted or corrupted the natural strain of English (read: Gothic) character.

10. Libertarian Political Gothicism

This very event—the overthrow of Roman rule—is also the basis on which Gothicism was cited as an ideological origin for liberatory politics. Because Goths ended the tyranny of hierarchical imperial Roman rule, replacing it (the argument goes) with institutions of democracy and freedom. Thus, those who sympathized with anti-monarchical movements also appealed to Gothic heritage for evidence of legitimacy: "For most of the eighteenth century it remained common to celebrate the shared libertarian virtues of all the non-Roman septentrional [northern] peoples, Celtic as well as Gothic, as antithesis of imperial Rome." (Kidd 82). Eighteenth century revolutionaries thus could claim ancient roots while seeking modern social-political arrangements: "The Anglo-Saxon myth not only vindicated the deeds of England's island story;

[65] For discussion of the uses of Gothic fiction to grapple with the French revolution See Ronald Paulson "Gothic Fiction and the French Revolution."

it also located English history within a wider context, as but one element, albeit exemplary, of the lively mosaic of limited Gothic monarchies which arose during the medieval period to replace the monolithic uniformity of the Roman Empire" (Kidd 214). Botting too outlines the historical sense of the Gothic as "associated with the history of the northern, Germanic nations whose fierce avowal of the values of freedom and democracy was claimed as an ancient heritage" (Botting 5).[66] The look to the north was emphatically anti-classicist (Botting), and in this what I would call the libertarian Gothicists share a view tied to the immemorialists. However, there is an ideological distinction here: the libertarians were looking away from the classics not for a superior native history of England to rule the narrative of English society, but as a way to be freed from the constraints of the past. Wollstonecraft's travels to the north are thus a journey into what Groom calls the ideological and semantic "minefield" of England's 'Gothic' heritage (68). Through this journey, she is able to capitalize on arguments that locate England's identity as separate from France and Europe, while also making an argument for liberty against monarchical tyranny[67].

11. Literary/Aesthetic Gothicism

There is also, of course literary or aesthetic Gothicism—a much more common use of the term "Gothic", especially in literary studies. Though the genre of the literary Gothic is still nascent in Wollstonecraft's time, the motifs and themes of the Gothic are present in her *Letters Written During*, and she calls upon them to make her political points—a move I discuss in detail

[66] Botting, Fred. Gothic. Routledge, 1996.
[67] Favret in *Romanitic Correspondence* notes another important factor in the Scandinavian destination: "in 1793 the northern kingdoms had announced themselves as "neutral" in the war between France and England. For Wollstonecraft's purposes, they provided an imaginary middleground, a distant region on which to play out conflicts closer to home" (99).

in the final section of this chapter. Motifs of Gothic aesthetics (in the 18th and 19th centuries in particular) include sexual deviation, violence, psychological abnormality and revelation (Brown 20), ghosts, incest, rape, supernatural events (Bowen), old castles, knights and malevolent aristocrats, cathedrals, monks, priests, and "the tyranny and barbarity of feudal times (Botting 5), imprisonment, incarceration, revenge, retribution, walking corpses, and torture (Groom 35). Introductions to the Gothic name these features, but also highlight the importance of a relationship to history that is conducted through the motifs. Gothic aesthetics, particularly supernatural elements, serve to test the "relationship between the modern world and the past– not as one of evolution or development – but of sudden juxtaposition and often violent conflict[68], in which the past erupts within the present and deranges it" (Bowen). Brown cautions readers to avoid succumbing to a genre definition that equates these motifs with the Gothic text; in most texts of the period "the horrors appear only briefly, as glimpsed by comically foolish servants….If you want sadomasochism, you are much better off with *Dracula* or with your corner newsstand" (32). More significant to the genre is the form of the text through which the "supernatural serves as a pretext for the focus on the thoughts and feelings of the isolated individuals (32) in order to test the limits of human reason (Brown 12), or to act as the "timeless past rising up to rescue us…by [interrupting] not only regular processes but rather dramatic conflict and confusion" and "[suspending] the disorder of nature and of human corruption" (Brown 50).

12. Reconfiguring the Gothic: connecting the aesthetic to thei historic.

[68] See Marshall Brown's *Turning Points*.

The link between aesthetic Gothicism and historicizing Gothicism is largely undiscussed; primers of the Gothic (such as Groom's and Botting's) outline the history of the Goths, their influence on medieval architecture, and the resurgent fascination with the architectural features of death that morph into the 18th century Gothic novel.[69] The political and historiographic modes (as discussed extensively by Kidd) co-exist simultaneously with the aesthetic mode, but have not yet been fully theorized together. Groom suggests that the term "Gothic" be understood to refer to three threads that weave together: a political theory central to Whig interests; medieval manners and chivalry and their influence on national identity; and the "cultural aesthetic of decay, nostalgia, [and] melancholy, marked by death [and] associated with the Northern Past" (65). Botting suggests traces of the historical and political within the aesthetic of the Gothic, in that the motifs of "[o]ld castles, knights and malevolent aristocrats seem to fit into an enlightenment pattern identifying all things Gothic with the tyranny and barbarity of feudal times" (5). Despite this apparent aesthetic push of the Gothic into the past, Gothic novels (belie) the "rational distancing" for a "nostalgic relish for a lost era of romance and adventure, for a world that, if barbaric, was, from the perspective of the late eighteenth century, also ordered" (Botting 5). This mode of thinking that pins an ethnic origin in a non-European past that is nonetheless barbaric, coincides with the immemorialists thinking of ancient constitutionalism (slow progress through careful testing and inevitable discarding of those practices of law which are not advantageous to the society of England). The same Gothic-history framing also lends itself to Gothic aesthetics: horrors of the past haunting the present.

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[69] Groom, Nick. *The Gothic: A very short introduction*. OUP Oxford, 2012.

The history haunts the present in search of the rational. As with historical Gothicism, aesthetic Gothicism summons the past variously to threaten present order with demise, to lay claim to a longer history of present order, and to offer liberation from corrupt order into a more rational one. The 'grand causes' of history that "combine to carry mankind forward" are also, in Wollstonecraft's argument, the causes of the French Revolution. [70] At the same time, Wollstonecraft's ardent public support for the Revolution and its devolution into the Terror require her to walk back her claims for its beneficence. She does not compromise her revolutionary allegiance, but turns from sympathy for the French instance of revolution to advocacy for the ideals that motivated that national endeavor. She does so by demonstrating a line of civilized progression from near barbarism to high cultivation in Scandinavia, using both England and France as a measure for the progress of society in the north[71]. In drawing these comparisons between England, France, and Scandinavia, Wollstonecraft draws on a strain of Gothic history and aesthetic—one that Burke himself uses—in order to demonstrate a more authentic and agentive interpretation of history's progression.

13. Gothic comparisons: England, France, and the North

Describing locales of one's travels in terms of the norms of the metropole is a common feature of 18th century travel writing. Such comparisons served as a pragmatic way to make scenes of foreign lands comprehensible to readers who might never travel to the foreign country and also a way to order the world in relationship to the home-country.[72] Usually comparisons

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[70] See Halldenius "The Primacy of right" and Rendall "The Grand Causes."
[71] For discussion of Wollstonecraft's "commitment to cosmopolitan improvement," framed as a peremptory Kantian aspiration, see Steiner "Mary Wollstonecraft's "Love of Mankind" and Juengel's "Countenancing History"
[72] See Mary Louise Pratt *Imperial Eyes* as a foundational critique of metropole-centric travel writing as an imperial tool.

ordered the metropole as the more civilized, or more advanced, but travelers also used the comparison to draw attention to the depravity of the metropole's supposed heights of civilization.[73] What is striking in Wollstonecraft's account of her northern travels is the comparison to both England[74] and France[75]. In a climate of both intense shared culture (see: publication histories of French/English cross channel culture) and intense political differentiation both before the French Revolution during the Seven Years War and the fears of pamphleteers and politicians like Burke, Wollstonecraft's triune comparison serves to point to a unified history and the possibility, the necessity, for all countries to pursue freedom.[76] In Wollstonecraft's account, differentiation between nations and the ordering of civilized growth is measured not in stages of subsistence production and corresponding governmental structures (see Palmeri) but is measured in relation to the ideals of freedom.

Despite the context of the Terror – a series of events commonly read (especially by Burke) as evidence of the failure and dangers of revolution—Wollstonecraft's *Letters Written During* is permeated with a paradigm favoring revolutionary ideals. When she compares Scandinavia to France, it is often negative, but not because of the recent revolution. Instead, negative comparisons are occasions in which she condemns the *ancien regime*, rather than cautionary narratives against revolution or differentiations between England and France to

[73] See discussion of this dynamic as it plays out in Montagu's letters in Donna Landry's "Love Me, Love My Turkey Book"
[74] See Steiner, Henriette. ""The more I see of the world"
[75] For analysis of Wollstonecraft's own philosophy of travel writing, see Horrocks, Ingrid. "Creating an 'Insinuating Interest'"
[76] Miriam Wallace's article on Wollstonecraft and Holcroft draws out the politically radical project they each set out on, and in the case of Wollstonecraft, specifically eschews the tendency of scholarship to cast her journey to Scandinavia as a feminine sublime or a roman a clef, attempting to remedy the elision of Wollstonecraft's political project. See Wallace "Discovering the Political Traveler in Wollstonecraft's Letters." See also Jones, Angela D. "When a Woman so Far Outsteps Her Proper Sphere.'"

demonstrate the inappropriateness of change for England. Early in the *Residence*, Wollstonecraft describes the manners of the Swedes[77] as influenced by the French: "Their tables, like their compliments, seem equally a caricature of the French" (62). Wollstonecraft is ambivalent about the model of French manners.[78] The problem with imitation may be that the Swedish imitation only captures the absurd extremities of politeness, a grotesque "caricature", as she says. Or the problem may instead be that the original model is itself grotesque. This ambivalence is carried through the comparative clause, "like the well-bred French" in a sentence describing Swedish politeness:

> The Swedes pique themselves on their politeness; but far from being the polish of a cultivated mind, it consists merely of tiresome forms and ceremonies. So far, indeed, from entering immediately into your character, and making you feel instantly at your ease, like the well-bred French, their over-acted civility is a continual restraint on all your actions" (62).

Wollstonecraft's recurring critique of Swedes imitating French manners is that doing so squelches the expression of native customs and hospitality. The problem with the dishes, ['the table] imitating French food is that they are "composed….of a variety of mixtures to destroy the

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[77] For a discussion of Wollstonecraft's treatment of hospitality as an avenue for renewed political orientation, see Wawrzinek "Hospitality and the Nation."
[78] Bode reads Wollstonecraft's description of the Swede's "politeness" as part of her larger dismissal of the manners of all Scandinavians, and as proof that she has traveled to the North with prejudices that cannot be shaken, prejudices that see the Northern cultures as slow, lazy, and cold-hearted. He asks, "was she ever long enough in any Scandinavian metropolis to examine her own prejudices and to lose them? Did she ever really mix with the locals?" (36). Bode's observation of Wollstonecraft's cultural imperialism (or at last parochialism) seems to me correct, but it does not undermine the ways in which she contrasts England to both France and Scandinavia—striving to create a view of England that is in fact better than the culture of other places (both France and the north). Rix's introduction to *Norse Romanticism* includes a brief discussion of the appeal to Gothic/Scandinavian morality in 18th century England. See also "The European Circulation of Nordic Texts in the Romantic Period" by Robert Rix.

native taste of the food without being as relishing" (62). The 'well-bred swedes of the capital" who are 'formed on the ancient french model" (67) speak the language, but, Wollstonecraft cautions, though "[t]his may be reckoned an advantage in some respects...it prevents the cultivation of their own and any considerable advance in literary pursuits" (67). Wollstonecraft's opening gambit in relation to the French is to discredit their model of cultivation on the premise that each country ought to develop its own manners, rather than adopt another's. But her agreement with what seems a Burkean caution is a more subtle rhetorical argument. No society ought to imitate the manners of another—a claim consistent with British immemorialists and Burkean traditionalists. But the manners she cautions against are specifically those of the *ancien regime.* These might indeed be outgrowths of natural cultivation in the courtly society, but the manners themselves are part and parcel of a tyrannical society.

Wollstonecraft wants to see a culture of manners, conversation, and sociability that does not rely on irrelevant traditions, but on examined values. She reflects on the limitations of socializing in Gothenburg: "[W]hen numerous circles are to be brought together, and when neither literature nor public amusements furnish topics for conversation, a good dinner appears to be the only centre to rally round, especially as scandal, the zest of more select parties, can only be whispered" (61). And she concludes that the progressive growth and refinement of society improves social enjoyment and the use of the senses: "The more I see of the world, the more I am convinced that civilization is a blessing not sufficiently estimated by those who have not traced its progress; for it not only refines our enjoyments, but produces a variety which enables us to retain the primitive delicacy of our sensations." (61).The progress of society that Wollstonecraft observes is one that points universally towards ideals of human cultivation and liberty; and civilization everywhere is at risk for tyrannical limits to that progression.

It is not only through a comparison of manners that she works to condemn the *ancien regime*—a condemnation that is reinforcing the importance of revolutionary ways of thinking that overthrow the tyrannical old for a better considered means of social organization. When Wollstonecraft describes despots of the North, she compares them to the tyrannical rulers in France: "[The Grand Bailiff]" was quite a Frenchman of the ancien régime, or rather a courtier, the same kind of animal in every country. Here I saw the cloven foot of despotism. I boasted to you that they had no viceroy in Norway, but these Grand Bailiffs, particularly the superior one, who resides at Christiania, are political monsters of the same species" (127).

Wollstonecraft also turns to France when there are Scandinavian institutions that she approves of. But here, she compares them to their positive reception of revolutionary ideals coming out of France, this time in the present—that is, not from the *ancien regime*:

> "The happiness of the people is a substantial eulogium; and, from all I can gather, the inhabitants of Denmark and Norway are the least oppressed people of Europe. The press is free. They translate any of the French publications of the day, deliver their opinion on the subject, and discuss those it leads to with great freedom, and without fearing to displease the Government." (92)

And she repeats in Letter 19 more explicitly her favor for the Revolution, correcting the misperceptions her readers may have of it, "We talk of the depravity of the french [sic], and lay a stress on the old age of the nation; yet where has more virtuous enthusiasm been displayed than during the last two years, by the common people of France and in their armies?" (154). She acknowledges the "account of horrours" they have done, but she argues that "the gross vices which I have always seen allied with simplicity of manners, are the concomitants of ignorance" (154). Both the tyrannical dangers and the cultivating ideals were apparent in France, and their

Revolution was founded on the universal aims of freeing themselves from the former in order to achieve the latter. And the way to get to the good is to move past ignorance into a better thought, better considered mode of manners—not one that is only informed by an inexplicable past.

Despite Wollstonecraft's comparisons to France both pre- and postrevolution, she takes care to tell her reader that this is not actually a comparison of national character, nor is she upholding France as a model to be mimicked (remember here her disgust at mimicking manners and culinary dishes). Instead, she is looking for a broader logic to explain how progress works, and to create conjectures about the best course of (as she says at the end of the final appendix) to diminish the sum of human misery. She explains in letter 19:

> "Do not forget that, in my general observations, I do not pretend to sketch a national character, but merely to note the present state of morals and manners as I trace the progress of the world's improvement. Because, during my residence in different countries, my principal object has been to take such a dispassionate view of men as will lead me to form a just idea of the nature of man. And, to deal ingenuously with you, I believe I should have been less severe in the remarks I have made on the vanity and depravity of the French, had I travelled towards the north before I visited France." (154)

Wollstonecraft's comparisons of the Gothic north with the Gallic revolution makes France into an instance of pursuing "grand causes" and not the originator of them. Freeing the ideals of the French Revolution from the French instance itself is a first step in making the 'grand causes' available again to English reading publics, thereby allowing Wollstonecraft to maintain her

revolutionary authorial identity while also recuperating her reputation in the context of the French Terror.[79]

14. Comprehending Causality, Enabling Transformation

On her northern journey, Wollstonecraft sees societies that evidence the "growth of each particular soil" "matured by time" and accelerating in that growth (176, full qt this chapter, section 6, page 105). Like many travelers, she viewed her travels as a means to observe "patterns of human psychology" and facets of governance, cultivation, and trade on which to build "speculative or hypothetical histories and [work] out the stages that might or must have brought human beings from a posited original condition outside society to a state with recognizable institutions of religion, government, law and exchange" (Palmeri 3). The appearance fits the narrative of Burke and the immemorialists. But for Wollstonecraft, the surface description is insufficient to explain the causes—the 'grand causes'—as she says. Wollstonecraft's phrase is ambiguous; "causes" might here refer to the underlying dynamics of historical change, or, especially with the adjective "grand" she might be referring to the revolutionary causes motivating the French revolution. I think that here it is both. And both are

[79] Favret, in *Romantic Correspondence*, also notes the political recuperation Wollstonecraft does in *Letters Written During* to justify her revolutionary sympathies in the face of the Terror. Favret reads the *Letters Written During* and Wollstonecraft's *An Historical and Moral View of … the French Revolution* (1794) as an argument that the terror occurred because "the French people were not ready for revolution" (108). Canuel also reads Wollstonecraft as disentangling revolution from the French Revolution. See Canuel, Mark. "Wollstonecraft and World Improvement."

contrary to the implicit (and commonplace) historical thinking underscoring Burke's writings and political position.

Wollstonecraft acknowledges that the usual, immemorialist (Burkean) version of explaining the progress of history is, by all appearances, correct. Evidence of society's progress through time as seen in her travels to the north does reflect slow growth accelerating towards civilization. The model has descriptive, but not explanatory power. It can explain *that* something has changed, but not why it has. This is a common fact of conjectural histories. As Pocock says, Burke's historiographic theory—shared by a wide array of preceding and contemporary political thinkers—was necessarily irrational. The law was not created by reason nor could it be understood by reason, only by collective experience. Pocock explains,

> He also held that political knowledge was the fruit of experience and that reason in this field had nothing to operate on except experience; from which it followed that, since the knowledge of an individual or a generation of individuals was limited by the amount of experience on which it was based, there was always a case for the view that the reason of the living, though it might clearly enough discern the disadvantages, might not fully perceive the advantages of existing and ancient institutions, for these might contain the fruits of more experience than was available to living individuals in the sum of their personal or reported experience of the world. It also followed that since the wisdom embodied in institutions was based on experience and nothing but experience, it could not be completely rationalized: that is, reduced to first principles which might be clearly enunciated, shown to be the cause of the institutions' first being set up, or employed to criticize their subsequent workings (Pocock, "Burke" 202-3).

In short, immemorialism in its purist theoretical form as a model of natural growth does not and

cannot consider causes.

Thus, when Wollstonecraft writes, “had I not previously considered” she is introducing an argument with the Burke’s very way of thinking,[80] thereby troubling the natural conclusions that she appeared to concede in the first part of the paragraph. It *may be*, she says, that civilization appears to be the natural fruit of national growth. But importantly this is only an appearance, the surface of affairs,[81] and not the motivating action. The “view” is nearly, but not quite, sufficient. Consideration is the necessary element for truly understanding historical changes. Conjectural histories more generally subscribed to this a-rational model,[82] so Wollstonecraft’s argument for consideration is an intervention in the mode of historical thinking dominant at the time. Her method of reasoning and consideration is evident in her in anecdotes assessing the culture of the north. She makes it into a hermeneutic method in the nineteenth and twentieth letters, in which she models for her readers first an unreasoned way of encountering history in Gothic scenes, and then corrects such an experience with a rational interpretation of

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[80] This negative (“had I not”) is one that is missed by Favret in *Romantic Correspondence* and Rendall’s “Grand Causes” when she considers this passage and identifies Wollstonecraft as moderate following the French Revolution.

[81] Emma Goldman attributes the political differences between Burke’s reaction to the French Revolution in *Reflections* and Wollstonecraft’s reaction to the same as written in her response to Burke as a difference between seeing the surface only and seeing the greater details of context: Goldman writes, “The erstwhile champion of English liberalism, the great Edmund Burke, delivered himself of a sentimental sermon against the French Revolution. He had met the fair Marie Antoinette and bewailed her lot at the hands of the infuriated people of Paris. His middle-class sentimentality saw in the greatest of all uprisings only the surface and not the terrible wrongs the French people endured before they were driven to their acts. But Mary Wollstonecraft saw and her reply to the mighty Burke, *The Vindication for the Rights of Man*, is one of the most powerful pleas for the oppressed and disinherited ever made” (Goldman 12), and later in describing Wollstonecraft’s *The French Revolution*, “Keen as she was in her observation, she saw deeper than Burke, beneath all the terrible loss of life, she saw the still more terrible contrast between poverty and riches and [that] all the bloodshed was in vain so long as that contrast continued” (15)

[82] See Palmeri 15.

the same scene and (critiques for) the more considered experience of history mode that all readers can execute.

15. Reviewing Gothic Scenes

Wollstonecraft deploys gothic scenes in the nineteenth and twentieth letters as a means of presenting various modes of reading the past through the present. The thread of 'reading the past' is one of several characteristics that bind together the gothic as a genre—others include a preoccupation (exercised through form and theme) with the limits of reason[83] and the imagination; examinations of what is objectively 'real'; and psychological and sexual relations, with a particular emphasis on genealogical issues. Gothic is, perhaps too simply, defined by its tropes: settings in archaeological ruins or ancient castles; genealogical knots of potential (and actual) incest, obscure parental deaths, and orphaned children; death defied and bodily integrity confounded with dismembered body parts, walking corpses, and disembodied spirits; incarceration and imprisonment—often irrational or unconnected to rational explanations of crimes. These tropes, though key to the Gothic (several 18th and 19th century scholars are keen to explain), are not in themselves fully characteristic of the Gothic. Indeed—they can appear in the Gothic's descendant genre of 'horror' and not be 'Gothic' and Gothic texts have only 'intermittent' appearances of such tropes (Brown 22). These tropes are instead markers of the Gothic—which is better defined (as Brown, Groom, and Dent all argue) by an engagement the problems of history and time, the workings of the unseen (a category under which I would also include history and time); and with the limits and possibilities of the imagination and the mind—including reason. In what follows, I read Wollstonecraft's Gothic scenes as examples of her own

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[83] See Brown, throughout.

explicit development of a means to engage questions of history and of reason, funneled through her experience of the gothic scene she writes herself into. The scenes signal the Gothic, in other words, in order to rewrite the way of engaging it. She uses aesthetic/literary Gothicism in order to highlight the way that unthought aesthetic Gothicism deploys a politics that is averse to liberty, and she then re-thinks the same Gothic tropes to propose a liberated politics—transforming the Gothic scenes into liberatory, revolutionary, Gothicism.

Wollstonecraft's nineteenth and twentieth letters present a series of aesthetically Gothic scenes: a public execution, arson, a haunted castle with queerly lit and possibly animated animal statuary, a (partially disorganized) archival library, and a Royal museum (possibly including armor, and certainly including gowns and fabrics worn by now-passed royalty). If, as Deidre Lynch writes, "Gothic fiction can remind us of what is spookily mechanical, volitionless, about readers' responsiveness" (Lynch "Gothic Fiction" 58), then Wollstonecraft subverts the Gothic by presenting it as a scene for readers to re-think and reflect on their political responses.

Before examining the formal and philosophical work Wollstonecraft does through the gothic scenes, a short summary of the nineteenth and twentieth letters. The nineteenth letter moves primarily between two topics –a public execution and arson in Copenhagen. Wollstonecraft adds a third scene – a party scene – where she talks with other guests about events and superstitions surrounding the execution. Each of these scenes – the execution, the party, and the arson—includes running commentary, either explicit judgment from Wollstonecraft or more implicit framing context that frames the interpretation of the events. And each of the three scenes frames the others—the party scene provides a social commentary on the scenes, and the story of the arson interspliced with the scene and discussion of the execution provides a parallel plot of the terrible event of arson (an 'intermittent horror', to borrow Brown's

description of such Gothic scenes in Gothic fictions), that can be extrapolated to interpret the scene of the execution.

Wollstonecraft is building a structural form of gothic signification: a scene pointing to a social and philosophical question, which itself is a provocation to another scene of social concern. Timothy Michael, writing on Wollstonecraft's rhetorical strategy in *Vindication of the Rights of Men*, points out Wollstonecraft's reliance on a strategy of concatenation in which she poses a series of questions that are topically different, but logically synonymous—that is, asking the same philosophical question repeatedly about different legal and social issues. Doing so, he argues, builds an argument about particular political issues by drawing on a rational political framework. In her *Letters*, presented as a travel narrative and series of letters, Wollstonecraft is more obliquely making the same move: presenting a series of Gothic scenes (which do make for good travel narrative material—sensationally so), and responding to them each separately, but relying on an underlying logic that can transfer from one scene to another.

The second aesthetically Gothic letter—that is, the twentieth letter—takes a different structural tactic. Here the Gothic scenes follow one after another as she visits a castle within which there are animal statues, the library, and the royal museum with its different sections of artefacts, only partially organized. Each of these presents an opportunity to encounter the past, and as she progresses through the castle she experiences moments of superstition which she then attempts to rework in her own experience and to propose alternate methods of encountering these objects that remain from a longer continuous history.

In the following pages, I work through these two letters, summarizing them as they unfold. These summaries and the extraction of her commentary on her gothic experiences at the execution and in the library are in the service of the larger project of the volume of *Letters*

Written. As a review of where we are in this argument: Wollstonecraft's *Letters Written During* is a work of political philosophy—not, as many critics read her, a retreat from her radical pro-French Revolution politics in light of the Terror into memoir and Romantic, individual, self-reflection or even a retreat into a more single-issue focus on feminism and maternal experience. Wollstonecraft's formal shift into epistolary writing is not merely an expressive choice for constructing a persona, but an interpolative one, that (through the common moves of epistolarity) summons her readers into a 'we'. The construction of this 'we' is political. Wollstonecraft is still engaged in the arguments of political philosophy that she launched into with her two *Vindications*: an argument against Burke's anti-intellectual empiricism in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. Burke's politics is Gothic—a politics of ancient constitutionalism and immemorialism as a slow progress constructing a 'we' that is felt and tested but not thought. Wollstonecraft is seeking a political community of a 'we' that *is* in some form thought, and she does this in part by accepting the Gothic formulation, using the cues of aesthetic Gothicism, and guiding her readers to encounter such Gothic tropes thinkingly.[84] Her encounters of the gothic aesthetic and her pedagogic re-readings present a hermeneutics for political thinking that meets empirical immemorialism and calls for a rational and collective rethinking of it towards a more revolutionary liberatory politics.

16. Case study 1: Drinking the blood of the executed/critiquing empiricism preferring rationalism

Letter 19 opens with an account of running into a crowd outside of town who had gathered, a servant informs her, to view an execution by guillotine—a clear parallel to the French Revolution and occasion to review gothic modes of description. Wollstonecraft describes the

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[84] See Timothy Michael on the link between Burke's aesthetic and political logic.

public execution as a scene of horror, not for its presentation of death but for the entire scene including the lack of sympathy from the audience gathered. In this, the spectacle itself is a marker to point to the more horrific dynamics—just as gothic tropes are intermittent horrors that point to social, philosophical, and historiographic concerns to be examined through the narrative. Wollstonecraft condemns executions as a state policy and as a spectacle. She writes of the scene: "people go to executions to see how the poor wretch plays his part, rather than to commiserate his fate, much less to think of the breach of morality which has brought him to such a deplorable end." While the state may consider public executions as an example to dissuade others from crime, it is clear to Wollstonecraft that this is an unlikely outcome, for people do not in any way reflect on the crime itself nor does memory or knowledge of certain beheading dissuade a criminal caught up in the moment:

> the fear of an ignominious death, I believe, never deferred anyone from the commission of a crime, because, in committing it, the mind is roused to activity about present circumstances. It is a game at hazard, at which all expect the turn of the die in their own favour, never reflecting on the chance of ruin till it comes. (150)

Indeed, the act of committing a crime is generally thoughtless, and in the act, reflection is suspended. However, it is not the lack of capacity for thought that causes a crime, for criminals are, she suggests, equally capable of civilized engagement. The difference between making a villain and making a citizen is in the state of education: "When a strong mind is not disciplined by cultivation it is a sense of injustice that renders it unjust." The execution is a scene that allows her to turn to reflect on the causes of criminality, and on the even more gothic questions of "the pernicious effects produced by false notions of justice" (150) but it operates as a Gothic marker—a means to test the limits of the power of the mind and an unseen force—in this case,

the question of the abstract idea of justice. Wollstonecraft is, in this letter as in all her other works, ideologically committed to an understanding that individual human well-being is connected to society's arrangements. What we will see in the next paragraphs—despite their varying topics—is a concern over the relation of thought to politics; a relation that she is forging against the grain of Burke and other Immemorialists whose Gothic conception of history relies on empiricism rather than rational thought.[85]

Rather than fully examining, in a logical mode, the problem of the audience's reaction to the execution, Wollstonecraft turns to the scene of arson in Copenhagen. She justifies this topical shift by explaining that it is the context that informs the audience's hunger for the execution, and also as an explanation for why the execution occurred at all:

> Executions, however, occur very rarely at Copenhagen; for timidity, rather than clemency, palsies all the operations of the present government. The malefactor who died this morning, would not, probably, have been punished with death at any other period; but an incendiary excites universal execration; and as the greater part of the inhabitants are still distressed by the late conflagration, an example was thought absolutely necessary; though not, from what I can gather, the fire was accidental. (150-51)

She writes of rumors passed along to her that the spread of the fire was not merely wind and bad luck, but plotted with "combustible materials…placed at proper distance" (150). The rumored plotter is Mr. Pitt, British Prime Minister, who is said to be retaliating for Denmark's recently declared stance of neutrality with regard to the French Revolutionary Republic. In other words, the cause of the execution was the fire that had collectively been narrated as arson and as political plot. The execution: an unthinking response to an event that was itself irrationally

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[85] See Pocock, qtd page 115 of this chapter,.

defined (as arson, when it seems it was really accident), and that irrational, unsubstantiated conclusion is itself a fascination with plot over attention to detail.[86] While Wollstonecraft believes the fire to have been, in fact, accidental, she reflects on the nature of plotting more generally. "Fabricators of plots" are the same everywhere: they all "build their conjectures on the 'baseless fabric of a vision.'" (151).[87] Whether the "fabricators of plots" are the plotters themselves, or the rumor mongers who fabricate the notion that there was a plot at all is unclear in the syntax of the paragraph. But in either case, plotting is social action that imagines a future that cannot be manifested on current, real, facts, but must be created whole-cloth through plot. Rumors, too, create a vision of affairs that has no basis in evidence, but create an idea that has nothing to do with reality except the statements conjectured. This, she suggests, is part of the machination of state politics at large. For the great irony is that the accused plotter William Pitt is himself busily working in London to quash reformers at home, accusing them of plotting treason—so that Pitt himself is a "fabricator of plots," creating the idea that others are plotters in order to bring them to trial.[88] Wollstonecraft's friends were among those brought to trial for

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[86] Bode, "Bias and Openness" (2017) critiques Wollstonecraft for her duplicity on this point: She insists on rational, factual attention to detail and yet describes the Scandinavians generally (and nonspecifically at times) without detail, making them play into her own plot of political machination. I don't deny it—but her authenticity and her reliability as a travel writer are not what is at stake in her writing (for her and for her audience—though we can certainly see that they would have been at stake for the Danes, the Swedes, and so on). What is at stake for her, is the form of political reason that will make possible a more equitable Britain, and she is writing from her experience in the north not for anthropological evidence or even for direct sociological comparison, but as a rhetorical device to situation Britain in its Gothic roots, and to demonstrate that roots alone are insufficient political reasons: even the Scandinavian descendants of the Goths are prone to disaster when they unthinkingly fabricate.

[87] "baseless fabric of a vision" is from Prospero in The Tempest; that baseless fabric of a vision is what actors use to create characters, and these actors are but 'spirits' and shall fade into air. There is much to be said about Wollstonecraft and her skepticism of the stage, particularly her use of Shakespeare in this and other passages.

[88] see footnote 3, page 151, Broadview edition *Short Residence*

treason, but in this text her focus is on the irony and confusion of rumored plots as a method of political action and social understanding. What a mess politics is when it is unmoored from evidence, from thought, and floated wildly on conjecture.

Wollstonecraft abruptly returns to the initial topic of her letter: capital punishment, with a very epistolary transition addressing the 'you' who is her reader, "I forgot to mention to you, that I was informed, by a man of veracity, that two persons came to the stake to drink a glass of the criminal's blood, as an infallible remedy for the apoplexy" (151). [89] The social scene continues to unfold rapidly. She disapproves of the action and another party goer disagrees with her, "when I animadverted in the company, where it was mentioned, on such a horrible violation of nature, a Danish lady reproved me very severely, asking how I knew that it was not a cure for the disease? adding, that every attempt was justifiable in search of health" (151). This anecdote of a public execution becomes, like the first one, an occasion to reflect on the baseless fabric with which theories are concocted and false notions perpetuated. In this exchange at a social gathering, she picks up the thread of what counts as legitimate grounds for action. The woman who reproves her takes as legitimate anything that might lead toward health: a trial and error approach ad infinitum, but without reasoning to choose one course of action over another. Wollstonecraft rejects this sort of reasoning out of hand, and refuses to engage in argument with the woman: "I did not, you may imagine, enter into an argument with a person the slave of such a gross prejudice" (151) And she links the state of the woman's ignorance to the state of education in society at large: "I allude to it not only as a trait of the ignorance of the people, but to censure the

[89] A good example aligning with Bode's critique that Wollstonecraft is highly unreliable in matters of factuality—this is a third party summary, and Wollstonecraft does not speak the language. Wollstonecraft's descriptions of both the original scene (drinking blood) and the scene in which she is told of the event cast the Danes in a very poor light—barbaric and unthinking.

Government for not preventing scenes that throw an odium on the human race" (151) The state of knowledge, and more particularly, of reason, is a social problem, and not merely one of philosophy or personal practice.

Wollstonecraft follows the anecdote of the party-goer's blood-drinking defense with direct identification and condemnation of the mode of thinking necessary to support such superstition: "Empiricism is not peculiar to Denmark; and I know no way of rooting it out, though it be a remnant of exploded witchcraft, till the acquiring a general knowledge of the component parts of the human frame becomes a part of public education" (152). In her assessment, justification of barbaric customs as one of many attempts in search of health is a form of the crudest empiricism. The problem with empiricism writ large, and evidenced in this barbaric justification, is that it is lacking "general knowledge" and that it is a leftover from the past—it is Gothic. The only means for 'rooting out' such barbarism is for public education to include the practice of abstraction (general knowledge) and analytic thought (component parts). These must be of the "human frame"—by which she might mean anatomic, but it also refers to the spiritual, moral, and social dimensions of human life.

It is easy here to slip between "empiricism" as the political philosophy into a more contemporary definition of "empirical" as an evidentially based truth statement. Timothy Michaels gives this gloss of empiricism by quoting the "staunchly empiricist Hume, who thinks that "the different operations and tendencies of …two species of government might be made apparent even *a priori*" (13). The empiricist model of political knowledge requires *experience* not facts. Quoting from another 18th century empiricist, this time Richard Valpy's sermon, Michael explains that empiricists believe that, "political knowledge can only be the slow and progressive result of experience" (Valpy, qtd in Michaels 14). Michael explains, "Valpy's

remark is representative of an accommodationist strain of conservative thought on the subject: if one concedes the possibility of political knowledge at all, it is far preferable to argue for the more laborious empiricist route, which seems less threatening than the apparently quick gains of rationalist speculation" (14). Wollstonecraft concurs with the critique of 'speculation' as fabrication, but also critiques an atmosphere in which 'experience' is taken as the basis of political decisions such as the enforcement of law through the spectacle of a public execution. The experience of fear of a fire that is understood (wrongly) to be arson does not justify public execution, no matter how 'experienced' it is. She introduces what we would now call "empirical thought," evidential analysis, as a rational method of political reason. In this she is still, firmly, a rationalist.

The next several paragraphs of letter 19 continue with a detour through the tyranny of property ownership, particularly in the conditions of relations between men and women (another grand cause—or better to say—grand causality). This is, of course, well-trodden argument for Wollstonecraft, being at the heart of her *Vindications of Woman*. She even alludes to her return to the political topic she is best known for (other than, of course, her allegiance to the French Revolution). The unjust relation between the sexes is her constant theme because, she, asks, "How can I avoid it, when most of the struggles of an eventful life have been occasioned by the oppressed state of my sex[?]". This is, perhaps, an odd explanation for her choice of topic, given her rejection of all things empiricist above. The empirical, by long tradition, is that which bases knowledge on the experiential, rather than on abstract or (as she calls it) "general" knowledge. Her explanation for circling back around to the relation of men and women is an explicitly empirical explanation. She writes about the condition of women because she experiences it. But it is not the end point. Instead, her experience provokes her to reason: "We reason deeply when

we feel forcibly" (153). This is not a new idea for her—she made a similar point in Vindication of the Rights of Woman. The difference here, though, is that she posits not only a theory of feminine thought, but a principle for social thinking and historical understanding: an empiricism tempered by rationalism.

It is clear in the letter that she is not wholly settled on the proper mode of thinking: whether it should be experiential, observational, or guided by general knowledge. She writes of sensuality (a key element of empiricism but also of romanticism) that it "arise[s] rather from indolence of mind, and dull senses" more than it signifies "exuberance of life", which would, if it were the source of sensuality, be the catalyst for "the whole character when the vivacity of youthful spirits begins to subside into strength of mind" (153). Her vision of the "whole character" is one whose sensations grow into thought, but lacking such wisdom, she finds herself condemning sensation altogether, preferring cultivated reason over lazy sensuality. It is as if she wishes that sensation were the mode of life, but unjust laws and social conditions require vigilance and rigor of thought. This is—in fact, the conclusion she reaches in the appendix, as we have already seen. She would be willing to admit that un-reasoned, un-coerced, un-cultivated progress happens in history, but the evidence she has seen does not allow her to believe that human misery can be diminished by resting on the simple laws of nature.

17. Case Study 2: Organizing Spectacles of History

Wollstonecraft continues her consideration of history in the 20th letter by reflecting on four public sites of historical engagement: the theater, the Palace (open for tours), the public library, and the Royal Museum. The first of these is, in her view, too much a spectacle to be of significant reflective value. The second, in the palace, is rife with hauntings of gothic

immemorialism and all the trappings of empirical ‘witchcraft’ she decries in the gothic scene of drinking the executed’s blood. She describes her passage through the palace:

> “This palace, now deserted, displays a gloomy kind of grandeur throughout; for the silence of spacious apartments always makes itself to be felt; I at least feel it; and I listen for the sound of my footsteps, as I have done at midnight to the ticking of the death - watch, encouraging a kind of fanciful superstition.” (156)

Wollstonecraft accounts for her empirical experience in the Palace of Rosembourg as one forced upon her, the acoustics of the room turning her footsteps into a ticking death watch, “encouraging…superstition”—the hallmark of unreflective empiricism. The objects in the palace similarly affect her; in her account, she herself becomes the object of the things in the room, as they “carr[y] her” back to past times and “impress…the manners[90] of the age forcibly on [her] mind” (156). Wollstonecraft’s description of the palace is one of a Gothic scene that she experiences Gothically, “spookily mechanical, volitionless, readers’ responsiveness” (Lynch “Gothic Fiction” 58).

Wollstonecraft continues in the vein of Gothic description, comparing the castle to a “vast tomb, full of the shadowy phantoms of those who had played or toiled their hour out, and sunk behind the tapestry, which celebrated the conquests of love or war” (156). She asks, if “these beings”—these former inhabitants of the palace, “composed of such noble materials of thinking and feeling, have they only melted into the elements to keep in motion the grand mass of life?” Could they, in other words, have lived and thought and felt only to become part of some nebulous elemental force? If so, the transmutation of lives into ‘nebulous elemental force’

[90] In *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* “Gothic affability is the mode you think proper to adopt, the condescension of a Baron, not the civility of a liberal man.” (16)

is the basic logic of ancient constitutionalist, immemorialist political logic: the constitution exists because it has accumulated the life force and experience of thousands of individuals over hundreds of years, which cannot therefore be rationally accounted for, only felt in the constitution itself. The idea, that is, that history progresses through some kind of 'natural ferment'—a kind of elemental force—that is not subject to reason. Individual life is, for those ancient constitutionalists, important because it serves to test the laws to prove them worthwhile (or otherwise), but they can do so only as part of a melting into a larger variety of test cases. Wollstonecraft entertains the thought that this might be the case even for the aristocracy who lived in, now haunt, these walls and concludes "It cannot be!—As easily could I believe that the large silver lions, at the top of the banqueting room, thought and reasoned" (156). In order to believe an ancient constitutionalism, she would have to abandon the fundamental categorization of human and animal: if humans dissolve into history and yet somehow still influence the present, without thought in their lives or after, then gilded statues animals might as well have thought. But Wollstonecraft is perturbed. Haunted history baffles her categorizations of thought, seems a matter of superstition. Nonetheless, the objects in the castle which so 'impress' her, may nonetheless "be considered as historical documents" (156), and their preservation thus justified. Wollstonecraft's encounter with the apparently animated lions is an occasion for her to critique her own (visually, Gothically aesthetic) interpretation of the events and to proffer a reasoned response. She does not leave it here by calling the Gothic aesthetic logic and its ally the ancient constitutionalist form of political Gothicism "irrational"—to do so would be simply to invert the claim the empiricists make against rationalists; that basing political knowledge on reason instead of experience is mere 'speculation' (see Michael 13-14). Instead, she takes her critique a step

farther to examine what role history does play in political reason. History has no role to play as "shadowy phantom" but does have a place as a document to be reasoned with.

The library, which she visits in the 20th letter, is an ideal scene of historical evidence, in the twentieth letter, Wollstonecraft opens her paragraph on the library with approbation, "The public library consists of a collection much larger than I expected to see; and it is well arranged" (157). She cannot say much more about the library than to comment on its arrangement—after all, she does not speak the language: "Of the value of Icelandic manuscripts I could not form a judgment, though the alphabet of some of them amused me" (157). However, despite her diminutive affective experience with the Icelandic texts,[91] Wollstonecraft continues to comment on the commendable social activity that enables the library—though her ambivalence toward an experientially based historicism comes through in the word "submit"—an unfree relation of person to posterity:

> "shewing what labour men will submit to, in order to transmit their ideas to posterity, I have sometimes thought it a great misfortune for individuals to acquire a certain delicacy of sentiment, which often makes them weary of the common occurrences of life; yet it is this very delicacy of feeling and thinking which probably has produced most of the performances that have benefited mankind." (157)

This library scene of nascent rational organization is less pointed a reframing of gothic empiricism toward rational liberatory rationalism than her revision of the apparently animated statuary. What we do see here, though, is a continued thread of her search for a means to engage history in political knowledge without surrendering individual lives to the dominance of history.

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[91] Bode points to this passage as another example of Wollstonecraft's irresponsible reportage on the Scandinavian regions.

That men will "submit to" immense labour during their lives simply for the sake of 'posterity' is as much a limitation of liberty as is the posthumous claim that history has determined the necessary contours of British political and constitutional life: the lives of those who came before somehow "proofed" the law, binding themselves to it and in so doing also binding present lives to the same. Examining the order *may* be a way to preserve history without surrendering reason to it.

In contrast with the nascent organization of the library is the royal gallery of pictures. Wollstonecraft comments on its poor organization of paintings (another instance of the visual plane as insufficient!) that "[t]he good pictures …mixed indiscriminately with the bad ones" (158). In another room, though, where clothing is collected, she begins to see a new, more sensible, order: "Much better, though, is the "collection of dresses, arms, and implements…displaying that first species of ingenuity which is rather a proof of patient perseverance, than comprehension of mind" (158). As in the library, this collection has not fully succeeded in ordering the objects; however, it too shows that first element necessary for turning history into an accessible, legible, display rather than a jumble of historical artefacts that cannot be explained but has emerged 'Gothically' out of time, accumulated into a nebulous force of spectacle. Wollstonecraft does not anywhere see the order she advocates, but gives her prescription for the best organization in two negatives, by describing what the collections lack. The art, she says, "ought to be arranged in such a manner, as to shew the progressive discoveries and improvements in the art" (158), and the "specimens of natural history, and curiosities of art" are merely "huddled together without that scientific order which alone renders them useful" (158). The ideal order for collections of historical artefacts is scientific and demonstrative of progression. Though Burke too is a progressivist, Wollstonecraft's view of progress is one that is

understood through a scientific ordering, rather than mere accumulation.[92] Thus, by the end of this twentieth letter, Wollstonecraft has sketched out her ideas about how history might be apprehended: unordered, sensational, and empirically understood through a kind of superstition, or ordered, rational, scientific, and with an eye toward conscious contributions to the trajectory of human society.

18. Conclusion

When she writes in the final paragraph of the appendix that she would have been convinced that history changes slowly, as a kind of 'natural fermentation' within the keeping of the national character, drawing on its roots, "had [she] not previously considered" the grand causes that lead to progress, it is this weight of the word 'consider' that we, her readers, must remember. *To consider* is, for Wollstonecraft, a matter of sifting through historical evidence, making comparisons that exceed characterizing nations according to stereotype, and reflecting on experiences in such a way that comparisons and conclusions may be drawn. Her method relies on personal experience, on rationalism, *and* on reflection. No one of these can triumph over the others.

Wollstonecraft's *Letters Written During* is in the genre of the travel narrative and of the epistolary, both of which are genres commonly concerned with the question of how to tell the truth –to tell it impartially and yet to give it weight through the weight of the personal experience, the promise of the ethos that *I have myself seen it*. The genre itself puts Wollstonecraft's dismissal of 'empiricism' at odds with the necessarily empirical nature of

[92] See Timothy Michael 98-9 on Michael is looking at Wollstonecraft's language and rhetorical strategies for critiquing Burke

epistolary travel writing. Wollstonecraft is not unaware of this. Her question of what to do with historical objects is a real question: they must not be empirically (that is superstitiously, sensationally, spectacularly) displayed and consumed; but neither are they entirely unimportant. The question is not one of the past but one of the present: how is the audience to receive the historical objects?

Wollstonecraft has presented the lands she travelled to – their landscape, their people, and the elements of history that she can see (and speculate) that would give an explanation for the conditions of the country. But she is wary – as all travel writers must be—of the partial nature of her observations: "I may be a little partial, and view every thing with the jaundiced eye of melancholy" (159); and she has been incomplete in the gathering of details, which she explained at the outset in the Advertisement "My plan was simply to endeavor to give a just view of the present state of the countries I have passed through…avoiding those details which, without being very useful to travelers who follow the same route, appear very insipid to those who only accompany you in their chair" (51). She laments that she has been unable to offer more valuable details:

> "Private business and cares have frequently so absorbed me, as to prevent my obtaining all the information, during this journey, which the novelty of scenes would have afforded, had my attention been continually awake to inquiry. This insensibility to present objects I have often had occasion to lament, since I have been preparing these letters for the press" (177)

These are laments for a failure of total description—a failure that surely an immemorialist would note are exactly the reason the average person cannot go tinkering about with untested political theories: society is too complex, they would say, too unobservable in its entirety for the common

man or woman to try to change. But Wollstonecraft has a different answer. It is not comprehensiveness that makes political knowledge possible, but comparative reflection informed by a particular kind of historical conception:

> "but, as a person of any thought naturally considers the history of a strange country to contrast the former with the present state of its manners, a conviction of the increasing knowledge and happiness of the kingdoms I passed through, was perpetually the result of my comparative reflections" (177).

Her letters have presented a comparative means for reading history in two ways: Gothically (immemorial) and rationally. And that she has written these as letters, not as a purely pedagogical or political tract presents these letters to an audience of non-politicians—to the public you. Consideration and comparative reflection on what they have read (limited thought it may be in its presentation of history) and their own experiences of political events and historic. These activities of consideration and comparative reflection are not to be reserved for the politician alone, or for the traveler, but can be productively engaged by all:

> "Desultory reading is commonly a mere pastime. But we must have an object to refer our reflections to, or they will seldom go below the surface. As in travelling, the keeping of a journal excites to many useful enquiries that would not have been thought of, had the traveller only determined to see all he could see, without ever asking himself for what purpose." (67)

The letter, as an address to a 'you', promotes rational political thinking to all, and opens a door for the reader to become the writer—an effect of the letter form itself, but also an effect of Wollstonecraft's direct suggestion and by the hermeneutics she has pedagogically demonstrated in the letters themselves. The most important service an author can render to her society, she

explains, is "to promote inquiry and discussion, instead of making those dogmatical assertions which only appear calculated to gird the human mind round with imaginary circles" (81)

As readers of letters, not only is her audience asked to compare the details which she has shown them, but to recognize that it is necessarily a communal and social act of conversation and education to achieve a general knowledge through which "grand causes" might "combine to carry mankind forward, and diminish the sum of human misery." She herself has reached a mode of *consideration* that balances the troubles of travel writing, while also contesting Burke's mode of historical thinking. And she writes this as letters which invoke the readers as her addressees—rather than merely as eavesdroppers. In addition to the discursive interpolation of her public readers as, in fact, her intended and addressed audience, relying on the commonplace knowledge 18th century readers had of reading letters. Each reader is positioned by the epistolary genre of her travel writing, to be able to—even expected to "initiate his [and her] own utterance" (Altman 117). The purpose of the letters, is to position readers to make a different choice in the progress of mankind than that of industry protected by law, but unconsidered by reason, experience, or general, sociable, cultivated knowledge. She has endeavored to offer to her readers a means for re-engaging with the greatest ideals of humanity through engagement with her and with each other by providing the most important act a writer can: to make the world available for analysis, discussion, and progress.

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Chapter 3: Looking for a House that Talks: the Epistolary "I" and the Limits of Narrative Language in Dodie Bellamy's The Letters of Mina Harker

1. Introducing the Experiment

If Pope's epistolary experiment proofs the limits of propriety's usefulness in making a public sphere of engaged, critical discourse, and Wollstonecraft's epistolary address is an inquiry into the principles and premises of English origin stories of Gothicism both constitutional and aesthetic, Bellamy's experiment is to posit the possibility of a writing subject under conditions of disintegration. In this, Bellamy's novel *The Letters of Mina Harker* undoes my initial question: how does an individual enter into a sensibility of communicating with and as-part-of a public? The individual undone, the question made illegible. Techniques of New Narrative (the writing movement of which Bellamy is a part), collage, channeling, exploded metaphor, anagram and mnemonic disassemble the coherence of a writing subject. Reading *The Letters of Mina Harker*, despite its apparently pulpy plot description and its smart-funny sub-cultural asides, is difficult. In the body of this chapter, I outline the particular reading challenges presented by *The Letters of Mina Harker* (at least—those that I faced in reading this book with intent to analyze). Through an outline of these challenges to close-reading hermeneutic practices, I suggest that Bellamy's epistolary book benefits from an epistolary hermeneutic. Bellamy's engagement with the epistolary form turns towards the problem of the "I" who writes in a way that exceeds Pope's performances of character and Wollstonecraft's reclamation of respectability. What does it mean to be a "self" who writes? In an interlude in the middle of the chapter, I suggest that this is a question emphasized by the transformations of subject formation and identity during the 1980s, on the wave of gay liberation's identity movement for Gay Pride which break hard on the devastations of the AIDS crisis and mainstream media's condemnations of personal

irresponsibility, paired with the newly visible dynamics of neoliberalism's responsibilization of the self as primarily a market actor rather than as a subject of civil rights. These three contexts – Gay Liberation, the AIDS crisis and responses to it, and Neoliberal political ascendance are the context in which Bellamy conducts her narrative experiments of self. In the second half I turn to the linguistic and epistolary tools Bellamy deploys in her experiments in search to find a self in words.

This chapter is about Bellamy's experiments of the self. It is also a limit case experiment for this dissertation's study of the epistolary form as mechanism for engaging in the problem of the self crossing into the public sphere. Outside of the 18th century culture of letters, the structural moves of the epistolary genre are submerged more deeply and the context of communication norms are upended by newspapers, telegraph, radio, and telephones (and now—the internet and mobile phones as well). What gestures of the letter are still useful? Increasingly, letters are understood as highly intimate—but I resist accepting that this is their primary import. This chapter tests the limits of the analytic tools developed in the introduction and first two chapters; nonetheless, I offer throughout the chapter gestures toward the hermeneutic utility of reading epistolarily.

2. Introducing *The Letters of Mina Harker*

A synopsis of *The Letters of Mina Harker* at first suggests a potboiler, a page-turner narrative in the vein of *Interview with a Vampire*. University of Wisconsin Press, publisher[93] of the 2nd edition:

[93] This press continues to hold the copyright. Bellamy has publically contested their decision to move to a pay-to-print-on-demand model in a series of tweets on June 26, 2018, #freeminaharker.

> In Dodie Bellamy's imagined "sequel" to Bram Stoker's fin-de-siècle masterpiece Dracula, the plain Jane secretarial adjunct, Mina Harker, is recast as a sexual, independent woman living in San Francisco in the 1980s. The vampire Mina Harker, who possesses the body of author Dodie Bellamy, confesses the most intimate details of her relationships with four vastly different men through past letters. Sensuous and captivating, The Letters of Mina Harker describe one woman's struggles with finding the right words to explain her desires and fears without confining herself to one identity. (University of Wisconsin Press)

When I summarize this novel to people at parties who, kindly and bravely, ask me the topic of my dissertation, they perk up at this summary and ask if I recommend the novel. Yes, I tell them, if they are interested in avant-garde writing. While the novel draws from cult-class genres of the romance novel (erotica, scandalous relationships, phone-sex, a woman trying to strike free from the confines of a secretarial persona) and from horror (starting with Bram Stoker's *Dracula,* and borrowing extensively from B-films of the mid-to-late 20th century), this is an avant garde novel. Through collage, constructions of narrative mediumships or channeling, 'language games' akin to those of the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets, and the apparatus of the epistolary, Bellamy's novel examines the plausibility and possibility of the 'subject,' of an 'I' who writes to you, in the era of neoliberalism's mainstreaming and at the height of the AIDS crisis. The novel is committed to a search for a subject, even as it is premised on the idea (shared by language poets and in the wake of Barthes' "Death of the Author") that a coherent and cohering subject is no longer possible to find or to create in a text. Written as an epistolary novel, a genre classification signaled foremost by its title, *The Letters of Mina Harker* has as its basic premise that the narrative voice operates with the belief, "*je crois te parler*"(Kauffman xix)—I believe I am

talking to you. But who the "I" is who believes they are speaking, who the I is who speaks at all, is uncertain and (contested). This chapter will examine the ways that the novel presents a divided "I" as well as some consideration of the context of the mid 1980s-1990s that made the coherent "I" a subject of dispute and uncertainty. Ultimately, this chapter—much like the novel it looks at—reaches no conclusions about the possibility, desirability, or form of the subject. Instead, this chapter suggests that the novel is a playbook of the search for the "I" who writes under circumstances in which the "I" must always be constructed anew. This chapter will look primarily at the conceptual and textual mechanisms Bellamy uses to construct something like a narrative of a self in relationship with others at a time when the 'subject' and relationships—particularly sexual ones, but other intimacies as well—are radically disintegrating and changing.

I picked this novel to look at in part because of its formal apparatus: it is an epistolary novel written originally as letters sent through the mail. But I also want to look at it because it was written and published at a time of significant socio-cultural transformation. The two decades of this text's composition—the early eighties when Bellamy began the project of letter writing that yielded in 1994 a published collection, *Real: The Letters of Mina Harker and Sam D'Allessandro*, and in 1998 the novel *The Letters of Mina Harker*— are also the decades of the AIDS Crisis (from recognition of the 'syndrome' in 1981 to its transmutation from a 'death sentence' into a 'life-sentence' (Comaroff 25) with the 1996 introduction of highly active antiretroviral therapy (HAART) in 1996 and the subsequent 50% drop in mortality in 1997, while over the same period the US saw the establishment of neoliberalism as the dominant mode of social, economic, and political organization. These two large scale events, or rather series of events, instigated reorganizations of the subject. The reorganization of the subject under AIDS and neoliberalism are the conditions under which *Mina* is written, and the assertions and

struggles over the nature of the speaking I and the context of language and address in which the "I" speaks presents the conundrums of cohering a subject through, and despite, the pressures of economic and epidemic dissolution.

3. Stress Testing Close-Reading

Reading a dissolving and reconstituting subject stress tests the analytic tools of the close-reader. Reading *The Letters of Mina Harker* with the tools of 'close reading' is, if anything, more challenging than consuming the novel as a genre text for pleasure reading. Instead, I take the text as a guide and provocateur for thinking through the conditions of its writing in order to better see the moves it is making. *The Letters of Mina Harker* is an attempt to write an experience of the fragmented and heterogeneous self in a media-saturated environment in which the subject is not coherent (at least—not in the ways it used to be). The effect of the novel's "pulling in" texts as a collage, and accreting a narrative instead of plotting one, is one that simultaneously threatens to absorb a reader's interpretation into itself—making interpretation impossible and redundant—and at the same time it works to keep the reader at arm's length by withholding the sources of citation and authenticity often expected of novels, particularly novels proclaiming to be epistolary. Despite the red herring of intimacy suggested by the epistolary genre, I will suggest that the structure of epistolarity serves well to outline the contours of the dilemma of the self that Bellamy is navigating.

Let me give you a taste of the text to introduce the difficulties. The following passage is drawn from the fourth letter in the novel, and introduces Dion, who becomes one of Mina's/Dodie's lovers over the course of the next 3 letters. We have been introduced to Sing—Mina's best friend who works as a criminal psychologist, but Katharine is a new character, and

one who doesn't return in any significant way. I quote this at length to give a sense of Bellamy's prose in *The Letters of Mina Harker*:

> Katharine, Sing and I sit around a battered desk—on the window beside us Small Press Traffic is painted backwards in red. Customers mill among the shelves of books, Dion a young poet I've seen around barges through the door his eyes beaming contact and alarm, "Hi, how ya doing?" Gnarly shoulder-length hair, overblown pecs, a neanderthal packed into a baby blue turtleneck, he heads for the New and Noted display, cracks open a thin paperback with huge callused hands, and reads *rational agency has no access to external reality*. Katharine lowers her voice and says she's been nauseous for days—recognition sparks across the thrift store desk as if the three women poised around it were neurons and the air a palpable synapse SING AND I HAVE BEEN NAUSEOUS TOO! Dion turns the page *words draw in their horns and the physical world refused to be ordered* We each enumerate the reasons we can't possibly be pregnant, the main themes are *control* and *time* but fear is electric passing from womb to womb *what if our high school biology teachers were wrong and conception is random as lightning striking Striking STRIKING.* Dion turns the page *personalities do not develop they merely intensify* he looks up and catches my eye. "I hear you have a wolf," I say, "and you speak beast language to it like Michael McClure." He strokes his stubbled chin, "Yes—and his name is Leander, as in Hero and Leander." "And you're the hero?" He winks. I like it

Who hasn't felt like a hybrid in times of stress.

> Flaccid, KK's penis is endearing, so velvety and shy—but the trouble with babies (as my mother always said) is that they grow up—your bed inflates to the breaking point with thirty-three-year-old male desire panting and prodding *the thing inside burst through her belly, horror props, sausage links and ketchup* around my neck KK fastens a locket filled with a snip of his hair *to protect me from evil* I cross the street with my eyes closed, cars screech then cease to exist, the atom remains unsplit forever, cells multiply at a reasonable rate every death is from a natural cause LOVE LOVE LOVE LOVE LOVE LOVE LOVE LOVE LOVE remember when his nails were half an inch long, thick, hard, yellowed—he clipped them off for *me* parting my capillary pink flesh without a scratch *all it took was one "ouch"* claws retract, breathing softens.
>
> Bellamy 36-7

There are 5 moves in this passage that appear across the novel and test the close reader. We might call them "traps" in which the close-reader is caught. The 'trap' lures the reader in with a way to dismantle the trap—to spot something in the novel that has an 'easy' explanation, but in trying to explain that thing, it actually reproduces the thing that needs explaining. I conclude each section with a gesture towards an epistolary move, the knowledge of which might redirect the reader from interpreting the passage in its own terms to interpreting the passage as a participant in the structure of correspondence. Where close reading seeks to solve the "problem of unity—the whole which the literary work forms or fails to form, and the relation of the various parts to each other in building up this whole" (Brooks 72), epistolary reading anticipates a partial

text which can only possibly be 'made whole' by rhetorical anticipation of the reader, and structural awareness of the medium.

Stress Test 1: Multivocal Subversion of the Short Passage

Close reading relies on the method of selecting passages, usually short ones. However, accretion as the meaning-making mode in *The Letters of Mina Harker* makes short passages nearly impossible to select. Take, for example, the passage above. It begins with a fairly clear narrative story about 'first meeting' someone who will become an important character in the following letters, complete with a casual conversation quoted. But before the first paragraph is through, the narrative is interrupted by a phrase in italics that does not follow from the narrative of the text. This is the first problem: almost every passage in the novel has a series of interruptions that derail one line of thought or perspective for the next. Any quotation on its own is of interest, but it is the combination of these that is central to the novel, the contrast of one against another. The dominant mode of the novel is of leaping from one thing to the next, often without explanation. It is tempting to quote a single passage as "evidence" of an idea, but to do so is disingenuous: the book is so multivocal and multifocal that any quote without its interjections flattens the novel beyond recognition.

Where a hermeneutic that seeks explanation through coherent linearity fails, the logic of the epistolary exchange might serve to alleviate the search for contiguity. Letters, after all, cross in the mail, and are read out of time, out of place, and out of order:

> Writer and reader share neither time nor space. The discontiguity of the space and time is reflected in the discontinuity of the exchange, a dialogue composed of more separate, monologuelike units than the component units of the oral dialogue. The written exchange not only introduces the time lag between message transmission and message reception; it

> also widens the interval between message reception and response….[Letters] can complicate communication by crossing each other in the mail or getting lost or stolen. Altman 135).

Bellamy's novel resists an interpretive logic resisting on a single passage or stable signification of technique; perhaps an epistolary method of disjunction across time, space, and the progress of the novel as an accretive logic would better serve than the search for control over the narrative. Letters, after all, exert "less continuous control over the construction of a life-myth" than forms of autobiography (Spacks *Gossip* 69), and perhaps more than other narrative forms as well.

Stress Test 2: The Perpetual Paradox Machine without End

If the first problem is that focus on a single passage as an indicative part of the whole betrays the multivocality of the text, the second is a related problem: the non-production of synthesis, or what I call at the end of this section "the perpetual paradox machine." The text doesn't belie the tools of close reading as a productive source for interpretation, instead *Mina* creates conditions for non-closure of the paradoxes. Cleanth Brooks' foundational description of formalist close reading presents paradox as fundamental to poetry: "It is perpetual; it cannot be kept out of the poem; it can only be directed and controlled….The terms are continually modifying each other, and thus violating the dictionary meaning" ("Language of Paradox" 56). However, in the poem and therefore in the critics' reading of the poem, ultimately "There is no final contradiction" (56). *Mina*'s text in contrast thrives on a perpetual production without end, reading for paradox increases the contradictions and invites further contributions, rather than resolving them through unity of the text as it is presented.

As an example, what is the function of the italics in the passage above? The novel is strewn with such italicized interjections. In fact, typeface variation extends beyond italics to all

capitals, bold all caps, and italic all caps. I'll take the first three italics passages above to demonstrate the trap of close reading. As a caveat, I will say at the outset that italicized passages in the novel do several different things inconsistently and unpredictably: they indicate alternatively (as they do here) either a change in point of view, quotation, emphasis, or internal monologue. These are all recognizable uses of type-face change in print. But Bellamy uses them interchangeably.

The first passage of italics above, *rational agency has no access to external reality* seems to be a quotation from the book Dion picks up. The second, the same. Italics indicate quotation of another source—whether Dion reads aloud or to himself. The third set of italics, though, is not citation but speculation "*what if our high school biology teachers were wrong*." Perhaps then, italics indicate spoken word. But other words spoken aloud are presented in quotation marks: "Hi, how ya doing?" Perhaps, then italics are internal voices: Dion reading to himself, and one of the women thinking of their sex-ed classes. Which woman? the italics say "our" teacher. One of the women may be thinking of the shared teacher, or perhaps this is a collective voice.

The typography has not taught us how to read it, but the metaphoricity might. Preceding the italicized passage "*what if…*" the passage suggests the mechanism of expression is one of "recognition": "Katherine lowers her voice and says she's been nauseous for days—recognition sparks across the thrift store desk" (*Mina* 36). The italicized passages, then, are indications of moments when characters recognize one another and through this 'spark' are able to channel the other—their voice, their thoughts, what they are reading. Close reading triumphs by explaining the italics (the oddity or the 'what'), in terms of the effect on point of view ('why' the italics are present) and giving us the stakes—that individuals are not fixed to a single perspective, but can imagine and 'focalize' through another person's eyes ('so what')

The italicized passages that look like quotations are "*rational agency has no access to external reality*" and "*words draw in their horns and the physical world refuses to be ordered.*" These two passages offer a consistent concern about the relationship of thought to object, of mind to body. As such, they would seem to offer a way into the text, and an opportunity to open up and interpret the rest of the passage as a continued meditation on the limitations of the Cartesian subject. So we can apply this to the third italics passage: the anxious italics *what if our biology teachers were wrong* can be explained as an extension of the concern with the relationship of words to reality. It could be read two ways: (1) words are inadequate to explain reality (the explanation about impregnation given by the science teacher is wrong and does not correspond to what really happens), or, (2) the disordered world of experience (i.e. the fear of impregnation by lightening) cannot be ordered by knowledge of biology learned through the words of the teacher. Any time there are italics, we might conclude, is a meditation on the division of spirit/body, words/reality, ideas/objects.

But this chain of logic does not hold—it collapses on itself as soon as we look back to the beginning of the passage. The first italics were not an example of the divided body/mind, even though the content of the first italics proclaimed this dilemma. No, the first italics were an example of the point of view leaping between bodies. So by close reading, we develop not one answer to "what do the italics interjections signify" but 4: a) italics indicate quotes b) italics indicate a leap between points of view c) italics indicate a shift to discussion of abstract philosophies, d) italics indicate Mina occupying different bodies, inhabiting the experience of multiple subjectivities. This is not one synthetic answer, but four that contradict each other: if it is a leap (b), it cannot also be the same consciousness (Mina's, d). If it is a quotation (a), it cannot also be an internal meditation (c). And then there is the next italics, working more like

screenplay directions or description of on-screen action: "*the thing inside burst through her belly, horror props, sausage links and ketchup*" (37)—neither quotation nor internal meditation, and not the stuff that abstract philosophy is made of. Close reading has not yielded a significance of the italicized text—each use of the italics is local and dependent on the text around it. In particular, the significance of the italics can be grasped by accumulation: putting together the series of italics to find the throughlines. Hyper-local interpretation combines with a logic of accumulation to generate significations.

The text offers a temptation to try close reading the passages that appear together on the page, to attempt to read the form and the content together to explain each other. But, in conducting the close reading, the form and the content betray each other and more answers are produced than questions posed. Or better put: one conundrum is only solved by producing more. This is a trap for the close reader who wants (like me) to follow the trail of thesis/antithesis/ synthesis. Doing this kind of close reading forecloses a larger view of the novel even as it produces a prodigious amount of writing and of new problems.

The takeaway point from this close reading is not actually anything to do with italics, or the dilemmas of embodiment.[94] The significance here is that the text invites close reading through its "series of paradoxes" as Brooks says all poetry does. Yet the critic's pursuit of paradox in Bellamy's novel does not work toward "a fine precision" through the overlay of metaphors to (Brooks "Language of Paradox" 61), nor does pursuit of the metaphors and paradoxes result in what editors Rice and Waugh call "an organic resolution of opositions and contradictions" (Literary Theory 45). Whereas Brooks close reading of poetry yields a poem (a vision of a poem) that is striving towards a single truth, but that truth cannot be uttered without

[94] See Breu for more on the topic of embodiment

the use of analogy, which opens apparent paradox. In the end, "there is no final contradiction" (Brooks 56). For Bellamy's novel, though, the "continual tilting of planes" (Brooks 56) is seeking a place of coherence, but has not yet actually found it. The "paradoxes" . The text acts as a perpetual conundrum machine: solve one, create 2 or 3 more. Though differences are created through this process, they are differences that are already pre-existing in the text: the close reading shows that the disjunctive moves in the text are disjunctive in exactly the terms of the text—nothing new is produced: the text theorizes itself in exactly the manner a close reading does. The theory and the object become one and the same, rather than reaching terminal velocity to say something about the text by reading through the text.

Epistolarity reminds readers that the clarity of the text is not located internally—but always outside of the text in the reader who will receive it. Epistolarity always expects that any utterance will be followed by a reply: "The you of any I-you statement can, and is expected to, become the I of a new text" (Altman 121). Correspondences do end, but only because of the writers are united (in marriage, commonly) or one of theme dies. The logic of the letter, though, presumes perpetual motion of reply.

Stress Test 3: References

The end of the first paragraph quoted above packs in two references quickly, Michael McClure and Hero and Leander—these are references fairly easy to recognize, the first a comparison: you talk to your wolf "in beast language" *like* Michael McClure does. McClure is a name recognizable in the Bay Area—a poet himself, as well as a character in Kerouac's *Big Sur*. He was famous also for reading his poetry to lions in the San Francisco Zoo. I learned this latter detail from Wikipedia. Hero and Leander too are recognizable—more so than McClure—as hero and heroine of Greek myth (I looked this up, too, as I get my Greeks and Romans mixed up).

Why do I emphasize that I searched these two references? Because reference to cultural texts and cultural figures is pervasive in *The Letters of Mina Harker* and reading it in the internet age it is tremendously tempting to seek meaning in the referenced texts. Google and Wikipedia make this easy. Reading references as meaning making requires either extensive research outside the volume (with or without the ease of 21st c. search engines and Wikipedia[95]), or a shared cultural knowledge—essentially an 'in group' of referential knowledge. For the outside reader, the references act as a trap—not one that pulls the reader inside the novel but one that propels us outside of it. Knowing that Michael McClure talks to lions doesn't actually tell us anything about Dion, nor does it tell us anything about the text other than the fact that it refers to other texts. And again, much like in trap #2: the perpetual paradox machine, the significance of the references is primarily that they create a heterogeneous text. The instinctual response to resolve the heterogeneity with knowledge of the referents actually increases the heterogeneity, and does not resolve it into a streamlined uniformity or coherence. The novel traps the reader in its orbit by creating a heterogeneous field of referents that invites the reader to reproduce the knowledge of the source texts.

The "reference trap" extends past cultural references—the premise of the novel includes a loose substitution of characters for real persons. KK is stand in for Kevin Killian; Sam is Sam D'Allessandro who also writes as S/X (or is written Bellamy as S/X); Dr. Van Helsing is Bruce Boone (Milks 27); "Dodie" is also Bellamy the author; Mina is also Dodie, but on bad behavior. As the author said to me in an interview: "Dodie's not doing it—well she's doing and not doing it. Obviously it's clear that Dodie's doing everything in the book" (Palo 28:48).

[95] Search Engines W3 Catalog, Aliweb, JumpStation, and WWW Worm were operational in 1993, Go.com and others launched in 1994—the date of *Mina's* first edition publication, and Yahoo!Search and Magellan launched in 1995 (Wikipedia "Web search engine").

If we read the cultural objects and the semi-pseudonymous characters not merely as trails of referents, but instead as a kind of gossip—a citation of an event, a person, a place that the reader of a letter might know, but also might not (being, after all, at a remove from the site of the letter writer), then we might tolerate and better enjoy the construction of a world of references. Letters, Beebee reminds, do not "depend upon traditional notions of storytelling" (78), and Spacks enjoins that "Collections of letters…elude literary exegesis" (*Gossip* 65). The pleasure of reading private letters offered for public readership "comes partly from their evocation of genuine human complexity, like that achieved in the best kind of intimate gossip" (*Gossip* 73).

Stress Test #4: Collage as composition

Collage is not, to my knowledge, present in the passage quoted above—though perhaps the italics *rational agency has no access to external reality* are in fact pasted in from a real text. However, collage permeates the novel—Bellamy copies in lines from poetry (often Jack Spicer, on whom her husband Kevin Killian wrote a biography), song lyrics, passages from her correspondents' letters, summaries and quotations from movies and performance art.

Collage presents the same problem as references: it produces a desire to know where the text is copied from, with a false promise that knowing the source might illuminate the passage's significance in *The Letters of Mina Harker*. Collage also introduces a false interest in authenticity: who really wrote this? which parts are "really" Bellamy's writing? what is "really" the voice of the character (or spirit) Mina Harker? These questions of authenticity appear to have a place because of the letter genre—but in neither case is there a satisfying, or even a verifiable way to identify the authentic author. Let me modify that—to say that there is no

'verifiable' way suggests that an authentic author exists but cannot be identified; the point here is that collage provokes a desire for knowing authenticity while simultaneous producing a condition in which there is no such thing as a singular author. What do I mean? I mean that collaging is an act of authorship that is without authenticity, even as the form of the letter that frames the novel as a whole seduces the reader into looking for the authentic authorial voice. Knowing that *rational agency has no access to external reality* was authored by one person or another gives one kind of insight that might generate further significations. But of equal importance for the practice of reading this book is the affect of seeking—the mechanism of collage provokes a desire to look outside the text as much as, or more than, inside it.

Recall here that letters, too, create their meaning in large part through a collage of sorts: the repetition of genre markers and turns of phrase that demonstrate the writers' social position. As Bannet shows through her study of 18th century letter manuals and correspondence, imitation as a mode of composition was the norm for letter writing in the 18th century:

> Imitation and compilation were means of instruction and technes of writing that at once transmitted the same conventional discursive forms and cultural norms to anyone who siwhsed to learn and produced that kaleidoscopic proliferation of fractals, variants, combinations and mutations which prevented the same from remaining identical with itself. (Bannet 315).

And the function of this imitation was to situate the writer in the wider world beyond the text of the letter, "The practice of imitation therefore linked the letter manual's ideological, generic, rhetorical, grammatical and compositional teachings, and connected it to practices outside the world of the book" (Bannet 94).

All authorship is citational, imitative, and collaged, and the letter form summons this structure more readily than others.

Stress Test #5 Sex

The problem of sex in this novel is not so much one of close-reading, but of transgressing propriety and challenging the limits of the polite subject[96]. Breu observes the discomfort of reading the body in *Mina*, "Bellamy…juxtapose[es] the theoretical and the intimate, the abstract and (representations of) the insistently material, to produce a discomfort that is simultaneously stylistic and affective. This production of affective discomfort in the reader marks the ability of language to impinge on the body and shape its meanings. (Breu 130). In her later work, *Cunt Norton*, a series of feminist cut-ups—or rather, *cunt-ups* – of Norton Anthology poems Bellamy again pairs disjunction and sex. The cunt-ups produce, by way of being dismembered texts pieced back together, "a diffuse agency, such that it is hard to tell who is active and who is passive" (Mitchell 80). In other words, Mitchell goes on, the ego is dispersed (though not disappeared). The cunt-ups produce "a kind of obscenity by juxtaposition" (Mitchell 81). Bellamy talks about her writing in *Mina* as an exercise in boundary crossing and transgression; beginning with the letters she first sent to friends (before she thought of making the letters into a book), she set out to "start bringing some of that intensity and edginess of writing into the personal by writing people these letters that embarrassed everybody. I wouldn't do that now" (Palo 8:48). The polite subject is embarrassed discomforted, diffused, disordered

One way that Bellamy disorders and diffuses the subject is by making sex generic. More later. Bodies are generic, as is sex. Mina/Dodie writes with resignation, "Sex, no matter how

[96] See chapter 1 for discussion of Alexander Pope's use of impropriety and sex in his published letters as a kind of 'stress test' of polite reading norms.

fondly recalled, comes across so generic" (*Mina* 77), and attempts to describe sex specifically fall flat, "flattened and blurred like a color Xerox of a collage (76-7), and bloodless, "I can invoke his name, his personality, but my loving descriptions of his body are bloodless, as though I were parroting another author" (81). Jennifer Cooke observes of *Cunt-Ups*, "Sex, then, would be a limit case for representation, a threshold where language falters or is improverished" (qtd in Mitchell 79). Despite the variety of bodies and sexual acts possible, both bodies and sex are differentiated within shared parameters of form. The kinds of differences that are possible to write about and experience are actually quite limited, and it is profoundly difficult to write about sex or bodies in a way that makes them particular to a person.

This is a trap of its own making: by trying to write the body, Bellamy falls into generic descriptions (a problem, really, of any kind of representational narrative). By trying to particularize the bodily descriptions, the reader (may) lose interest, and be repulsed. Myles says of Bellamy's embodied writing that this is actually an intended effect—a rejection of a normative expectation for 'good' writing:

> ""I think both the elegance and shockingness of Dodie's work seem to be about her class relation," said Myles, who shares with Belamy a working-class background, albeit regionally different. "Part of the thing of feeling like you don't belong in a room is that you're kind of like, "Oh, yeah, you think I don't belong here, well I'l *show* you I don't belong here'" In Bellamy, Myles said, thsi manifests as a "boundary-busting sharing of bodily or personal content" (Milks On Our Mind 18).

Dodie Bellamy observes that the sex in the novel was a major barrier in the novel in an interview with Megan Milks

> *Mina* was really hard to get published," Bellamy tells me. "It was rejected by a lot of people." someone at New Directions who had championed the book confided in a memo that the explicit content posed a problem for the editors. (It will be a cold day in Hell," the note quotes on editor as saying, "before this much sex makes it into a ND book.") "The best things about my writing have often been seen as a problem," she says with nonchalance. "I got so much shit for writing about sex. And not taken seriously" (Milks 29)

Like love letters, sex and bodies are tremendously personal and particular, but they are only recognizable as such when they are reproduced in the novel with identifiable parts (the flaccid penis, the capillary pink flesh). As Brant observes, though, this too is an element of letters that correspondents are familiar with: "The struggle to write about love is also a struggle to write about language….One of the primary paradoxes of love-letters is their desire to individuate their object and passion whilst being obliged to share a discourse with other lovers" (Brant 93). The reader of *Letters of Mina Harker* would do well to remember both the conundrum of the putting desire into words, to see it not as a barrier to entry but one of the fundamental questions at stake in –particularly—epistolary writing.

Results

These five "traps" are ways that the novel *The Lettters of Mina Harker* works to absorb the critical reader into its logic. There is a joy in this—finding oneself taking up the logic of the spirit possessed Dodie Bellamy, being first Mina then Dodie and having the power to leap between consciousnesses, to leap from narrative to quotation to internal meditation. There is a delight in recognizing the source of a quotation and a frustration at wondering what you are

missing when it seems like something must be collaged in. The bodies in the text are fascinating, repulsive, erotic, but generic.

So what is going on here inside of the text that can be better understood by approaching it from outside the text? The five traps are indicative of the problems to be considered. 1) This is novel whose primary expository logic is the interjection of narrative voices—of Mina and Dodie competing with each other over the question of what it means to be a subject with agency and voice. 2) Mina and Dodie both attempt to find meaning in their existence, to explain who they are and how they relate to others—this is one of the functions of the letter form, to explain one's situation to someone else—and it is also a through line of the novel as Mina/Dodie work and rework language to understand how it makes meaning. 3&4) the novel is constructed through reference and collage, so that the voices of Mina/Dodie and the collaged and referenced content produces significance as an accretion of other texts. 5) Mina/Dodie tries to articulate herself through sex and tries to understand relationships with other people through erotic contact. To some extent, the expectation of a narrative structure, "somebody telling somebody else" is to blame for these difficulties—there are two "somebodies" telling, and what they are telling is a collage of many other things. The epistolary structure of reading begins to offer some tools for reading the *Letters of Mina Harker*; if one can remember the necessary shifting vocality of the I/you, perhaps the I/I shifts of Mina and Dodie each speaking will become more readable because less fixed; if the reader can anticipate a narrative progression that depends on perpetual continuation as letters do, the generation of interpretations becomes if not easy than expected; if the references to names and events unknown can be read as gossip, a weaving of a society of knowledge, the novel can be read as an induction rather than as a rejection of readerly eyes; if

the body can be read not as particular to Bellamy, but as a problem of genre and of belonging, the reader might enter in.

Each of these moves to the epistolary, though they may ameliorate some of the discomfort of plunging into this avant-garde novel, are also an expectation to release singular author coherence. In fact, this is one of the epistolary conventions that Altman draws out which I think has been forgotten by 20th and 21st century writers of epistolary novels: the letter is not inherently, or even I think best, suited to intensely personal intimations. The letter is not a private space but a zone of crossing over of subjects between one another and into the public. In Bellamy's novel, despite the tendency of many of her readers to see the letter as "a ruse for writing in the first-person singular, the more selfish the better" (poet Kay Gabriel in an email to Milks, qtd. in Milks 29) instead proposes a subjective voice that is not personal. Bellamy says of her appropriations of texts in *Mina*, "I want that sense of an alien voice…all authoritarian with sharp edges to threaten the confessional, colloquial tone of my "regular" writing….I want that sense of a language that is not mine coming in, a language that I can read but never own, a language that I don't want to own" (Bellamy *Acedemonia* qtd. in Milks 28). The subject is interrupted, disrupted, made multiple, made to utter incoherently and chaotically. Epistolary reading serves as a hermeneutic model to engage with this writing without seeking to flatten it into singular coherence.

In the next sections, I ask what the stakes are of establishing a split subject as *The Letters of Mina Harker* does—what are the political contexts and stakes of experimenting with the speaking I? The incoherence of subject formation and consequent chaos of relationships with others is not solely a problem within the novel—it is a problem of its time—the late 1980s-early 1990s. The means of producing and understanding oneself as a subject rapidly changed in these

decades as neoliberalism gained hegemony and AIDS (and mainstream responses to AIDS) decimated San Francisco's population.

4. Interlude: The Subject at the Confluence of Neoliberalism, Gay Liberation, and AIDS (San Francisco, 1980s-90s)

The Letters of Mina Harker was written in the context of –and I argue engaged in— revisions to the articulation of the 'self' as a political subject. Neoliberalism, gay liberation, and activist as well as state responses to AIDS called into question the configuration of the subject. I briefly outline these reorganizations of the subject and then in the second half of this chapter outline Bellamy's experiments with the formation of the subject in her epistolary book.

Conceptualization and expression of the subject was at the core of New Narrative—the writing community and theory that Bellamy is identified with.[97] Robert Glück—who along with Bruce Boone ran the first community writing groups that came to be known as the home of New Narrative—describes the aims of their project was specifically interested in taking the rigor of Language Poetry's radical grammatical critique that sought to undo the reification of the subject, but also to bring out through writing the still-new gay subject, whose articulation was crucial to the fight for recognition of civil rights and for protection against mainstream representations of gay men that was expressed frequently through physical violence. This foundational tension between grammatical subject experimentalism and advocacy for identity through narrative is central to *The Letters of Mina Harker.*

[97] Bellamy continues to identify herself firmly with this writing community in interviews and her ongoing work; she and her husband Kevin Killian edited the collection of New Narrative writing *Writers Who Love Too Much: New Narrative 1977-1997 (2017).*

New Narrative bridged the era of gay liberation's peak and its complication by the advent of AIDS. Robert Halpern reflects on Bruce Boone's *Century of Clouds* in his introduction to the volume:

> [In] the time between *Century of Clouds* and our present, the epidemic transformed everything about the gay community: its institutions, its discourse, tis body, its political vision, and its potential for radical intervention into society at large. The modes of activism, aggression, tenderness, and care that inspire Boone's narrative with the promise of a transformed future would become the very modalities through which a medically compromised gay body struggled for survival, or bare life....And the traces of this more radical potential continue to smolder, even today as gay politics turns toward more normative ends." (xii-xiii)

Deborah Gould's history of community and activist response to AIDS also traces a complex affective transformation of subject formation from the early years of the epidemic (1981-86) when community care was the primary ethos and political commitment, to the formation of ACT UP (in 1987) which framed political action as an act of communal care and the ultimate form of personal responsibility. Gould observes the painful history of the slow political response not only of the state but also of the gay community itself. She suggests that the advent of the disease itself severely challenged the self-conceptualization of individuals and the community:

> Lesbians, gay men, and other sexual and gender minorities could not easily assimilate this new, mysterious phenomenon and its many implications. …The epidemic itself and responses to it by state and society called into question lesbians' and gay men's routines and practices, and generated immense self-doubt as well as anxiety about their

> relationship to mainstream society. It was an open and undefined moment when, because previously fixed ideas were uprooted and confusion and uncertainty reigned, the need to make sense of oneself and of one's world was greatly intensified. (Gould 61).

As AIDS became more visible in the media, the discourse became more conflicted, not more coherent. Narratives of individual (ir)responsibility as the cause and prevention of AIDS came into conflict with calls for comprehensive civil rights and protections for sexual and gender minorities (see Brier 79). These conflicts bore out both within the gay community—with Randy Shilts beating the drum of personal sexual responsibility and ACT UP fighting for political responsibility (Brier 79; see also Crimp "Promiscuity" 46-8)—and between AIDS workers/activists and the state response to AIDS, which ranged from a conservative moralizing condemnation of homosexuality and sex outside the bounds of marriage (a position Reagan adopted at the urging of, among others, Newt Gingrich) to a more public-health oriented version of recommendations from Surgeon General Koop, who proposed a frank discussion of sex be included in primary school education (cf. Brier 86-7).

Not only are political framings of individual, community, and society erupting, but so to does the discourse about AIDS. In 1987, one year after the date of the first letter in *Letters of Mina Harker*, Paula Treichler writes:

> In multiple, fragmentary, and often contradictory ways we struggle to achieve some sort of understanding of AIDS, a reality that is frightening, widely publicized, and yet finally neither directly nor fully knowable. AIDS is no different in this respect from other linguistic constructions, which in the common-sense view of language, are thought to transmit preexisting ideas and represent real-world entities and yet, in fact, do neither…. Of course, AIDS is a real disease syndrome, damaging and killing real human beings….Yet the AIDS

> epidemic, with its genuine potential for global devastation—is simultaneously an epidemic of transmissible lethal disease and an epidemic of meanings or signification. (40)

This context and the form of *The Letters of Mina Harker* have echoes of one another—fragmentary, contradictory, not fully knowable, contrary to the common-sense view of language as accurately representing a reality, and proliferating in meanings. I cite these various political positions and language irruptions to emphasize the various ways in which relationships between self, community, and society are constructed and reconstructed as part of the response to AIDS, and to emphasize that Bellamy's novel can be productively understood as participating in experiments of the self.

Gay liberation (particularly as a compunction of New Narrative's rise in response to Language Poetry) and responses to AIDS are two immediately salient contextual pieces for the subject experiments Bellamy embarks on. Less remarked on, but worth bookmarking here, is the effect of neoliberalism no the subject. While neoliberalism as a political theory was under concerted construction from the late 1940s onward (see Mirowski and Plehwe *Road*), American cognizance of its project came much later—well after "politically active intellectuals in other countries" (Mirowski "Dare Not"). There was a time lag between "the genesis and conspicuous impact of neoliberal development economics" (Plehwe 240). The genealogy of neoliberalism extends well prior to the AIDS epidemic and the era of Bellamy's novel, but the culturally visible prominence of neoliberal politics is another theme of subject disorientation that *Mina* is situated in.

Neoliberalism's policies reorient the state from its immediate post-World War II role of managing and providing economic and social security to citizens, to a focus on managing the

conditions in which markets operate to competitively sell the goods desired/required for daily life and to produce wealth[98]. Neoliberalism is not a set of economic rules, but a political theory of the market. In other words, it is a political theory that seeks to make the economy paramount—so that improved market outcomes of wealth and productivity are prioritized above all else. This theory has ramifications on the relationship of the subject to society, the state, and the market. A number of historians and cultural critics of neoliberalism have discussed the effects of neoliberalism on the subject—and I quote them here to gesture to the context in which Bellamy's experiments take place.

Mirowski states unequivocally the transformation of what it means to be a human person under neoliberalism as compared to classical liberalism:

> Neoliberalism thoroughly revises what it means to be a human person. Classical liberalism identified "labor" as the critical original human infusion that both created and justified private property. Foucault correctly identifies the concept of "human capital" as the signal neoliberal departure that undermines centuries of political thought that parlayed humanism into stories of natural rights. Not only does neoliberalism deconstruct any special status for human labor, but it lays waste to older distinctions between production and consumption rooted in the labor theory of value, and reduces the human being to an arbitrary bundle of "investments," skill sets, temporary alliances (family, sex, race), and fungible body parts. (Thirteen Commandments, #6)

[98] Markets also—in the theory of the neoliberals themselves at least—work to process the chaos of mass society through the "information processor" of the market, which is understood to produce logic. I do not pick up this argument about market logic, though there would be a potentially interesting relationship between the information processor of chaos and the production of chaos by Bellamy's collage method).

Wendy Brown calls this neoliberal subject "homo oeconomicus," that is, a unit of "human capital seeking to strengthen its competitive positioning and appreciate its value" (33). *Homo oeconomicus* replaces the construction of the human subject as *homo politicus*. The aim of neoliberal politics is to create limited freedom for and expanded responsibility of the subject (*homo oeconomicus*) in the realm of market choices—a freedom to choose—rather than a freedom to rule:

> With the vanquishing of homo politicus, the creature who rules itself and rules as part of the demos, no longer is there an open question of how to craft the self or what paths to travel in life….Indeed, no capital [read homo oeconomicus aka subject], save a suicidal one, can freely choose its activities and life course or be indifferent to the innovations of its competitors or parameters of success in a world of scarcity and inequality. Thus in the neoliberal political imaginary that has taken a responsibilized turn, we are no longer creatures of moral autonomy, freedom or equality. We no longer choose our ends or the means to them. (Brown 41-2)

Mitchell Dean's genealogy of the neoliberal subject and his reading of Foucault's fascination with it at the end of his life, suggests that there is a possibility of constructed freedom through "self-stylization" that is conferred as the mechanisms of social organization changed from normative political arrangements to market-oriented management (Dean 327, 329). This "way of governing" (Dean goes on), "offered support to the emerging minority groups who sought to maximize autonomy in their own self-definition and self-creation and resist the subjection of the welfare state and human sciences" (Dean 329-30). In other words: neoliberalism aligns itself with the aims of gay liberation to escape normative modes of subjectivity, opening realms of self-expression that were more highly regulated by political norms under classical liberalism.

The goal of neoliberalism was not to create a kind of utopian, liberated subject (Dean 328). However, a new kind of freedom is available to subjects with the ending of embedded liberalism/welfare-state governmentality. On the level at which one might say that the personal is political—an option neoliberalism actually relies on—this presents a problem for the subject: if freedom is choosing, what does one choose? The subject is no longer constituted by external trappings of normativity; when the norm has been absolved of political power, neither conforming nor rebelling against the norm offers a coherent subjectivity. The subject must instead assemble itself from a range of choices—these may, yes, be guided by economic necessity (which Brown argues is no kind of choice at all), but nonetheless there is a field of options. The field of options, too, may be limited, in fact, that is the role of politics: to create the conditions of market freedom by curtailing some of the 'reckless,' and 'irrational' human choices that can lead to detrimental outcomes—e.g. fascism (Slobodian 2). However, even within a limited field, the self still has choices to make, selections to gather from amongst a much wider set of options than was available under embedded liberalism.

Mina's possession of Dodie introduces a dilemma of freedom: who acts, who can be said to be acting, when the spirit that possesses is limited by the body it inhabits? When the body is restricted by neoliberalism's only-apparently open-ended field of choice? Bellamy describes the birth of Mina Harker as a hysteric or possessed a result of "walking around feeling constricted to the point that this other energy comes out" (Palo 27:40). When Mina bursts out, who is writing the letters? If the hand that writes is Dodie's but the spirit that animates it is Mina's? Neoliberalism says: you have the freedom to choose. A possessed Dodie presents the conundrum: who chooses if "I" am both Mina and Dodie?

Being free to choose comes with the burden of responsibility—of choosing correctly. Friedman, in his 1980s PBS series under the title “Free to Choose” says it directly: “We need to rediscover the old trues that the immigrants knew in their bones; what economic freedom is, and the role it plays in preserving personal freedom. The free market enables people to go into any industry that they want; to trade with whomever they want; to buy in the cheapest market around the world; to sell in the dearest market around the world. But most important of all, if they fail, they bear the cost” (Friedman 00:44).

This is the logic also of Reagan’s response to AIDS when he called for personal responsibilization—an option supplanting the proposal of the Working Group on Health Policy to make the state responsible for responding to the epidemic (Brier 78). Wrong choices lead to consequences of failure, destitution, or simply non-success as an entrepreneur.[99] Similarly, wrong choices as a person in choosing lifestyle lead to disease and premature death. This narrative of neoliberal subject choice is accompanied by a second one about the reality of the market. Any question about why things are the way they are is because ‘the market’ demands it, or more accurately in a political sphere, the conditions that make the best conditions for the free operations of the market require that politics and daily life are arranged in this way. Responsibilization and ‘realism’ are the two narratives for neoliberalism that are more pronounced in later years of the post-millennium, but are also present in discourse about AIDS.

There are significant problems for narrative—for writing in general—presented by this dual discourse: narratives of freedom, of choices made and their consequences, must be

[99] See Silva, Jennifer for the full blossoming of this logic in post-2008Silva observes millennials, living at home, saying “I take full responsibility for everything that has happened to me” despite the fact that, say, the company they previously worked for shut down all U.S. sites and moved everything to India., qtd. by Jason read at the working conference Neoliberal (Dis)Integration of the Political, 25 October 2019.

understood in the context of political conditions in which free choice is enabled, even promoted, only within the conditions set by politics: a bounded kind of freedom, the consequences of which are wholly returned to the character/subject of the narrative. I don't wish to suggest that all narratives post-Reagan era are examples of a false consciousness of freedom; but I do want to point out that in the transition into neoliberalism, responsibilization is a narrative doubly pressed by political shifts and discourse about AIDS, making narratives like the *Bildungsroman* and other narratives that examine the possible actions of the free subject into a fraught arena, in which 'becoming' and 'choosing' are not in a position to be transparently agential but politically conditioned to strive not for true personal growth but toward idealized subjectivity in the form of an optimized *homo oeconomicus* (either that or a failed subject entirely). Realism also faces a problem, as what is 'real' is no longer what is experienced, but what the capitalism dictates—an argument the Language Poets used as the basis of their experiments. Reality is verified in the market (and only in the market) because it is the arbitrator of success and the processor of information so how can a narrative present reality?

Avant-garde writing, particularly the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets responded to the dilemma of language's imbrication in capitalism (see Silliman) by turning to writing that deconstructed and revealed the function and failures of language itself. Founders of New Narrative, under whose mentorship Bellamy wrote *The Letters of Mina Harker*, though, did not want to sacrifice the possibility of narrating a self, but to find instead some way of navigating the contradictions of the era (and the literary constraints it bred) by finding a new narrative of the self that could be a subject acting within the conditions but not of them, representing a reality that is not the alienated consumer object. In this context, Dodie Bellamy wrote *The Letters of Mina Harker*, an avant-garde novel that refuses to eliminate the "I who writes," the "I" who

believes she is writing the letters…yet at the same time puts it profoundly within quotation marks.

With this context of neoliberalism's newly developing dilemmas for the self, I turn now to a reading of the novel *The Letters of Mina Harker* and its place in the literary avant-garde landscape of the last three decades of the twentieth century. The valence of the novel on neoliberal contexts will resurface in the last sections of the chapter.

5. Letters as Avant-Garde Experiments with the Self

The Letters of Mina Harker is a novel that—to borrow Brian Reed's definition of avant-garde poetry— "attacks the tools of the grammar-police because they are responsible for producing the citizen-subjects on which the contemporary knowledge economy depends" (157). It is also a novel that, by presenting itself as epistolary, emphasizes the importance of the writing subject in the composition of the novel. The premise undergirding the epistolary is a sense that *je croix te parler*: I believe I am talking to you. There is an "I"who believes and an "I" who writes, even as the grammatical "I" falls apart, subjectivity holds significance as a category of examination and of composition.

Dodie Bellamy, in an interview with Mattias Viegener, describes her writing—particularly her early writing—as avant-garde in its form and content:

> Like anybody working among the avant-garde, I've been concerned with pushing the boundaries of what's permissible in my given field. Writing about sex has been a part of that, but in a broader sense, it's still a struggle to have female-specific subject matter be taken seriously — or as seriously — as "higher" topics for avant-garde writing. I'm using this clunky term "avant-garde" for lack of a better, as a way to reflect the ecosystem of experimental poetry and narrative. This avant-garde can be pretty elitist. At a certain

point, I decided to move my writing towards accessibility, mostly because I hate the precious and I'm more interested in genuine intelligence than in studied performances of it. (Bellamy "Poetry & Pornography")

Bellamy's latest books, particularly the collection of essays, *When the Sick Rule the World*, is certainly on the intelligent and accessible side of avant-garde writing—recognizable as engaged with radical politics and literature, but without the "studied performance" of difficulty that often accompanies the avant-garde. Bellamy's first two book-length publications, *Real* and *The Letters of Mina Harker*, however, are engaged more directly in producing dilemmas and experiments of language and narration. Bellamy narrates her writing bibliography as one moving from poetry to prose:

> I started out as a poet. That's all I wanted to be. All I wrote was poetry….But my poems were increasingly becoming these long, narrative things, which was just not something you could do in the early 80s in San Francisco and hold your head up high. So when I started studying with Bob Glück, I was exposed to a more experimental approach to prose. There's lots of experimental approaches to prose, but in Bob and Bruce Boone's vein of it I realized that I could do everything I wanted to do in poetry, but do it in a form in which my narrative urges would also be acceptable. So I switched" (Bellamy "A Night with" 5)

"Bob and Bruce's…vein of it" is "New Narrative." Bellamy's sideways definition of New Narrative as "experimental approaches to prose…that could do everything [one] want[s] to in poetry but do it in a form in which…narrative urges would also be acceptable" is a good foundational definition of the relationship of New Narrative to Language Poetry—that school of avant-garde writing in the Bay Area 1970s-80s that is now more canonically recognizable. The

“school” of New Narrative is more a loose collective or a community than a set of principles. The trait most common to New Narrative writers is a commitment to what “Glück and Boone have referred to as ’text-metatext,’ a narrative operation whereby a story keeps a running commentary on itself, always opening, probing, and deepening the faults within its own construction” (Halpern “Realism” 89-90). Bellamy is firmly identified with the New Narrative community, by her own telling and by her continued engagement through the 2017 publication of *Writers Who Love Too Much: New Narrative 1977-1997* edited by Kevin Killian and Dodie Bellamy. Reading through the New Narrative works collected in *Writers Who Love Too Much*, excerpts from *The Letters of Mina Harker* stand out as less narrative and more formally experimental than others in the collection. Experiments with the limits of coherence, identity and cohesion of the speaking subject, and the referential reliability of words are all key experimental sites for Bellamy’s epistolary novel—and all of which are sometimes inappropriately assigned exclusively to Language Writing when New Narrative is cast as a competing, or diverging, school.

Breu differentiates New Narrative from Language poetry this way, “the writings of new narrative authors represent a form of contemporary writing that moves beyond (even as they draw on) the exclusively textual or linguistic preoccupations of much poststructuralist or postmodern theory to engage with the material underpinnings of everyday life, with particular emphasis on the intransigent materialities of the body” (124). Breu’s analysis draws attention to the body, whereas I’m more interested here in the subjective, conceptual relationships developed through the novel, which are influenced by and articulated through bodily experience but are also engaged in ideological forms of relationality. (i.e., bodies as plural). Halpern, writing on New Narrative, recognizes the importance of the body to New Narrative but cautions against reifying

it as the central concern, "New Narrative registers how the crisis of modernity will brook no simple call for "a return to the body," as the lessons of modernism can only disabuse us of the notion that there is a stable body to which narration can return that hasn't already been discursively mediated by incorporated social schema, or "told" into being" (Halpern "Realism" 88). Breu and Halpern both concur that New Narrative and Language Writing must be understood as engaging with the same dilemmas, using many of the same tools of writing. Breu explains that New Narrative retains Language Writing's "critical force of deconstruction…while also moving beyond its hermetic negativity" with the goal to "reconnect language, however problematically, with the world." (Breu 124). And Halpern emphasizes that the two movements share much in common, primarily through their root affiliation with leftist politics ("Realism" 85): "the tensions that stressed the Bay Area literary scene during the "poetry wars" lend themselves retrospectively to reductive arguments that cast Language writing as an anti-narrative formalism categorically opposed to New Narrative's enabling promotion of content and story. But such arguments risk amplifying the terms of dispute rather than affirming a more generative dynamism within the complex local ecology that the Bay Area literary community represents. When Language writing is caricatured as being "anti-narrative," New Narrative comes off looking like a reaction formation promoting the devalued term and the two movements appear inherently antithetical, if not historically irreconcilable. Language writing and New Narrative have more in common, however, than such hardened binaries allow, a commonality rooted in each group's affiliation with leftist politics" (Halpern "Realism" 85).

Bellamy very explicitly identifies her interest in New Narrative as including a formal element, incorporating language poetics into her writing, and bringing with it the ideological concerns of Language writing, even as she adopts a reoriented form of subjective narration hat is

disavowed by the precepts of language writing. She explains the appeal of "Bob's workshop" as an alternate to the formalistic, linguistic play of Language Writing workshops: "I could get away with doing in prose everything I wanted to do in Poetry. That was part of the New Narrative, right? …You could still be pushing form while dealing with content and emotion and all the gooey stuff" (Bellamy, BOMB). Language writing and New Narrative "agreed that narrative was dead"—dead at the hands of "corporate speech and advertising" (Bellamy, "Five Questions") which had corrupted language. Ron Silliman actually identifies the death of language as much older than the kind of mass-communication, age-of-advertising deadening of language, and points to the very ideological structure of capitalism as the root of language's alienation from expression and access to the real:

> "What happens when a language moves toward and passes into a capitalist stage of development is an anaesthetic transformation of the perceived tangibility of the word, with corresponding increases in its expository, descriptive and narrative capacities, preconditions for the invention of 'realism," the illusion of reality in capitalist thought. These developments are tied directly to the function of reference in language, which under capitalism is transformed, narrowed into referentiality" (Silliman 10).

Brian Reed summarizes Silliman's theory (quoting from the essay I quoted above, "The Disappearance of the Word, The Appearance of the World"):

> "At the beginning of the modern era, poets such as John Skelton (c. 1460-1529) still permitted "physical characteristics" to predominate in and provide order for their verse. Words had yet to be wholly rationalized, that is, made subservient to the inexorable logic of commodification. But then, as "language move[d] toward and passe[d] into a capitalist stage of development," the consequence was "an anesthetic transformation of the

> perceived tangibility of the word, with corresponding increases in its descriptive and narrative capacities." Words "disappeared" as sensuous playthings and became no more than tools to be employed instrumentally. Once that happened, the stage was set for "the invention of 'realism,'" that is, "the optical illusion of reality in capitalist thought." And realism, as represented by the English-language novelistic and cinematic traditions, only rarely acknowledges alternatives to wage labor and the capitalist marketplace. Seduced into believing that these "Realistic" representations of the world are objectively true, people lose access to a deeper, more meaningful reality, namely, "the world of natural and self-created objects." If, however, "in the context of class struggle," people manage to learn "the historic nature and structure of referentiality" by placing "language" at the "center" of their attention, they can overcome reification's baleful effects on their consciousness. They acquire the cognitive tools required to appreciate the real economic basis of society" (Reed "Grammar Trouble" 141)

But insofar as New Narrative and Language poetry agreed on the death of narrative and the withering of language's ability to communicate authentically or to agitate politically, New Narrative also was aware "that people 'on the margins' still had stories that needed to be heard" (Bellamy HTMLGiant). and writers of the New Narrative group were interested in finding ways "to address these important needs in a manner that isn't clichéd, that opens our understanding of the world in fresh ways—that's where experimental form came in" (Bellamy HTMLGiant).

Letters, a traditional form tied in many ways to cliché, to repetition, to genre confines, is also a form that relies on elaborate constructions of self and other through the structural relationships imposed by the medium of sending letters through the post. Bellamy's novel takes advantage of the hyper-structural apparatus of the epistolary form and intensifies it by

complicating the "I" who writes, by literalizing "letters" into the letters of the alphabet to manipulate languages basic building blocks, and by multiplying the medium so that it is not merely between the writer and the reader, but within the writer herself: Dodie is Mina's medium. The letters in *Mina* are edited version of those a larger project in which she wrote letters to others others and invited them to write back. Except it wasn't "Dodie" writing the letters, but "Mina Harker" taking spiritual possession of Dodie's body as a medium who connects the world of the dead with the world of the living. Correspondents were invited to write back as themselves, as an alternate persona of their own making, as a fictional character or possessed by one. Robert Glück in his preface to *Real* (a volume of letters written between Mina and her correspondent Sam D'Allessandro who sometimes writes back as "SX" describes the project:

> Dodie/Mina wrote to fellow writers who answered as themselves or as figures in the vampire legend (Bruce Boon was Dr. Van Helsing) or as myths of their own making (like Sam's SX). Dodie's plan broke the form of the epistolary novel by making it real; in doing so she allowed her correspondents to display the fiction of their personalities. In other words, it's pure new narrative" (*Real* i).

From the start, the letters are experiments not only with a divided authorial subject, but as a collective authorial endeavor. While letters are often read as personal, intimate, and revelatory of individual biography or psychology, the compositional arrangement of this project impels consideration of the interpersonal and the non-personal in the excurses of subject formation.

The letters in *Real* and in *The Letters of Mina Harker* are not wholly 'real' in the sense implied by Glück's preface. Rather than simply reprinting letters sent to Dodie/Mina, they are revised, cut-up, and collaged into the publication form. Bellamy clarifies, "*Real* is a really constructed book. Some of the things in it weren't actually letters between Sam and Mina; that's what's so funny about the title *Real*" (Bellamy "Bloch" interview). The form of the first half of *Real* is that of a published collection of correspondence, edited, yes, but still well in keeping with

the common expectations of epistolary publications. The set of letters is followed by the last story Sam D'Allessandro wrote before his death, which is then followed by the program for Sam's Memorial Service—February 13, 1988. Following this program—which might seem a coherent 'natural' end to the letters, is another letter between Mina and Sam, dated January 28, 1993. It is a letter to the dead from the undead—to Sam after his death from Mina in her possession of Dodie. This letter is published in very nearly the same form in *The Letters of Mina Harker*, with some edits. Christophe Breu treats the thematic content of this 'letter to the dead' with the gravity it deserves, but neglects in his analysis of the letter attention to its epistolarity.

In addition to having its compositional origins in the post[100], *The Letters of Mina Harker* retains the apparatus of the letter form not only in the title of the novel, but also in retaining a division into letters (rather than chapters). Sections of the book open "Dear Reader" "Dear Sing" "Dear Quincey" etc. There are no letters in reply to Mina, though she does reference them in a few passages. The address gives the impression of univocality: everything here is written by one person, Mina. However, the letters in the novel—as well as the letters originally sent (Personal Interview 07:10)—are notably collaged, copying text from works by other published authors—frequently without citation or reference.[101] The novel also transcribes passages from letters written in response to Dodie/Mina's letters: "Originally, one of the letters was to Dennis Cooper, one was to Gail Scott, one was to Leslie Dick, and there's traces of that—their work is collaged into their letters even though they've been removed" (Bellamy, Lodestar). The "original" letters,

[100] "I was doing this just as a fun performance project. In the original letters, people wrote back to Mina, so Mina had all this correspondence" (Bellamy, Lodestar).
[101] Bellamy has written and spoken about her critics mistakenly reading collaged quotation as her own writing. See "Digging through Kathy Acker's Stuff" in *When the Sick Rule the World* 128. See also the introduction to *Writers Who Love Too Much* where Bellamy recounts doing the same to Kathy Acker, who confided in Dodie afterward that the quoted passage was Juan Goytisolo's (xii).

sent in the post, were themselves full of uncited quotation—often of the correspondent's own work into the text (Personal Interview 07:19). To read this novel, one must hold in mind the foundational elements of the letter moving through the post—But the form, and the compositional practice, of the letters in both their original form through the post and their edited form of the novel deconstruct colloquial and structural aspects of the letter[102].

6. Epistolary's Subjective Forms:

Colloquial understandings of the letter include a constellation of concepts related to the formation of the subject. This is evident in letter manuals of the late 20th century. Letters are described as an "outlet for self-expression" (Stoddard 5) and a "mirror that reflects your appearance, taste, and character" (Post 252); handwriting is valued because it allows "intimacy or personal feeling" in the letter, and letters of condolence should consist only of "what you truly feel" (Post 249). A guide to business letters—first edition published in the early 1980s—opens its first chapter with the suggestion that "the key to writing successful business correspondence is to relax" (Geffner 1), and to use less formal and more 'natural' phrasing which will make the correspondence "more personal and friendly" (1). As one reader of *Mina* writes, "despite the addressee, the letter's a ruse for writing in the first-person singular, the more selfish the better" (Kay Gabriel qtd. in Milks 29). Letters are read as an expression of the self (or at least a realization of the self by way of putting oneself into words). This understanding—which is also a misunderstanding—adheres to the letter form well before the 20th century, "At least since *The Letters of a Portuguese Nun*, the letter has been identified as " 'the voice of true feeling'; traditionally the solitary heroine's letters are testaments to sincerity, authenticity, and

[102] (as with all deconstructive moves, the presence of the form to be undone is necessarily legible in order to be the scene of its undoing)

spontaneity" (Kauffman xviii). However, despite these persistent (and in the 20th/21st century-increased) understandings of the letters as intimate, authentic, and personal have always been at odds with the reality of the letter's medium and form.

A letter is always written to be read by someone else at another time and place, sent through the mail (or in a more restricted sense, put in a place to be apprehended by the reader—on the mantel, in a bouquet of flowers, under the lining of a basket of strawberries[103]). The temporal and spatial distance, however small, introduces the possibility of interception. Whereas a conversation may or may not have an eavesdropper, the letter can always be picked up, waylaid, in other purloined. If posted, or even if handed off through a messenger, a third party is integral to the medium of the letter. Whether or not the letter is read by another than its intended recipient, it is always already constructed as potentially-public. Derrida's reading of the letter's potential interception is that, because it *might not* arrive, structurally "one can say that it never truly arrives, that when it does arrive its capacity to not arrive torments it with an internal drifting" (Quoted in Beebee 56). In other words, the fact that the letter's medium includes in it the possibility that it might not arrive means that its composition and its reception always retain the haunting effect of that non-arrival: to read a letter is also to understand that it might not have arrived. Derrida's insistence on the eternal non-arrival of the letter is opposed to Lacan's assessment. Lacan argues that the letter "always" arrives: wherever it ends up is the final portion of its meaning (See Beebee 56). These two readings of the purloined letter contradict each other (Derrida's reads all letters as 'never arriving' while Lacan reads them as 'always arriving' at their destination; Peters points out that some letters end up in the Dead Letter Office (168)), yet both require a conception of the letter as more than merely 'personal' and 'authentic' and both

[103] in *Love-Letters Between a Nobleman and His Sister*, Aphra Behn (29)

definitions underscore the importance of *other people* in creating the sense of intimacy. The letter is not private. The private is not even private: the private is always constructed by another (Lacan) or by the potential public (Derrida). If we accept these caveats on the subject (which any good postmodernist surely will), then we can return to the letter and affirm that the colloquial understanding of the epistolary form is correct: letters are intimate and personal insofar as they are a genre which commands the construction of the subject: the letter's "I believe I am speaking to you" compels the "I" to articulate itself to the reader. Bellamy notes the productive force of the I/you relationship inherent in the letter form: "When I finished [*Mina*]…it was really hard to then move on and writer where I didn't have this one person I was writing to. It really generated a lot of energy. It became like an assignment….It's about narratives in your life, ut it's also about creating a relationship" (Personal Interview 13:04).

To write out of the premise, "*je crois te parler*" (Kauffman xix)—I believe I am talking to you , as one Kauffman argues all letter writers do, is to present a problem of the subject as well as a problem of the audience. The subject ("I") and the belief both structure the exchange. Speaking as though face-to-face is a characteristic of letters often commented on, see Brant (21-24). This phrase coheres, even under the dilemmas presented by the purloined letter. Even if the letter never arrives (Derrida), belief anchors this definition of the letter writer's subject position. The significance of the letter—not fixed until it arrives (Lacan), can be understood by the writer as complete in the I/you dynamic. Intimacy is preserved in this phrase. But Bellamy's *Letters of Mina Harker* undermines even this expansive genre definition. Every element is put into question, beginning with the "I" who believes, and the "I" (in my English paraphrase) who is talking. As part of the New Narrative School, whose heyday was in the late 70s/early 80s when "[o]ld "New Critical" notions of sincerity vs. authenticity seemed to be imploding as the 80s

began" (*Writers Who Love Too Much* xii), *The Letters of Mina Harker* is engaged with the question of what it might look like to write a subject that is neither restricted by a totalizing narrative, nor disavowed entirely. Bob Glück's "Long Note on New Narrative" describes the dilemma of subject and narrative that the New Narrative writers sought to examine:

> The questions vexing Bruce [Boone] and me and the kind of rigor we needed were only partly addressed by Language Poetry which, in the most general sense, we saw as an aesthetics built on an examination (by subtraction: of voice, of continuity) of the ways language generates meaning….I experienced the poetry of disjunction as a luxurious idealism in which the speaking subject rejects the confines of representation and disappears in the largest freedom, that of language itself….Whole areas of my experience, especially gay experience, were not admitted to this utopia, partly because the mainstream reflected a resoundingly coherent image of myself back to me—an image so unjust that it amounted to a tyranny that I could not turn my back on. We had been disastrously described by the mainstream—a naming whose most extreme (though not uncommon) expression was physical violence. Political agency involved at least a provisionally stable identity"

On the one hand, New Narrative writers such as their recognized 'founders,' Boone and Glück, were using writing to destroy the limitations created by pre-ordained, normative, narratives of the gay subject and to create new subjective identities. In this, their goals aligned with the Language Poetry (Glück writes in the same "Note," "If I could have become a Language poet I would have"). Though a broad 'school,' whose adherents did not always agree with each other or even with the notion that they were of the same 'school', Language Poets and theorists

worked to “decenter subjectivity” (Watten 236) and to “foreground the language of which [poetry and prose] are made” (237). Language writers/poets such as Silliman strove to examine the “autonomy” of language and grammar that is “independent of subordination to any narrative or discursive context” (ibid 237-8). This was a political interest as much as it was a linguistic or aesthetic one (or better to say, it was all three at once). Language’s referential capacity meant to the Language writers that in its daily use it is inexorably subordinated to the political-economy of capitalism (Silliman “Disappearance of the Word”). The goal was to break normative meanings that overtook the grammar itself and re-examine words as aesthetic objects in themselves, separated from the concepts to which they refer—and this was an explicitly political project. Breaking free from dominant narratives is a shared interest of New Narrative and Language Poetry. Yet Boone and Glück were interested not only in dissolving dominant narratives, but also in finding “a better representation—not in order to satisfy movement pieties or to be political, but in order to be” (“Long Note”). They wanted a new narration, a new mode of representing selves that was not mere representation or referentiality, but a means for living freely. They struck upon the idea of “text-meta-text” to embrace both a dissolution of the narrative and subject forms that confined and did violence, and to create narration that enabled being in and through writing. Glück explains the operation of text-metatext:

> a story keeps a running commentary on itself from the present. The commentary, taking the form of a meditation or a second story, supplies a succession of frames. That is, the more you fragment a story, the more it becomes an example of the narration itself—narration displaying its devices—while at the same time (as I wrote in 1981) the metatext “asks questions, asks for critical response, makes claims on the reader, elicits comments.” (“Long Note”)

This list of the function of New Narrative tracks closely to elements of letter-writing. Letters ask questions, ask for critical response, make claims on the reader and elicit comments in the form of a return letter (one hopes). Moreover, letters are commonly comprised of narrations of the scene of writing, noting the context in which the writer is finally able to sit down and write, to apologize for the length of time passed since last corresponding or for the haste of writing in an uncomposed manner; in other words letter writers write meta-text as part of their texts, due to the genre demands of the medium

The self-reflexivity of the letter writer's meta-text in the text of the letter is but one split of the epistolary subject; the medium of the post creates the space for further divisions of the subject. Traveling through the post, across time and space, the letter works to construct both the sender as a character legible to the reader and works to construct a reader who can apprehend the text and write back. The second chapter of this dissertation focused on the construction of a 'you' as a central epistolary move. Bellamy's *Letters of Mina Harker*, though, are less concerned with constructing a coherent subject—either of the reader or the writer, the 'you' or the 'I'—and more concerned with the meaning-making process of putting together fragments. Parsing out, and then piecing together, Mina and Dodie as characters is the primary dilemma of the novel, developed through the epistolary—including through the heightened work of collage through the epistolary.

The first letter of the novel establishes the division and the struggle over who the "I" is who writes. Addressed to "Dear Reader," the letter writer introduces herself with a shout, sixteen lines down the page: "That's *me* on the screen you assholes!" She continues:

> "Who am I anyway? In *Dracula*, "Mina Harker" was this plain-Jane secretarial adjunct to the great European vampire killer Dr. Van Helsing. I'm the one who gathered the notes,

> the journal entries, letters, ship logs, newsclippings, invoices, memoranda, asylum reports, telegrams—I transcribed them and ordered the morass so the Reader can move through it without getting lost *no hassle, no danger—i.e., a plot or an amusement park, Safari Land, Transylvania Land.* (9)

The writer of this first letter seems to be Mina Harker, but the description given is the simple past: who Mina *was*. Mina who was the secretary in Bram Stoker's novel, who was the collector and compiler of papers. Mina who took the chaos wrought by the vampire, and the chaos of modern life and modern correspondence, and prepared it as a narrative without hassle or danger for the reader. But this Mina, in Bellamy's novel, who yells "That's *me* on the screen you assholes," is not a secretary or an order bringer. She is not a narrative author. At least, she is not a narrative author in the sense of developing a plot, providing a causal explanation of transformative events.[104] Instead of narrating coherence, she screams, exclaims, seduces, and exposes herself and others in messy scenes of fragments and interruptions. Reader be warned. This Mina is not a plain-Jane, she is sex and blood and chaos.[105]

Who, then, is this Mina, the character? There is, of course, the original Mina of Bram Stoker's novel. Then there is a proliferation of Minas on screen in Dracula movies. These Minas were most directly influential on the character Mina in Bellamy's book—as she says in an interview published in *Lodestar*: "I was mostly basing *[Mina]* on horror films, and then once I became really committed, I then read *Dracula*, and I couldn't believe how perfect it was. You

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[104] CITE: companion to narrative

[105] The book is the same. It is messy and full of sex. When people hear that my final dissertation chapter is about an epistolary vampire sex novel placed in San Francisco in the early 1990s, they ask "what's the name of it again? I want to read it." I warn them not to unless they like avant-garde writing and point them to Bellamy's recent, more readable but equally potent essays in *When the Sick Rule the World*.

know what I mean?" (Bellamy, *Lodestar*). This proliferation of Minas is an instantiating problem for the Mina of Bellamy's novel. She may share a name and filmography/bibliography with Dracula films and Bram Stoker's novel, but these antecedents do not provide her with a biography, much less an autobiography through which she can speak. Watching vampire films, Mina describes her biographical predicament:

> beneath the screen-writer's thumb I squirm…as the credits scroll by I stuff popcorn in my mouth to distract my racing heart: am I single? betrothed? married to Jonathan? who runs the insane asylum? does he live? do I die? Sometimes Lucy is my best friend sometimes my sister sometimes my husband is my father, I don't even look or Quincey he's forgotten so often and in a couple of radical versions MINA DOESN'T EXIST EITHER. (107)

The bibliography that should constitute a biography of Mina is fractured, partial, and filled with erasures. She is intertext more than text. She is an analogy of the textual history of letters, which have been seen as simultaneously "the most direct, sincere, and transparent form of written communication" and "as the most playful and potentially deceptive of forms, as a stage for rhetorical trickery" (Cook 16), and which has been identified as a "forerunner of the 'domestic-realist novel" (Cook 25; Cook is critiquing this tendency), and as a minor form of writing, of use to women, sentimental novels, private correspondence, and the like (Cook 24). This is a condition of women in literature more broadly, and is in part due to the genres in which women were relegated to writing—letters, diaries, and anonymously: "Letters were the one sort of writing women were supposed to be able to do well" (Perry 68). These genres remain devalued

as 'paraliterary' or simply as 'gossip'[106] more generally, and which can be partially recuperated by reading letters as an integral part of literary culture (as Susan E. Whyman and Elizabeth Heckendorn Cook have done with attention to women's writing in particular, and as Eve Tavor Bannet, Thomas O. Beebee and others have done even more broadly). Yet accepting Mina as the singular author of these letters is not a given. The book is, by all usual markings, written by Dodie Bellamy and Mina is a character written into the book. Mina, though, claims authorship by way of possession: she possesses Dodie's body and uses her as a channel or medium. In the first letter, addressed to the reader, Mina announces herself as the author and overthrows the authority of Dodie Bellamy as ostensible author of the text at hand:

> for the past hundred years imitators have barged into my story and hacked out enough sequels to fill a library….Dodie's the latest intruder, getting it all wrong in her attempt to be civilized—forget about her forget about them—this is *The Letters of Mina Harker* THE ACTUAL AUTHORIZED VERSION if you want anything done right you have to do it yourself" (9-10).

This is actually quite a funny claim[107]: who is "doing it"? Dodie or Mina? Who is 'yourself'? The writing subject (the speaking 'I') in Bellamy's novel is unstable because of the relationship between Mina and Dodie as one of spirit-possession or spirit channeling.

7. Channeling, Handwriting, and Divided Authenticity

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[106] One potential committee member for my exams dismissed letters (as opposed to the epistolary novel) as uninteresting because they are 'gossip.' See Patricia Meyer Spacks *Gossip* who agrees, but thinks gossip is interesting.

[107] Thank you to my reader Michael Esveldt for pointing out this particular joke, and my apologies for killing the joke by explaining it.

Bellamy's work—not only *Letters of Mina Harker*, but also her later work *TV Sutras*—are structured around channeling as a mode of communication and meaning-making in a mass-media environment. Channeling presents the possibility of immediate and intimate communication in a way that neither mass-media nor letters can, but it also introduces and exacerbates questions of authenticity, autonomy, intimacy, and subjectivity. In order to recognize the dilemmas articulated in *The Letters of Mina Harker* and the experiments with subject-formation that the novel posits to navigate the era of the late '80s/early'90s, the next pages present a brief entrée into the literature on channeling before returning to Bellamy's text.

Though narratives of similar phenomena of spiritual possession appear in biblical stories, oracular messages, and shamanistic practices, mediumship in Anglo-American contexts has its dominant roots in the 19th century, contemporaneously with the development of new technologies of typewriter, telegraph, and radio. The simultaneous development of spiritual and mechanical mediumship are best understood as more than coincidental. John Durham Peters points to the very explicit co-development of the two, "That the telegraph opened access to the spirit world is not a fanciful metaphor I am imposing retroactively; the spiritualist haunting of the new medium decisively shaped the popular reception of the technology" (94). Peters cites Braude, who, in her work on women mediums in 19th century evangelical circles, describes the way that radio communication and channeling were confused with and tied up with each other. The infrastructure for the first long-distance radio wire, Braude explains, was approved in Congress by a small margin. Representatives in the House could not grasp the science of the radio, and so were skeptical of the project of establishing wire connections, thinking them as obscure as spiritual channeling. Braude goes on to recount, "Chairman Winthrop of Massachusetts …opines, 'It would…require a scientific analysis to determine how far the

magnetism of mesmerism was analogous to the magnetism to be employed in telegraphs' (Braude 5).

This historical conjunction of spiritual and mechanical media is a crucial turning point for the understanding of subjectivity and authorship. Spiritual medium practices "can be understood as a direct response to the rise of new writing machines in the nineteenth century, as they represented an attempt to preserve the authority of the written 'I' at the very moment when these new technologies were threatening to displace the autonomy and integrity of the writing subject" (Enns 64-5) because no longer can you discern the author through the handwriting. Enns identifies the mechanistic displacement of the writing subject partially with reference to Kittler's discussion of the illusion of the "soul" as an illusion made believable by the unity of hand and writing—the apparent expression of personality in the penned letters. "By accelerating the speed of writing, severing the unity of hand, eye and letter, and introducing uniform letter-spacing, writing machines thus threatened the notion of writing as the expression of a writer's inner thoughts" (Enns 66). This conjunction of typing and mediumship is, for Enns, "one of the earliest attempts to address the impact of mechanical writing on subjectivity and authorship" (Enns 65). The limits of the identification of the writer (the one who writes) with the author (the one whose message is conveyed in writing) is newly explored within the frame of spiritual mediumship in which the spirit overtakes the writer, turning the body into a mere scribe—a supernatural version of Barthes' modern scriptor:

> these spirits were nothing more than a reification of the 'author function', which was entirely divorced from any person. The fact that spiritual mediums who transcribed these posthumous works were seen as nothing more than relays in a telecommunications system also supports Barthes' concept of the writer as a 'modern scriptor who transcribes

texts without conscious mediation. (Enns 65).

These are *newly* explored questions not in the sense that they are new questions, but that they are revisited in a new framework of spiritualism and telecommunications. While the speed with which writing and communication occurs is significantly increased, and the mystery of telecommunication and telepathy open new conundrums and new hopes for interpersonal and transcendental conversation, the fundamental problem of authorship, subjectivity, and writing in the machine is not novel to the 19th century mechanisms. In the centuries preceding the typewriter and the telegraph, epistolary writing bore the weight of the problems of communicating at a distance, of articulating oneself in writing and representing the self through the medium.

The typewriter's introduction of a standardized font is a new variation on the theme of visual style in shape of the letter on the page. Before typewriting, handwriting was not understood as uniquely self-expressive. In fact, handwriting was highly controlled and understood to be a demonstration of epistolary purpose and indicative of social roles and positions of the writers, readers and the situation itself. Handwriting was understood to be expressive of a social self. Whyman describes the evolution of a standard English handwriting, from the "Multiple hands of the Renaissance," when different styles of writing indicated different purposes and had to be studied in great detail and practiced extensively in order to properly write: "Specialized hands that were difficult to learn betrayed occupation and conferred status on lawyers, diplomats, and scribes" (Whyman *Pen* 27). Even when, in the eighteenth century, the style of the English round hand was developed and used widely in all kinds of correspondence, personal self-expression was not understood as the purpose of handwriting.

Rather, this "highly legible 'copperplate' hand" Whyman explains, "captured the values of its English writers and helped them to acquire epistolary literacy" (*Pen* 28). The development of the round hand as the generic script for many kinds of correspondence can be understood, then, as a technology of normalization in much the same way that typewriting supplied in the 19th century: the round hand of England was a regularized font that dissolved the differentiations of purpose that had previously been supplied by specialized handwriting. During this transition from occupation/context-specific handwriting to a more generic hand, letters themselves "became more informal" (Whyman *Pen* 23). And, "though there was always a tension between the form's conventions and the impulse of the writer…the epistolary balance between the epistolary balance between self-expression and controlled use of norms tipped towards more freedom" (Whyman *Pen* 23). Handwriting in letters may have exacerbated the problem of writing expressively, rather than clarified the personal author in the written word. Choices in font and style were certainly understood as indicative of meaning, but we in the era of typewriting's hegemony, must remember that demonstrations of character are created through the character on the page, not generated out of a unique persona (see Dierdre Lynch, *Economy of Character* for her analysis of the nature of 'identity' in eighteenth century England as they relate to typeprinting).

The Letters of Mina Harker does not forget the dilemma of handwriting for the production of a subject or its limitations when it comes to writing a life. Mina/Dodie proclaims, "Life is so elusive the ghostly trails left behind a moving hand on acid, whereas Writing is the hand" (117). Life cannot be on the page except as supernatural traces, but 'the hand' disembodied and metonymized as writing can be seen. In another letter, Mina describes seeking out her friend Dennis to interpret her correspondent Dion's handwriting. Handwriting matters, but it is not indubitably indicative of anything personal about the one who writes. After all, we

are reminded in the sixteenth letter, “Up to now Dodie’s been signing the letters you’ve received, I’ve been guiding her hand by remote via a transmitter embedded in the base of my skull—or I’ve tried to” (147). In theory, Dodie has been transcribing for Mina. I wonder, then, whose personality would show up in the handwriting analysis, the ghost whose trails are left behind by a moving hand on acid there or the biography of the hand that writes?

The anxiety of differentiating between self-expression and transcription is a common concern in letters, most extremely experienced in the context of writing love letters. Brant calls attention to the contemporaneous anxiety over this problem, as articulated in the 1790 letter writing manual. “One of the primary paradoxes of love-letters is their desire to individuate their object and passion whilst being obliged to share a discourse with other lovers” (93)—sharing might include borrowing, repeating, plagiarizing to demonstrate depth of love by using recognizable love language. Brant explains and then quotes the 1790 manual: “It is an unsupportable misfortune that all declarations of love should be alike, and yet the passion itself so very different.” (93). This paradox of letters as a “play between originality and conventionality” (93) is a conundrum faced by all letter writers, though some dwell on it more than others. However, for the sake of this chapter’s discussion of the authorial conundrum of Dodie Bellamy, possessed by Mina Harker, suffice it to say with Donna Landry that “The letter’s “natural” construction of a self-authenticating self, capable of familiarity, is a convincing fiction” (51). *Mina*’s premise of channeling heightens the potentical split of the ‘authentic’ self from the constructed one. The subject is split between the spirit Mina and the medium Dodie. The writer is both—Mina’s ideas and Dodie’s typing/handwriting. Sex scenes are divided—Mina is the erotic drive and Dodie is the body (though of course, as quoted above, “Obviously it’s clear that Dodie’s doing everything in the book” (Personal Interview 28:48). In scenes of intimacy, Dodie

and Mina conflict. The self-authenticating self is a fiction that is struggled over, and the letters undo the 'natural construction' and undermine the plausibility of the 'convincing fiction' promised by the epistolary genre.

There are a few different ways to term the relationship between Mina Harker and Dodie Bellamy: Mina possesses Dodie. Dodie channels Mina. Dodie might be called then a 'medium' a 'channel' or simply 'possessed.' The distinction between 'channel' and 'medium' is not always clear cut, though for some practitioners and scholars working on the subject, the terminology is not interchangeable in the field of Spiritualism. Bellamy's role in relation to Mina can be seen as both medium and channel. For example, Heather Kavan's ethnographic study of Spiritualism in New Zealand identifies mediums as those who "aim to link with deceased loved ones (sometimes via a spirit guide)" and channelers as those "who believe they link with a higher intelligence" (113)—a distinction important to her for the variety of purposes these New Age practices serve. Mediums, for example, are of interest to the "bereaved so that they can impart messages" from beyond the grave (113), while channels seek to tap into a more-than-human intelligence or historically or culturally distant persons. Ethnographer of American New Age spiritualists observers that the purpose of attending channeling sessions, and becoming a channel oneself, is to better understand oneself and to expand the 'self' beyond limits of conventional subjectivity. Articulated purposes of channeling for participants observed by Brown include, "exploring inner space" "decoding the mysteries of the self" (91) and "self-expansion" (93), or as he titles one chapter, "mastering self-expansion" (84-92). The project of channeling another, dead, self serves to examine one self. We see this enacted in *Mina*, particularly in the longest, centerpiece letter in which Mina/Dodie communes with the dead Sam D'Allessandro and grapples with his death from complications of AIDS. In this letter, Bellamy acts as medium, with

Mina as spirit guide. Mina navigates the afterlife—including talking to and fucking Death personified—as part of the search to communicate with Sam or his alter-ego and pen name S/X beyond the grave and to form a narrative identity in the context of a community full of death.

But for most of the book, Mina is not communicating with the dead so much as possessing Dodie's body, perhaps consensually and perhaps not, and in any case demanding an expanded sense of self in order to read the character who is writing. Spiritual possession, mediumship, and channeling all present conundrums of agency and identity. The possessing spirit is sometimes said to be a single entity and sometimes understood as a more diffuse energy, a composite personality, or even a variety of personalities. "Channels," Brown explains, "show different degrees of commitment to the separateness of their entities or spirit guides. Some are deeply involved in the biographies and personality traits of the entities, whether they are angels or warriors from Atlantis" (21). Mina is at the outset most apparently this sort of a spirit, one who establishes her biography and character and one in whom Dodie Bellamy is invested as a viewer of vampire movies and reader of Bram Stoker's novel, but also one who takes over Dodie's body to do with it as she will.

8. Possession: or "Excuses, Excuses"

The nature of the relationship between Mina and Dodie is antagonistic throughout the novel, and Mina has the upper hand in the first half. Different from channeling, where there is willing collaboration, possession is forceful and unwilled. Mina declares herself the author "HARKEN THE WORDS OF MINA HARKER, FORTUNE COOKIES FROM BEYOND THE GRAVE" (10—in all bold all in the text). She asserts the separation of Mina and Dodie, replying to a lover's unrepresented question, "Do I hate you or do I just want to fuck you? it's lucky you asked me instead of Dodie—she wouldn't understand this line of reasoning, but it's

my philosophy in a nutshell" (19). Another lover, another letter, trying to reach Dodie and not Mina, is stymied by Mina's presence as she proclaims, "Quincey, DID YOU REALLY THINK YOU COULD GET TO KNOW DODIE WITHOUT HAVING TO DEAL WITH ME? She can tolerate ambivalence but I *Mina Harker Queen of the dicataphone and typewriter* always want to know what's what" (70). In this proclamation, Mina not only asserts her dominance in the relationship between herself and her channel, but also proclaims her sovereignty over the mechanisms of writing. This is precisely the opportunity presented by the modern mechanisms as Enns discusses them—the impersonality of the machine allows the spirit to speak through it by using a medium as the transcriber.

Dodie is relegated to the role of writer and secretary while Mina is the active protagonist. The scene of the channel writing is shown as laborious and mindless: "Dodie leans over her notebook drives the muscles through systems of meaning as far from her grasp as mine" (36), or even as mechanical reproduction:

> *an author on automatic pilot, motherhood bound…she sits before a hand-painted antique mirror, pink and blue flowers frame a blonde organism that others seem to recognize…who…she drops her pen leans forward pores enlarge and open, eyes merge into a single greenish corona, all this mindless duplication I might as well be a xerox machine* (30—italics original).

Writing is characterized here as "automatic" as "mindless duplication" as being barely more than "a xerox machine." Though phrased as an anxiety and disgust over being a modern machine, a photocopier, this kind of 'copying' is akin to the kind of copying that is prompted by letter writing manuals. Letter manuals provide guides for writing based on the social role of the author. There is a polite way for a woman to address a man, a mother her son, a wife her

husband. And by writing in this manner, social interaction is made possible and normalized social roles reinforced, even as they define the identity of the writer through the expectations of the genre. In other words, the writer is recognizable, reiterated, and reinscribed as the social role they write. The self is the reproduction of the role in the letter and is legible primarily through the genre expectations—even when those genre expectations are defied, it is in their defiance that the writer is legible. Here, in Bellamy's passage, we see this repeated: the social role of being "motherhood bound," and the trappings of gender "pink and blue flowers" are indeed traps. As the writer looks in the mirror and has her image reflected back to her, she sees an image that "others seem to recognize" but that might as well be mere duplication, photocopies, not authorship.

If transcription is what the channel does, it seems to follow that the spirit Mina's action is that of author. But Mina's primary action is sex. The sentence I quoted above "Dodie leans over her notebook" is the second clause of a complex sentence that begins with Mina's action: "Gliding my palm along the length of his thigh I am piercing laughter a fire in the night, Dodie leans over her notebook, drives the muscles through systems of meaning as far from her grasp as mine" (36).

Mina may have declared herself, "*Mina Harker Queen of the dicataphone and typewriter*" (70), but she is a hands-off ruler, directing Dodie to write but having no engagement herself with literature. In fact, she disdains it, "I gag on the ordinary, on those novels Dodie's always reading: tiny fluctuations in the daily life of British spinsters" (46). The novel of manners, as much as the scene of social writing, is anathema to Mina. Her realm is sex. She not only commandeers Dodie's body in order to have sex with other people, but to masturbate: "I untie Dodies' bathrobe spread her legs glide my hand across her snatch moist putty" (150).

Mina's role is to violate social roles, relegating Dodie to the vehicle for her exploits—a channel not for writing but for sex.

Most channels of other entities—whether channeling a single entity or a number of entities—go into a trance and hold no memory of what happened. Though letter writing frequently relied on transcribing directly from letter manuals' suggestions for socially proper wording and the self-expression was at best constrained if not (as Landry has it, above) wholly a constructed fiction, it was at least a conscious transcription. The introduction of New Age channeling—a direct descendant of 19th century spiritualism—introduces the problem of the unconscious transcription. If the channel does not know what the spirit says when it speaks through her body, is the channeler responsible for what they say? Kavan poses this question as a provocation to consider the risks of channeling. Dodie Bellamy poses it as an opportunity for experimentation.

9. Sex Without Dying

Why is an 'excuse' for sex necessary? In other words, all of this epistolary and channeling apparatus of the novel has—in my account so far--been at work to create the excuse. The self has been divided into one who writes and one who fucks. That writer is writing something that looks like letters—and those letters recount and create erotic scenes. I will return to the question of letters and the writer after an excursion here into the function of sex that is enabled by the novel's form. Christophe Breu in the only peer reviewed article on *The Letters of Mina Harker* gives a first reason for the state of exception through which sex operates in the novel:

> the emergence of the AIDS epidemic in the United States also shaped the discourses of biomedicalization that emerged alongside of it—both adding to and enabling the discourse of moral and sexual hygiene that made distinctions between those who deserved health care and those who, by their taboo and “unhygienic” practices, could be left to die. Thus, biomedicalization in the United States as it confronted AIDS was not only a practice of Foucauldian biopolitics, creating normativizing discourses that managed public health and directly shaped subjectivity, but also…a form of…thanatopolitics, in which certain populations are abjected, constructed as an unhygienic threat, and marked for death in the name of immunizing and mzximizing the health of thos populations that are deemed worthy of protection. (126).

Breu is particularly interested in the “thanatopolitics” of the AIDS crisis, that is, the ways in which AIDS became a means for enacting a set of political policies and philosophies that ruled by deciding who dies and who lives, and in so doing declares those who live to be ‘normal’ and ‘hygienic’ and those who must die to be unhygienic abnormal—or what we might call exceptional, outside of the normal. Any sex that is not ‘normal’ is exceptional, and qualifies its participants for death. “Normal” sex being most obviously defined by (American) Christian values of sex as solely procreative. One possible way to read Mina’s existence as an ‘excuse’ for sex, then, is that Mina offers a way for the character Dodie to have sex without subjecting herself to the risk of being condemned to death. Because Mina is already ‘undead,’ she does not care about the risks either medical (contracting HIV) or social (condemnation for promiscuous sex at a time when promiscuity is blamed for the spread of the virus almost exclusively) (See Crimp).

Reading Mina as reckless casts her as 'taking advantage' of Dodie's body and, in fact, putting Dodie more at risk—thus playing into the narrative of risky sex. This is a reactionary reading, one that does not actually match the tone of the novel itself. After all, the "risk" of channeling is not that the channel will be harmed, but that the channel will not know what has been said or done (see Brown). The risk is that the self disappears. This is the risk in letters as well: with the genre speaking for the writer, the writer risks losing the particularity of herself and of the situation described. The risk for Dodie is that she is confined to the social role of the transcriber only, and not able to have exceptional sex, only to write the encounters Mina has with the body she has possessed—Dodie's body.

Writing sex is a major problem for Mina and for Dodie in the novel. Sex scenes permeate the book. Yet the attempt to write the sex is, by the novel's own account, is inadequate. After narrating a scene of phone sex—imagining Quincey masturbating through the receiver—Dodie writes, "this cum shot is precise, yet flattened and blurred like a color xerox of a collage; as I type it a frenetic neighbor stomps above my head. Sex, no matter how fondly recalled, comes across so generic" (77). Mina's promiscuity exacerbates her problem of character differentiation and particularity: "Dion, the past year has convinced me that in bed I could get into *anything*. This is why, as a character, I'm so universal" (84). Described sex suffers from exactly the same problem that writing does: it is a repetition of commonly recognizable tropes. As Justice Potter Stewart famously said of obscenity, "I know it when I see it." Genres are recognizable—writing fulfilling a particular need and conforming to known (if broad) rules of form. To have sex that is exceptional is still to operate within the boundaries of what is known as 'sex.' The normative is pervasive. To write exceptional sex that is recognizably sex, one still must play within the

boundaries of sex-writing. Bringing in Mina as the excuse has not provided the escape of the *ex* – an *ex*ception sought has not been gained.

Breu's interpretation of Mina/Dodie's ultimate sex scene—sex with death—reads the scene as a means through which people without AIDS can enter into allyship with people with AIDS across the lines of 'normal' and 'infected' imposed by biomedicalization. He emphasizes embodiment as the means of re-imagining political relationships under neoliberalism:

> Bellamy's novel suggests a more general ethics of embodiment that can begin to imagine political connections amongst all those whose position is abjectly and often painfully embodied in relationship to the dominant thanatopolitical symbolic constructed by new-right social relationships and neoliberal commodity culture. (145).

Breu's argument for interpretation of the novel revolves around the materiality of the body—recognition of bodies of all kinds, not only those who fit the normative and biomedical schemes of biomedicalization, not only those who are 'fit to live' in the fullest sense. He reads past the language games of Bellamy's text to emphasize recognition of embodiment as the critical action of *The Letters of Mina Harker*:

> "These recognitions [of the materiality of the body, of the world of objects, of the political-economic realm, and finally of death itself are central to Bellamy's artistic practice. This is a practice not simply about metafictional language games; it is one that employs an experimental aesthetic to indicte that which language cannot fully describe: the forms of materiality and embodiment that underpin late-capitalist existence" (149).

How can one match this artistic practice? How can a reader embody the politics Breu identifies in Bellamy's work? In order to recognize the body that is outside of language ("that which language cannot fully describe"), we must "symbolically [accept] our relationship to bodies and

materiality" (148). Breu's terms of analysis largely match my own—he is looking at the 'language games' as indicative of serious political work, interpreting the text as an experimental examination of what it takes to construct a subject in late-capitalism at the height of the AIDS crisis. But where Breu looks to the materiality of the body as the subject's substrate that must be raised up from where it has been buried by capitalism's exploitation, I want to take seriously the metafictional language games as the means for constructing a self. In other words, I want to read symbolically, not to relocate or 'disinter' something buried outside of language, but to see the way that the subject is constructed in the language. What if there is not an 'ex'—an excuse, an escape, an exception to language—as there was no exceptional sex available even under the sign of the excuse that is Mina? What kind of experiment can be conducted to identify the experience of the subject that is not merely the reproduction of mass media, of genre, of language itself as a set of grammatical rules?

10. If not Narrative, then Metaphor

I said at the beginning of this chapter that Mina is not a narrative author. And this is true in that Mina does not narrate a story. Her letters are full of exclamations, fortune cookies from the future, disruptions, shouts. In addition to being pieced together through collage, the letters are episodic and seemingly interchangeable rather than linear and developmental in the way plots are. But the letters of Mina Harker does have a plot: Mina possesses Dodie, but then realizes that she can only exist as long as Dodie continues acting as transcriber of Mina's existence. The second half of the novel unfolds in the face of Mina's contingent existence and concludes with the subject (Dodie/Mina) seeking a home in language as the body proves untenable as a

guarantor of the spirit's home. Here is the passage where Mina's hegemony as the narrator (with Dodie as the possessed body, writing at the whim of the spirit of Mina) falters:

> "Quincey says our movie date is an example of living a narrative. Dodie interrupts, "Quincey, you live a *life*. You *tell* a Narrative." His instant historicalization is beyond her…until you lend KK *Precious Victims* . . . when the dead baby's mother swore she felt the blow that knocked her out her alibi cracked—experts testified: A PERSON NEVER FEELS THE BLOW THAT KNOCKS HER OUT there is always a delay from the moment of impact to the brain's registering of it *where did my now go?* The present like death is always after the fact, glimmering in Oz. The present is a short story, a disease spread from character to person…not knowing where their feet are at any given moment how does anybody ever make it across a room? Dodi's hand, is it inside or outside the popcorn box? And Quincey's cock…*her brain is so shifty whispering its incessant gossip* the future hits her head on—we could be unconscious before she gets to the end of this sentence we'd never even know it. (95)

Nothing "happens" here to knock Mina out, nothing other than a statement that she could be knocked out and could already have been. The "I" who is writing the letters, Mina discovers, is only coherent so long as it is unquestioned. Four pages later, she pronounces her non-existence as a person:

> "I know—I'd better show more compassion or the reader won't think I'm a good person, but, Sing, I'm not a person—if I ever was this story ended that—I am I I am she I am Mina Harker a sexy construct a trope a simulated force of nature Dodie's embarrassment a vortex of urges swirling around a void: all I see is my character: a woman in a bath an empty bath but she's oblivious, masturbating under a jet of water…another female

> incompetent at being female in a culture where the feminine . . . is muted . . . Sing, what I need from you is the permission to behave excessively, will you grant me that much?" (99, ellipses in original)

Mina is nothing but a character, one constructed by Dodie to fulfill the demands of being 'feminine.' The character of Mina, it seems, was conjured to give form to the feminine urges limited by 'embarrassment.' The embarrassment comes from both a failure of being feminine *and* from the conditions of the culture: "the feminine . . . is muted." In other words: the category of 'feminine' is a norm that is still on offer, but that is not recognized or is at best recognized by denying it. The 'norms' previously on offer are still available as a means for forming a sense of self that can only be a performance of identity. The category of 'feminine' is strong enough that it can be evidently failed "another female incompetent at being female," but success in this mode would not create a location for the successfully feminine subject to be integrated into the social sphere. Dodie faces demands that offer no reward. Mina is summoned (or arrives to possess Dodie) in order to fulfill the feminine demands ("a sexy construct a trope a simulated force of nature"), but as a resolution to the conundrum of subject/identity formation's double-bind, Mina wants to exceed it: "what I need from you is the permission to behave excessively." In other words, Mina is a metaphorical vehicle: the feminine subject to Dodie's tenor; Dodie is not able to fulfil cultural demands because by design, the feminine subject is a condition that is by design *unfulfillable*. The metaphor is a way to expand the limits of what is possible by other means—to expand the literalism of a thing under its own guise by giving it the characteristics of another object. Mina expands the activity and identity available to Dodie.

Lest you think I am stretching the metaphor of metaphor to make Mina into a literary trope, let me offer three reasons to think of Mina as metaphor. First, *The Letters of Mina Harker*

suggests it, literally. In the first letter, addressed to the Reader, Mina asserts, "Bad metaphors are the only way we can approach the really important things, don't you agree?" (11). Looking for metaphors, especially bad ones, is a mode of reading that will serve the reader well in this novel. And "Dodie is possessed by Mina" is indeed a pretty bad metaphor—posed as a simile it would be "Dodie is acting as if she is possessed by a vampire." The metaphor is even worse, because Dodie does not suck blood, does not quake at crosses or garlic, does not sleep in a coffin or associate with bats, she does not turn her lovers into vampires nor (we learn on page 95, quoted above) is she immortal. So why say she is a vampire? The answer to this question can be found in the second reason to think of Mina as metaphor.

Nina Auerbach's study of vampires from Polidori's *Vampyre* (1819) to films of the 1980s, *The Lost Boys, Fright Night, Near Dark*, submits that "[vampires] are personifications of their age" (3). They are too mutable to be merely allegory—that is, a vampire cannot be read simply as "immortality" or as "foreigner" (to take two tropes from Bram Stoker's novel *Dracula* that might seem obvious characteristics to transfer through metaphor). Nor can vampires, Auerbach advises, be "reduced to their political component" (3)—that is, we cannot read Mina as a feminine role, an undead instance of the subject form of the 'welfare' state that recognized and produced "particular kinds of subjects (Dean 329). Instead, Auerbach argues, vampires personify the *fears* of the age (4) by promising escape from our dull lives and the pressures of our times (9), even as their construction is inextricable with both the dullness and the pressures of our times. Vampires are metaphors that do not carry an inherent meaning, but are instead a means to understand the times. As Mina says one of her lover's wives does to her, we have to put the "MEAN" in Mina—not (as Lucy does), to put cruelty into Mina, but to put *meaning* into Mina. Here is a bad metaphor as a serious argument: Mina is a metaphor for looking (in vain)

for the significance of being a subject in the late ‘80s and early ‘90s. When she dies as a character, “knocked out by a blow” (95) she doesn’t see, it becomes clear that a metaphor cannot produce subjective significance, or a character to identify with.

There is one more reason to read Mina as a metaphor: She is a vampire in the age of AIDS. Recalling Treichler from page 22 of this chapter, AIDS “is simultaneously an epidemic of transmissible lethal disease and an epidemic of meanings or signification” (57). Meanings proliferate with AIDS, and as Susan Sontag observed, metaphoric discourse dominated cultural knowledge of AIDS: “Just as one might predict for a disease that is not yet fully understood as well as extremely recalcitrant to treatment, the advent of this terrifying new disease, new at least in its epidemic form, has provided a large-scale occasion for the metaphorizing of illness” (104). Sontag identifies two dominant metaphors in the genealogy of AIDS discourse: 1) “an invasion” and 2) “pollution” (105). The first is a metaphoric idea that adheres to many vampires—particularly Dracula, whose Romanian origin was less important for its particular location than it was to indicate his non-Britishness and his threat to English ways of life. Vampirism’s transmission through blood and sex makes it a ripe metaphor for thinking AIDS (or as Sontag points out—not thinking but interpreting (93)). Bellamy does not name AIDS or HIV until the very end of the book, so readings of Mina as a metaphor for AIDS (the disease and the social construction around it) must be entirely imported by the reader. This is, after all, how metaphors work—by association and exchange of traits (see I.A. Richardson).

What we see in *The Letters of Mina Harker* is, at first, the presentation of a character who acts as a metaphor: a metaphor for what it means to be an agential woman, a metaphor for female ‘bad behavior’, and a metaphor for AIDS. As a metaphor, she could potentially provide a cohesive subject identity—a way to be that resolves some of the conundrums of creating a

subject under the conditions of neoliberalism, while also providing an excuse for the 'irresponsible' actions that exceed rational choices. Mina as metaphor seems like an answer. But metaphor does not provide a solution to the dilemma of self-identity; Mina is knocked out by the premise: one cannot live a narrative, one can only live a life. Dodie, as the body living a life, cannot simply 'be or become Mina' because she is a metaphor that provides the grounds of a narrative. Mina can be no more a solution to the problem of subject formation than Dodie can be.

11. If not Metaphoric, than Anagrammatic

Following the "blow that knocks her out," asides in the text are preoccupied with the textual nature of Mina as character and the reality of her inevitable death at the end of the pages of the novel. Some examples:

"maybe this letter is a matter of Life and Death" (99).

"my life becomes a pastiche of the wrong novel: *Jane Eyre*"

"my mood turns easily as the page of a book" (106).

"Reality penetrates her. The living narrative must die." (106)

Then a new method of ascertaining the nature of Mina's subject appears: anagrams. Instead of finding meaning through a metaphor, Mina explains her origins,

> "A century ago I sprang full blown from Bram Stoker's skull. In a way I am he, it's encoded in our names:
>
> BRAM STOKER
>
> MINA HARKER
>
> ten letters each, five of them in common: M-A-K-E-R, Mina Harker the fact gatherer the transcriber of tapes the puller together of manuscripts" (107).

Rather than finding a logic of comparison, of traits transferring between people to give an explanation of 'how a person is,' (metaphor), anagrams offer to find coded meaning within a single word. A couple of letters (epistles) later, anagrams appear again, this time to play with Dodie's name. We get:

LIMBO DELAYED (141)

IDLE MALE BODY—I LAY MODEL BED (142)

MALE BODY LIED—DEADLY MOBILE—I YODEL BEDLAM (143)

MILE LEAD BODY—DIE BODY ALL ME (144)

The Internet Anagram Server (aka "I, Rearrangement Servant") finds over thirteen thousand anagrams for Dodie Bellamy. Even by hand/without the internet Bellamy surely found more than the eight included in the fifteenth letter. The eight that do appear in the novel create a constellation of phrases that might describe the experience of AIDS: a death sentence delayed, a limbo until then; gay men dying; media stoked fears of lovers lying about their status, the activist cries about the chaos wreaked on a community by the non-response of government to the epidemic, and so on. Rather than trying to find a self and a set of actions through another name for another character ("Mina"), Dodie/Mina turns to finding meaning through rearrangement of existing characters—the literal letters on the page. She says as much: "I want to deconstitute myself" (169), "Never the Big Picture. Parts" (171). Dodie/Mina later retells a dream she had of Sam—who died of AIDS—as "*a man more beautiful than any mortal* and Adonis" (176). KK says to her, "You know what Adonis is, Mina?" "What?" "An anagram for NO AIDS" (176). And rather than finding the "meaning" of AIDS through those who have died, she turns to look at the parts, to try to disassemble and reassemble them rather than looking for significance transcending the words, to look, even, for a cure. The letters are all that are available when

metaphor has failed and reality has little to offer. Mina writes, "There's metaphor on one side and literality on the other and I'm stuck between them *two mountainous silicone tits crashing against one another"* (154). By anagramizing, Mina no longer has access to literalism or to metaphor.

Is there a way out? Is it possible to have anything other than a rearrangement of the letters of words, or (to analogize), to make rational choices mixing and matching amidst an array of options granted by the political conditions that promise 'freedom' and 'non-coercion' but premise that liberty on dis-abling the effectiveness of an individual or democratic action in the political sphere from the market that is (we are told) "reality"? Is there a way for the individual to do anything other than rearrange the circumstances of her life to tell a 'story' about who she is when all the narratives that are made available are, ultimately, a new form of coercion? As Glück puts it:

> I experienced the poetry of disjunction as a luxurious idealism in which the speaking subject rejects the confines of representation and disappears in the largest freedom, that of language itself….Whole areas of my experience, especially gay experience, were not admitted to this utopia, partly because the mainstream reflected a resoundingly coherent image of myself back to me—an image so unjust that it amounted to a tyranny that I could not turn my back on. (Long Note)

Anagrams are not a "resoundingly coherent image," but they also do not seem to be any kind of freedom, other than the 'free play' of letters rearranging themselves. What can this offer to a subject?

12. If not Anagrammatic, then Acrostic

Bellamy gives us one final formal mechanism for constructing the self in language after metaphor and after anagram: she gives us acrostics. Here is the passage that initiates acrostic play:

> Fingers undulate over belly shoulder ass, fingers parting thighs, "You're a kite," he says softly, "and I'm a key attached to you—electricity is inevitable, t's in the air." *I want the warm hand the warm hand doesn't call me by name*. "Kite and Key," he muses, "I like the initials: KK, like me. And for you I would say, 'You're the Dog and I'm the bone.'" "DB is for Dodie—what about MINA?" *I'm the Doppelganger and she's just a body* chin stubble scratches my cheek, "How about 'You're the Mouse and I'm the Hole'—or 'You're the Mustard and I'm the Hot dog.'" *The warm hand shimmies across my cunt, pauses to sniff then burrows*. "You're a mountain and I'm a Hiker you're a Mouth and I'm Homeless you're Miserable and I'm Happy you're a Million and I'm a Hundred you're Magic and I'm History." The warm hand twitches *you're the Minutes and I'm an Hour you are the Map and I am the Highway you're the Mud and I'm the Hut*. (198).

A few more acrostics are scattered across the next few pages:

"You're a Monkey and I'm Human." (199).

Then without the identifying "you are" and "I am," simply, in italics:

Mad Hornet Masculine Hijinx (203)

Any one of these acrostics could be read as meaningful in some way—what does it 'mean' that KK is Magic and Mina is History? The importance is not in the particular items that share a first letter with each name, in the same way that "Every good boy deserves fun" means nothing,

though the mnemonic signifies the notes on the staff lines in treble clef. In this way, this last logic of identification might be better called “mnemonic” than acrostic. An acrostic, usually, has a full line or sentence following the initial letter, and there are more lines down the page that spell out a word or a phrase. Here we get two initials and two words for each unit. KK: kite, key; DB: doppelganger, body; MH: mountain, hiker; etc. Acrostics can work as cryptography: a singular, secret message hidden in all of the other words on the page, if one knows where to look and how to read. The Author of the acrostic has manufactured the secret message, there to be found: the first letter on each line, the first letter of every sentence, or some other mechanism. But we do not have an all knowing author—just the Mina/Dodie construction, both of which will individually and collectively end at the conclusion of the novel. Who would be the author of the secret message that communicates a definitive story or identity? So this is in fact more of a mnemonic logic: finding words to remember initials the way we remember math and science: “Please Excuse My Dear Aunt Sally,” (math) “My Very Excited Mother Just Served Us Nine Pies,” (astrology) “Stop Letting Those People Touch The Cadaver's Hands” (anatomy).

Mnemonic logic is a means for individual consciousness to a larger system. The mnemonic works as a part that is a conduit to a whole. Most commonly understood as a study aid, mnemonic logic here serves as a political conduit. Berlant twice in *Queen of America* refers to mnemonics as a logical form of political cognizance of individuals. In the first, she describes the connection between the "chain that links the fetus, the wounded, the dead, and the "childreN" as the true American "people"" and the "default consciousness of the nation with no imagination of agency" as a "zero-sum mnemonic" (50). The model of citizenship is, in other words, one that expects citizens to be (and to think of themselves) as passive, in need of care, and not capable of power or effecting politics. What, though, is a "zero-sum mnemnoic"? Berlant

describes it as a "modality of paramnsia, an incitement to forgetting that leaves simply the patriotic trace...that confirms that the nation exists and that we are in it" (50). If the mnemonic is a shorthand to remind of larger collection of items, the 'zero-sum mnemonics' would be a short hand that only reminds of itself. As Berlant puts it: the "subsitutiton for the fact (that the nation exists) for the thing (political agency)". A mnemonic logic of citizenship would use a reminder of the nation's existence to signal the realm of political agency.

Berlant's second example of mnemonic logic is that of the Pink Panther's "Bash Back" slogan and self-defense actions: " 'Bash Back' simply intends to mobilize the threat gay bashers use so effectively--strength note in numbers but in the presence of a few bodies who represent the potential for widespread violence--against the bashers themselves. In this way, the slogan turns the bodies of the Pink Panthers into a psychic counterthreat, expanding their protective shield beyond the confines of their physical "beat." Perhaps the most assertive "bashing" that the uniformed bodies of the Pink Panthers deliver is mnemonic. Their spectacular presence counters heterosexual culture's will not to recognize its own intense need to reign in a sexually pure environment" (156-7). The bodies of the Panthers are not metaphors or analogies for the threat of violence that is enacted on them, nor are they metaphors or analogies for the reverse threat (bashing the gay bashers). The uniformed bodies of the Pink Panthers are mnemonics: symbolic reminders for a larger threat. Like all mnemonics, the uniformed bodies are part of that threat but they are not identical to it (as "the "E" of "Every Good Boy Does Good" is both the name of the musical note and the first letter of the mnemonic word).

What, exactly, is the mnemonic connecting in *The Letters of Mina Harker*? are KK (who only goes by KK in this novel, to distinguish him only slightly from Kevin Killian, Dodie Bellamy's husband outside of the novel), Mina Harker, and Dodie Bellamy at risk of forgetting

their names? Perhaps—given the difficulty of knowing who "one" is at all. But more importantly, what this logic—call it acrostic or call it mnemonic—offers is a means for reaching out into the world to assemble the self by accretion. The letters of the initials constrain the choices, but unlike anagrams there is a much vaster world of mix and match. The letters in the name are no longer the sum-total of options for creating a word play of self-identification, now the whole realm of language is available. The mnemonic is not a way to remember one's own name, but to remember that one's name is in the field of language. The meaning of one's self is as wide as the field of alliterative nouns. Not an oceanic, unlimited self, but neither is it confined to the alphabetic rearrangements of a few letters. Freedom of choice within a constrained—but seemingly endless—field.

In the form of mnemonics written in the text, there is one more aspect to note: the form given is not (with one exception) simply a list of words that share initials. Instead, the mnemonic is presented with the phrase "I am x and you are y." Names and the words associated with them do not belong to the individual alone. The name is shared. One's name is own(ed) partially by oneself and partially by another: I am the Mouse, says Mina, and you are the Hole. Mina Harker finds her home in another. As much as we can put weight on the last line of a novel like this with its shifting significance and signifieds, its referents and collaged in phrases, we can lean on the conclusion put in KK's mouth: "he nibbles my ear, whispers, "This is what you always wanted, isn't it, a house that talks." This might be Hegel's words, and it might be the last words (save for "Love, Mina") in the novel. But it is also the promise of more words. This isn't exactly a comfort: proliferation of words is not an answer to the problem of a proliferation of words that cannot adequately create a sense of self and significance, that cannot take political action and cannot end AIDS. Words are, really, only words. KK's last words are a wish, not a solution.

What we have at the end of reading this book is the experience of searching for a home in words, never finding it but finding a series of ways to look for it.

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