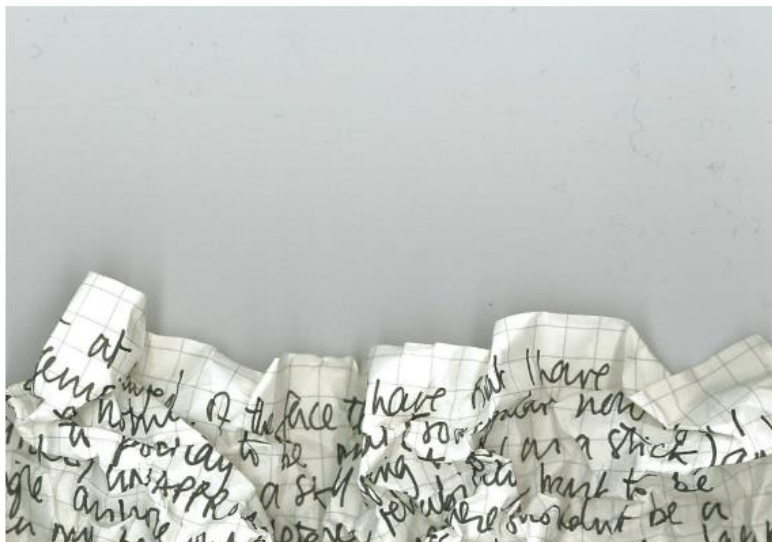




## ***Writing Back through Our Mothers: An Analysis of Rhetoric in Women's Literary Letters***

***Ellen Hart***



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Rhetoric in Women's Literary Letters***

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***For Alex, R.I.P***



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# ***Writing Back through Our Mothers: An Analysis of Rhetoric in Women's Literary Letters***

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## ***Introduction***

This essay provides an analysis of a written form that has been crucial to the construction of woman's literary voice. The epistle, by its very nature, is equipped to serve the woman in the negotiation and subversion of a patriarchal society of oppression; a letter is unequivocally owned by its writer; its content, subjective, intimate, and personal in voice, facilitates the expression of the self and its intentions. Organic in creation, a letter does not require its writer to have access to institutions of education, or social and political recognition, providing a literary outlet 'as homegrown as the feminist press and media are',<sup>1</sup> accessible to those with even the most minimal of intellectual and material resources. A letter has a recipient, a reader who is ascribed a listening role, allowing the voice of the writer to be heard and digested by, at minimum, another individual; this communicative aspect of the form exemplifies what Linda S. Kauffman has described as 'the performative [aspect] of rhetoric' which she in turn highlights as a key feature of the epistle in its role as a persuasive tool for those whose voices are systematically subordinated.<sup>2</sup> Olga Kenyon's assertion that 'a tradition of female letter-writing has existed for at least eight centuries'<sup>3</sup> attests to the enduring prominence of the woman writer in the epistolary form. I have identified a strong historical correlation between woman's employment of the letter and the subversion of gender imposed restrictions by Western patriarchal society, which I shall endeavour to illuminate briefly in this introduction in acknowledgement that there is not scope to provide a detailed historiography; for the following I am indebted to Kenyon's *800 Years*

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<sup>1</sup> Margaretta Jolly, *In Love and Struggle: Letters in Contemporary Feminism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Linda S. Kauffman, *Discourses of Desire: Gender Genre, and Epistolary Fictions* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1988), p. 25.

<sup>3</sup> Olga Kenyon, *800 Years of Women's Letters*, (Gloucestershire, UK: Sutton Publishing Limited, 1997), p. ix.



of *Women's Letter Writing*, which provides the first and only feminist-compatible, comprehensive historiography of women's letters.

The epistolary form as a pervasive mode of social correspondence and literary discussion amongst aristocratic women facilitated the eighteenth century's gradual, and socially selective, literary education of the gender;<sup>4</sup> those of the upper echelons considered well practised in the art of letter writing were first allowed, and then encouraged, by the patriarchy to produce literary works in letter form for publication. The Duchess of Newcastle, Margaret Cavendish, a foremother of the epistolary form, described herself as working 'under the Cover of Letters' to promote her views on contemporary society;<sup>5</sup> in a letter addressed 'To all Professors of Learning and Art' she proposes that education should not be restricted by gender but should be available to all those 'that have most Learning and Witt', highlighting the early instrumentality of the letter as a rhetorical device in challenging patriarchal society.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, Olga Kenyon remarks upon the perceived '[unobtrusiveness]' of the letter, stating that 'it posed no threat to the male-dominated literary establishment, which never counted it as 'real' writing.'<sup>7</sup> The establishment of the mid-eighteenth century Blue Stockings Society, an intellectual and literary club devised by middle-class women who endeavoured to further their literary education and practice, produced 'informed and well-argued letters which both influenced newly emerging fiction and were influenced by it',<sup>8</sup> highlighting the immediate success of women's letter writing in relation to literary society and the popular press. A growing public interest in, and appreciation of, the form allowed women

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. ix.

<sup>5</sup> Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, *Sociable Letters*, 1644, ed. by James Fitzmaurice (Taylor & Francis, 1997), p. 8.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>7</sup> Kenyon, *800 Years of Women's Letters*, p. xii.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., xv.

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to achieve financial independence and success through epistolary publication, strengthening authorial confidence and reader reception, and allowing women to more boldly tackle concerning social injustices through the letter form; the Contagious Diseases Act of the 19<sup>th</sup> century saw women writing letters of protest and campaign in attempt to emancipate the most heavily subordinated women in contemporary society from prejudice and destitution.<sup>9</sup> This notion of community and comradeship through correspondence extended into the twentieth century as women fought for suffrage, writing letters both to the press, in attempts to raise public awareness of their struggle, and to each other in support.<sup>10</sup> The notion of public consciousness-raising through the epistolary form remains a prominent feature of the woman's epistle in the twenty-first century; I have been fortunate to have access to the 2013-15 publications and archives of *The Letters Page*, a journal in literary correspondence, edited by Jon McGregor, which has allowed me to trace the tropes and traditions of women's literary letter writing to the present day. Such recent examples of women's correspondence provides this essay with evidence for the prevailing employment of the epistolary form in subversion of patriarchal oppression in our current society.

I theorize that there are a number of identifiably consistent rhetorical features of the women's literary letter, traceable through history to the most recent contemporary publications. In an analysis of what I have identified as three key thematic areas of literary epistolary discourse: love and relationships; identity and experience; and protest and progression, I will explicate these traces through an analytic comparison of prominent and pertinent historical epistles to those penned in our own century, working under Kauffman's assertion that 'the higher a genre develops and the more complex it

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., xvi.

<sup>10</sup> Carolyn P. Collette, 'Answering Point for Point', in *In the Thick of the Fight: The Writing of Emily Wilding Davison, Militant Suffragette*. (MI, USA: University of Michigan Press, 2013), p. 173.



becomes, the better it remembers its past.’;<sup>11</sup> Kauffman’s concept is of particular significance to the study of women’s culture, as one that has been instrumental in its own creative and reflective construction. In analysis of the genre of literary correspondence I operate under Patrick Garlinger’s assertion of ‘an equivalence between fictional and authentic writing’, in acknowledgement that ‘epistolary fiction develops in relation to the authentic correspondence’ of its own historical, social and political context.<sup>12</sup> This essay further operates under the acknowledgement of the patriarchal nature of Western society (and its consequent, historical and presently pervasive, systematic subordination of women) and thus comprises a feminist analysis of selected epistles. Throughout the analysis I draw on Helene Cixous’ seminal essay, ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’, which advocates a feminist interpretation of women’s writing in relation to the constant necessity for subversion of patriarchal suppression.<sup>13</sup> A final point of significance is that gender is a social construct; distinct from biological sex, emphasis on gender therefore negates the use of ‘female’ (which relates to the anatomical construction of the human body), in favour of the terms ‘woman’ and ‘women’ which refer to identified gender. This essay aims to avoid a reductive consideration of gender by operating under Leigh Gilmore’s assertion that ‘to agree with the notion that gender is culturally constructed...in no way minimises the effects of gender oppression on all women’;<sup>14</sup> thus the singular form, ‘woman’, is applied in abstract when ‘speaking of woman in her inevitable struggle against conventional man’.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Kauffmann, *Discourses of Desire*, p. 23.

<sup>12</sup> Patrick Paul Garlinger, *Confessions of the Letter Closet: Epistolary Fiction and Queer Desire in Modern Spain*, (MN, USA: UMP, 2005), pp. 18-19.

<sup>13</sup> Helene Cixous, trans. By Keith Cohen & Paula Cohen, ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’, *Signs* 1:4 (1976), p. 875.

<sup>14</sup> Leigh Gilmore, *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women’s Self-Representation* (Ithaca: CUP, 1995), p. 10.

<sup>15</sup> Cixous, ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’, p. 875.

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## ***Chapter One – Love and Relationships***

The themes of love and relationships pervade the tradition of women's epistolary discourse as rhetoric. The heterosexual relationship has historically prevailed as a problematic substratum of assumed male dominance, both facilitating and restricting the sexuality of the woman. In *Sexual Politics*, Kate Millett elucidates this notion:

the situation between the sexes now, and throughout history, is a case of that phenomenon Max Weber defined as *herrschaft*, a relationship of dominance and subordination...The concept of romantic love affords a means of emotional manipulation which the male is free to exploit, since love is the only circumstance in which the female is (ideologically) pardoned for sexual activity.<sup>16</sup>

The letters of Mary Wollstonecraft, author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*<sup>17</sup>, to her lover Gilbert Imlay, during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, document an extensive development of amorous correspondence, with the former's letters providing insight into the intimate life of one of feminism's earliest fore-mothers. Wollstonecraft's seemingly infallible devotion to Imlay in the face of long-term separations, infidelity, and physical and emotional neglect, resulted in months of amorous letters professing adoration, frustration, and despair; the most poignant of the correspondence dates from 1793-5 while Wollstonecraft, residing in Paris, waited for Imlay's spontaneous visits, during one of which she became pregnant.<sup>18</sup> In negotiation of the social and economic oppression engendered by her relationship with Imlay, the

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<sup>16</sup> Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1970), pp. 25, 37.

<sup>17</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), ed. by Miriam Brody Kramnick (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1975).

<sup>18</sup> Roger Ingpen, 'Preface', *The Love Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft to Gilbert Imlay*, (London: Hutchinson & Co, 1908) Ebook Online, Project Gutenberg, < <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/34413/34413-h/34413-h.htm>>, Date Accessed: 15/05/15, n.p.





writer's correspondence employs a number of feminist rhetorical techniques of subversion that, given her historical position, exemplifies her enduring status as 'the aesthetic foremother of feminist expository prose.'<sup>19</sup> In exposition, Wollstonecraft illuminates the physical state of her body in pregnancy:

Ever since you last saw me inclined to faint, I have felt some gentle twitches, which make me begin to think, that I am nourishing a creature who will soon be sensible of my care...Yesterday—do not smile!—finding that I had hurt myself by lifting precipitately a large log of wood, I sat down in an agony, till I felt those said twitches again.<sup>20</sup>

The maternal reality of the woman's body is here written into physicality, both in her topical engagement with the reactive sensations of childbearing and in the materiality of the letter form, allowing the woman to transport and convey the reality of the female body across imposed physical distance. By liberating her body from the stifling oppression that Imlay's distance and disengagement creates, Wollstonecraft rhetorically emulates Cixous' assertion that 'By writing herself, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her...Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time. Write your self. Your body must be heard.'<sup>21</sup> In writing 'her self', Wollstonecraft employs the first-person personal pronoun, a technique that Lynn Pearce asserts was adopted as a key rhetorical device in the published texts of the Women's Liberation Movement in the 1970s, and '[encouraged] women to speak the "I"

<sup>19</sup> Susan Gubar, 'Feminist Misogyny: Mary Wollstonecraft and the Paradox of "It Takes One to Know One,"' *Feminist Studies* 20 (1994), p.454

<sup>20</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft, 'Letter V', *The Love Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft to Gilbert Imlay*, Ebook Online, Project Gutenberg, < <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/34413/34413-h/34413-h.htm>>, Date Accessed: 15/05/15, n.p.

<sup>21</sup> Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', 880

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and to become the validating narrators of their own lives.<sup>22</sup> Wollstonecraft's use of the self-referent in the following excerpt conveys a moment of confession that simultaneously voices and validates her feelings of continued affection and monogamous interest:

I have found out that I have more mind than you, in one respect; because I can, without any violent effort of reason, find food for love in the same object, much longer than you can...The way to my senses is through my heart; but, forgive me! I think there is sometimes a shorter cut to yours<sup>23</sup>

The writer's use of the second-person personal pronoun 'you' draws the intended reader of her correspondence into the discourse, compelling engagement through a variation on the oral discourse structure of speaker and addressee; the excerpt is written in the present tense, while the second-person personal pronoun 'you' in reference to Imlay implies the spatial and temporal proximity of face-to-face interaction. Janet Altman notes the epistolary technique of 'alterations in minimal and maximal uses of the 'you' to rhetoric effect'<sup>24</sup>. Wollstonecraft's simulation of the spatial and temporal closeness of oral discourse rejects Imlay's imposed separation; she is thus able to subvert the patriarchal dominance of physical and emotional distancing by establishing her own spatial parameters for interaction within the letter. Altman further asserts that 'the *you* of any *I-you* statement can, and is expected to, become the new *I* of a text'<sup>25</sup>. Addressing Imlay in the second-person personal form and employing a personal pronoun dichotomy, Wollstonecraft elicits a response from her lover, a contribution to a dialogue into which he has already been initiated. In liberating herself, through letter writing, from the

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<sup>22</sup> Lynn Pearce *The Rhetorics of Feminism: Readings in contemporary culture theory and the popular press* (London: Routledge, 2004), p.47.

<sup>23</sup> Wollstonecraft, 'Letter V', n.p.

<sup>24</sup> Janet Gurkin Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* (Columbus: OSUP, 1982), p.118.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p.118.



emotional and physical invisibility and silence imposed by separation, the woman writer is able to further subvert the patriarchal dominance of distance by facilitating and necessitating engagement through the forms and features of the epistle.

Selma Dabbagh's letter, published in 2014 in Issue Three of *The Letters Page*, 'Travelling Light' (see Appendix A for this and further references), develops Wollstonecraft's employment of the personal pronoun dichotomy in the subversion of male dominance and oppression to express the emotional dissonance between the narrator and her lover, in a relationship that also operates within the parameters of brief encounters. The letter traces the subject's evaluation of the relationship, culminating in a realisation that the reality of the addressee does not pertain to the ideal relationship partner she envisaged in dreaming 'of kisses and fairy tale princes.' Her emotional dissatisfaction is illuminated in the final line: 'I feel sometimes that it was easier when you existed in my life before I knew you', where the dichotomous pattern of personal pronouns emphasises the dissonance between the separate entities. Dabbagh develops Altman's acknowledgement that the epistolary second-person pronominal provides a 'reference point' from which the letter writer navigates the discourse in constant relation and return;<sup>26</sup> in her letter the second-person 'you' becomes a rhetorical device; a point of dissociation and departure for the woman subject from the oppressive structures of the relationship. Dabbagh establishes this departure through the dichotomous inversion of repeated verb phrases; 'you knew', 'you know' is countered by 'I knew', 'I know', and 'I feel', foregrounding the subject's maintenance of mental and emotional autonomy.

Both the evocation of man's dominance and the rhetoric of woman's subversion appear as subtle rhetorical constructs in Dabbagh's epistolary narrative, which facilitates

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p.119.

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its potential for (mis)reading as amorous longing rather than a preliminary realisation of oppression. Diffuse implications of the addressee's violent domination are connoted in the images of 'heavy bottomed bottles', 'a knuckled hand on my hip bone – a grasp of desire', and in the references, introduced by the second-person personal pronoun 'you', to his pervasive dominative influence; the narrator describes her lover's 'anxious' and 'intent' desire to 'know every part' of her life and her constant awareness of his presence: 'even then you know I felt you were there'. The woman's account of the couple's sexual relationship assigns agency to the man and renders the woman a passive, changeable body; the narrator describes 'a filling of me...which is so complete that sometimes I feel like a puppet who has become frazzled in my strings and you made them lace, or silk, and then I am still in my lace and silk and messy with you', further asserting 'you can turn me into lace-stringed limp loveliness and transform me'. Dabbagh represents what Cixous notes as the patriarchal rendering of the 'activity/passivity' opposition between man and woman; the 'power relation between a fantasized obligatory virility meant to invade, to colonise, and the consequential phantasm of woman as a 'dark continent' to penetrate and 'pacify'.<sup>27</sup> In contrast to Wollstonecraft's rhetorical employment of her materiality in subversion, the woman's physical body in Dabbagh's epistle is appropriated to facilitate the man's dominative invasion and transformation, engaging with the established patriarchal view of the female body as 'a site of social control'.<sup>28</sup> At the textual level, the subject appears to assume the form of the 'docile body' in passivity;<sup>29</sup> however, it is in consideration of the non-lexical features pertaining to the epistolary form that Dabbagh's woman employs her subversion. Just as Virginia Woolf's Mary Carmichael had to dismantle man's

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<sup>27</sup> Cixous, 'Laugh of the Medusa', p. 877n.1

<sup>28</sup> Katie Conboy, Nadia Medina and Sarah Stanbury (eds.), 'Introduction' *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), p.8.

<sup>29</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Penguin, 1979), pp.135-69.



sentence in order to inscribe woman<sup>30</sup>, Dabbagh provides space for her own subject's subversion outside the textual parameters of her epistle (I employ the term 'textual' here in reference to the lexico-semantics of the letter's content). The close assimilation of the letter form to conversational discourse, as explicated by Altman<sup>31</sup>, is exaggerated in Dabbagh's syntactic constructions which, comprising elongated, paratactic sentences, bear the resemblance of speech, allowing the subject to 'inscribe the breath' of the woman's body into the pace of the discourse. In support of Woolf, Cixous' assertion that a woman writing must 'invent for herself a language to get inside of' can be observed in Dabbagh's epistle at a micro-structural level, in which the subject dismantles the morphological structure of the soldier's 'biceps' in defiance of his misogyny.<sup>32</sup> A consideration of the extra-textual value of the letter's physical form displays a further subversion of the man's dominance as prevalent in the text; Dabbagh submitted her letter to *The Letters Page* as a scrunched up ball (See Appendix A for photographs). Kauffman notes the employment of the extra-textual materiality of the letter in conveying the writer's emotional intentions, acknowledging that, in Ovid's *Heroides*, 'Signs of physical pain (usually tears, sometimes blood) deface the pages' as the woman writer 'transmits a part of herself, the corporeal to the textual, implying that the body's message is truer than speech.'<sup>33</sup> Dabbagh's defacement of an epistle which harbours the textual denotation of man's dominative oppression provides a physical, embodied manifestation of the woman's rebellion. Cixous writes:

If woman has always functioned "within" the discourse of man, a signifier that has always referred back to the opposite signifier which annihilates its specific

<sup>30</sup> Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 1929, (London: Penguin Group, 1945), p.81.

<sup>31</sup> Altman, *Epistolarity*, p.139.

<sup>32</sup> Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', p.887.

<sup>33</sup> Kauffman, 'Ovid's *Heroides*', p.36.

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energy and diminishes or stifles its very different sounds, it is time for her to dislocate this "within," to explode it, turn it around, and seize it;<sup>34</sup>

Whilst, in the letter's content, the subject's body is 'more than confiscated...turned into the uncanny stranger on display'<sup>35</sup> in 'lace & silk' by her male addressee, the physicality of the letter form in Dabbagh's epistle, both micro- and macro-, facilitates her woman subject's subversion of sexual and emotional oppression.

## **Chapter Two – Identity and Experience**

In a society predicated on the culture, ideologies and attitudes of man, the woman as autonomous subject has been inherently subordinated; by extension, her thoughts, feelings and experiences become secondarily significant to that of the societal dominant. The academic and economic oppression of woman has provided the necessary conditions for the maintenance of such a subordination; in withholding the essential tools for societal advancement and influence – education; employment; the vote – woman as historical subject has been systematically denied a voice. From the perspective of literature and the literary arts, the patriarchal domination of the press and opportunities for publication prevented the public engagement with women's literature until the mid-seventeenth century, when a societal acknowledgement of middle-class women's literary prowess in the epistolary form began to generate interest in readership, resulting in the demand for published collections of women's correspondence.<sup>36</sup> The woman was thus permitted to begin to circulate and benefit economically from her own work, through a medium that can be described as extra-academic. The exclusion of women from the

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<sup>34</sup> Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', 887.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p.880.

<sup>36</sup> Olga Kenyon, *800 Years of Women's Letters*, x., xiii.



literary institution meant that such publications were only successful under a male pseudonym, or a false pretence; Kenyon describes the necessary negation of woman as author in early eighteenth century epistolary literature, acknowledging that 'the preface usually claimed that the letters had never been intended for publication, had been stolen or lost and only printed at a great risk to the [male] bookseller.'<sup>37</sup> This public interest in gaining a sense of the private life of the woman, and the suitability of the letter form in emanating a sense of private reality, highlights the historical relationship between woman's subjective expression through writing, and the epistle form, in providing a medium for inscribing the identity and experience of the long unconsidered subject. The significance of personal identity and experience value in women's political rhetoric bears its own historical importance; the Women's Liberation Movement of the late 60s and 70s specified the value of personal experiences of patriarchal oppression in raising identification and awareness of its prevalence in society. With a focus on connecting individual with mass oppression and drawing on Hanisch's assertion that 'the personal is political', the Movement organised group discussions for women to share their personal experiences of oppression with the intention that individuals would understand these to be part of the wider, political effects of patriarchal subordination.<sup>38</sup> The effects of this practice are acknowledged by a black feminist group, the Combahee River Collective who, in 1977, published this statement:

Black feminists often talk about their feelings of craziness before becoming conscious of the concepts of sexual politics, patriarchal rule and, most importantly, feminism...In the process of consciousness raising, actually life-

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., xv.

<sup>38</sup> Carol Hanisch, 'The Personal is Political', 1969 *Carol Hanisch 2006*, (Roehampton, 2006), [http://www.roehampton.ac.uk/uploadedFiles/Pages\\_Assets/PDFs\\_and\\_Word\\_Docs/Courses/Drama\\_Theatre\\_and\\_Performance/PersonalisPol\[1\].pdf](http://www.roehampton.ac.uk/uploadedFiles/Pages_Assets/PDFs_and_Word_Docs/Courses/Drama_Theatre_and_Performance/PersonalisPol[1].pdf), [Date Accessed: 21/05/15], p.1.

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sharing, we began to recognize the commonality of our experiences and, from that sharing and growing consciousness, to build a politics that will change our lives and inevitably end our oppression.<sup>39</sup>

We might conceive women's self-representation in the letter form (and, indeed, women's letter writing in general) as a form of what Jeremy Varon terms 'exaggerated pessimism', whereby the continued engagement with patriarchal subversion through self-representational practice maintains a 'moral imperative of resistance and solidarity'.<sup>40</sup> Letters on the subjects of identity and experience can hence be seen as acts of subversion and rebellion. Cixous notes that, in writing the self, woman is able to "'realize" the decensored relation...to her sexuality, to her womanly being' and 'tear her away' from patriarchal-imposed silence and subordination 'by means of this research, this job of [self] analysis and illumination, this emancipation of the marvellous text of herself'.<sup>41</sup>

In a patriarchal society, women become enigmas open to interpretation, 'objects of exchange...for the purposes of cultural critique'.<sup>42</sup> The history of reading women in literature 'as a secret to penetrate',<sup>43</sup> is borne out of this societal figuring. In the letters considered in this chapter, Sylvia Plath, and Lucy Durneen deny the possibility of interpretation as objects by becoming their own researchers and representatives; in Gilmore's terms, '[exchanging] the position of object for the subjectivity of self-

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<sup>39</sup> The Combahee Collective, 'The Combahee River Collective Statement', quoted in Peter M. Nardi and Beth E. Schneider (eds.) *Social Perspectives in Lesbian and Gay Studies: A Reader* (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 522.

<sup>40</sup> Jeremy Varon, *Bringing the War Home: The Weather Underground, the Red Army Faction, and Revolutionary Violence in the Sixties and Seventies* (California: UCP, 2004), p.10.

<sup>41</sup> Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', 880.

<sup>42</sup> Leigh Gilmore, *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women's Self-Representation* (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 1995), pp. 12-13

<sup>43</sup> Amanda Gilroy and W.M. Verhoeven, *Epistolary Histories: letters, fiction, culture* (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 2000), p.5.





representation agency.<sup>44</sup> One way in which this refiguring is made possible is through the temporal and spatial possibilities of the letter form. In 1949, Sylvia Plath contemplates the perfection of her age at the time of writing, and laments the prospect of growing older: 'Somehow I have to keep and hold the rapture of being seventeen. Every day is so precious I feel infinitely sad at the thought of all this time melting farther and farther away from me as I grow older. *Now, now* is the perfect time of my life.'<sup>45</sup> Plath's engagement with the temporal instance of writing highlights a genre-specific feature of the epistle, described by Altman as 'the pivotal tense' of the writing instance, 'from which all else radiates'.<sup>46</sup> By situating her thoughts and feelings in relation to the specific temporal location of inscription, and stressing its relevance ('*Now, now*'), she actively draws the addressee's attention to her perfect moment, supporting the content and rhetoric of her writing through an agentive construction of the instance of importance; the addressee becomes aligned with Plath in her moment of inscription. Altman notes that the writer's textual engagement with the epistle's pivotal tense 'plunges the reader in medias res, so that he feels tuned in to the hotline of events narrated as they occur by the person experiencing them.'<sup>47</sup> Plath's present tense narrative preoccupation, combined with the subjunctive mood of '[feeling] infinitely sad at the thought' of the moments passing, and the emotive tone of the moment's description as a 'rapture', positions the addressee with the writer both temporally and emotionally in her experience of perfection. She continues to describe her present emotional satisfaction relative to her spatial location, stating:

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 12

<sup>45</sup> Sylvia Plath, *Correspondence 1950-1963*, ed. by Aurelia Schober Plath (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1999), p.39.

<sup>46</sup> Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form*, p.122

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p.124

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It is a room suited to me – tailored, uncluttered and peaceful.... I love the quiet lines of the furniture, the two bookcases filled with poetry books and fairytales...At the present moment I am very happy, sitting at my desk, looking out at the bare trees around the house across the street.... Always I want to be an observer.<sup>48</sup>

Plath's initial description of her room provides a spatial guide for the reader to conceptualise the writer's surroundings that relate to her emotional satisfaction. She then, in describing the view from her window constructs herself as the deictic centre of vision, aligning the reader with this locus of perception. The rhetoric effect of spatial locative description in relation to self-representation is described by Frederic Jameson, who acknowledges the strategic use of 'cognitive mapping' by individuals who are systematically negated from 'multinational power relations'.<sup>49</sup> In asserting a spatial location, and aligning the addressee with her deictic centre through the narration of perception, Plath as agent is able not only to provide a cognitive map of her existence, but also to self-represent the experience of such an existence, in a world in which both are, historically, unconsidered. The rhetorical significance of temporal and spatial mapping in women's self-representational texts is further acknowledged by Adrienne Rich, who describes a 'politics of location' in women's writing and asserts 'I need to understand how a place on the map is also a place in history within which as a woman...I am created and trying to create.'<sup>50</sup> The necessity of agentive inscription of identity and experience is explored in Lucy Durneen's letter to 'L--', published in Issue Four of The Letters Page in 2014 (see Appendix B for all further references). Like Plath, Durneen's is

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<sup>48</sup> Plath, *Correspondence 1950-1963*, p. 40.

<sup>49</sup> Frederic Jameson, *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Carey Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: UIP, 1988), quoted in Leigh Gilmore, *Autobiographics*, p.3n.1.

<sup>50</sup> Adrienne Rich, 'Notes toward a Politics of Location', *Blood, Bread, and Poetry* (New York: Norton, 1986), p.212.



also preoccupied with temporal and spatial inscription. She describes writing 'from a Salon de Thé on the rue de Rivoli', acknowledging 'I was 19 when I came here last, when I last wrote letters.' The epistle is concerned with connecting the present moment to both poignant memories of past experiences – 'I have a passport now...never destroy your marriage certificate, no matter how much you hate the bastard' – and to a notion of future self – 'It seems an impossibility, that I was ever that age. And then there will be the time when I will think it an impossibility that I was ever 37.' Using the present tense as a pivotal point to access the relative past and to speculate on the future, Durneen employs the cognitive mapping process to relay her individual history to her addressee, who is figured in the letter as listener, and is directly addressed as such: 'I am trying to tell you --. I am writing everything down as if I will forget it.' By actively mapping her history of identity and experience, through the engagement with past, present, and future made possible by the letter form, the writer is able, in Cixous' terms of double-entendre '[draw] her story into history',<sup>51</sup> acting as the agent of her own autobiographic self-representation in a world predicated on the narrative of the patriarchy. The agentive process of identity inscription, of 'writing everything down' regarding the self, proves an invaluable activity in the subversion of the patriarchal conceptualisation of woman as subject. Gilmore's acknowledgement that 'It is in this act of interpretation, of consciousness, that we can say a woman may exceed representation within dominant ideology' is developed by current research in feminist psychology;<sup>52</sup> the process of women's engagement with their own histories and memories of the past self provides not only an increased awareness of systematic oppression but also, according to Susannah Radstone, 'a method that will enable individual women who have been drawn

<sup>51</sup> Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', p.881.

<sup>52</sup> Gilmore, *Autobiographics*, p.12.

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into the research process to live in a more conscious manner' in the future.<sup>53</sup> The use of the epistolary form as a medium for self-research, self-representation, and self-rumination thus provides not only a method for woman's subversion of objectification in the patriarchal system, but also a means of self-liberation from that system.

## ***Chapter Three – Protest and Progression***

The epistle is a key rhetorical tool for a direct engagement with issues of widespread social and political injustice, largely due to the particularities of its form; the inscription of an individual's voice, as discussed in Chapter Two, provides a platform for personal conveyance of social and political experience, while the prerequisite of an addressee initiates and promotes dialogue between sender and recipient. The formal suitability of the letter to the rhetoric of protest and progression is exemplified in women's historical use of the form in social and political contention. In the eighteenth century, the woman's employment of the epistle to engage with an academic world from which she had previously been systematically excluded provides one such example of the historical significance of letters and letter writing in social critique and transformation. From this initial emancipation from social silence, women continued to employ the epistolary form in critique of contemporary issues of political discrimination. The Victorian period exemplifies many notable women epistolary campaigners; Caroline Norton engaged in correspondence with members of parliament in attempt to raise awareness of domestic abuse; Josephine Butler embarked on a decade-long epistolary campaign against the Contagious Diseases Act, while Florence Nightingale's letters transformed health-care at both national and international level.<sup>54</sup> Cixous attributes the

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<sup>53</sup> Susannah Radstone (ed.) *Memory and Methodology* (Oxford and New York: CUP, 2000a). p.157.

<sup>54</sup> Kenyon, p.xvi.



historical relationship between woman and political and social protest to her systematic subordination in Western society, asserting that, in '[returning] from afar, from always: from "without", from the heath where witches are kept alive; from below, from beyond "culture"...woman un-thinks the unifying, regulating history' of systemic repression.<sup>55</sup> As the oppressed gender, and with experience in social subversion, woman is able to effectively conceptualise issues of injustice and strategize their contention. The letter, as a historically successful tool in woman's negotiation of individually repressive constraints, becomes a key rhetorical device in her public protest of collective issues; both those directly linked to her cause of patriarchal subversion and to others with which she empathises. Through a strategic employment of the forms and features of the epistle, the women in this chapter transform the archetypally private discourse medium of the letter to engage in public discourses of protest and social and political progression.

In navigating intimate relationships and the inscription of identity through epistolary discourse, the women featured in this essay so far have employed the letter's rhetorical privilege of the first-person pronoun 'I' as a self-referential tool of authentic personal expression. The rhetoric of women's letters of protest exhibits this consistent use of self-reference, but to an altered effect. In self-reference within protest discourse, the use of the first-person provides a foundation of experience on which the writer's polemic is constructed. Elspeth Probyn in *Sexing the Self* describes this rhetorical re-figuring of the 'I' as an 'enunciative [strategy]', further remarking:

Theorized within a theory of articulation, the experiential may be pried from its commonsensical location in 'belongingness'. It then becomes possible to distance the autobiographical from a representational logic. Instead of representing a

<sup>55</sup> Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', p.877, 882.

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'truth', a 'unity' or a 'belongingness', a critical use of the self may come to emphasize the 'historic conditions' involved in its *speaking*.<sup>56</sup>

The effect of this strategic use of the first-person pronoun in protest texts is one of historical and contextual alignment and privilege, whereby the writer situate herself as experiencer of the issue at hand, subordinating her subjective opinion *a priori* in favour of prioritising the event or contextual conditions of the protest. The use of 'first person strategic' is observable in 20<sup>th</sup> century suffragist epistles; on 26<sup>th</sup> March, 1911, militant suffragette Emily Wilding Davison of The Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) wrote to the Editor of The Sunday Times, as part of a three year-long correspondence campaign to the popular press, in protest of the exclusion of women from the British democratic system; her letters, now kept in the Women's Library Davison Archive, are published in Carolyn Collette's *In The Thick of the Fight*.<sup>57</sup> Collette describes Davison's letters as a 'testament to the motivation of militant suffragists, and a guide to all the major themes and figures of the tumultuous years between 1909 and 1913', highlighting the writer's concern with conveying the historical moment of protest.<sup>58</sup> In the opening lines, Davison asserts the objective of the WSPU protest, writing 'My hint that evolution might have to be hastened by revolution has aroused a storm of hysterical protest from several opponents.'<sup>59</sup> This sentence, in which the possessive form of the first-person is situated in an essential relative clause to the independent, is constructed to provide a subjective ground for privileging the ethos of the movement; Davison's strategic employment of self-reference allows the 'utterance' of protest to 'be served, rather than dominated, by the rhetorical power of first-person articulation.'<sup>60</sup> The revolutionary

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<sup>56</sup> Elspeth Probyn, *Sexing the Self: Gendered Positions in Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 1993).

<sup>57</sup> Collette, *In the Thick of the Fight: The Writing of Emily Wilding Davison, Militant Suffragette*, p.173.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. x.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 174.

<sup>60</sup> Pearce, *The Rhetorics of Feminism*, p.86



attitude of the WSPU is thus simultaneously authenticated by and emphasised over Davison's personal experience. The use of the first-person pronoun as an enunciative strategy is further observable in Angela Finn's submission to Issue Five of *The Letters Page*, 'Protest', in which she describes her participation in the marches of 2012 and 2014 in protest of the Eighth Amendment, which denies Irish women the right to abortion.<sup>61</sup> Finn writes:

In November 2012, I joined a large crowd at the Spire in O'Connell Street. It was raining...People held placards saying – NEVER AGAIN – SHAME ON US – ABORTION RIGHTS NOW...Savita Halappanavar, an Indian woman in the early stages of pregnancy had requested a termination when told that her foetus was not viable. She was refused...She died on October 28<sup>th</sup> of septicaemia.<sup>62</sup>

The writer aligns her experience of the protest with that of the large crowd, privileging the group over her self-representation in the description of joining them. Through the extra-textual possibilities of the handwritten epistolary form, she provides an embodiment of the protest placards in graphology, enunciating the visual experience of the event. Her following description of the historical event that led to the protest, the death of Savita Halappanavar, explicitly connects Finn's experience with the historical motive for protest. Probyn asserts that, in the strategic employment of first-person personal pronouns, 'the self can be used to produce a radical rearticulation of the relationship of critic, experience, text, and the conjectural moments that we construct as we speak of that in which we live.'<sup>63</sup> Finn's use of self-reference in her letter reconstructs the moment of protest through the combination of the experiencing self and an

<sup>61</sup> Angela Finn, 'For the world's more full of weeping than you can understand', Nottingham, *The Letters Page Archives*, Issue 5: Protest, 44.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, n.p.

<sup>63</sup> Probyn, *Sexing the Self*, p.31.

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emphasis on the embodiment of the event. The employment of the epistolary first-person personal pronoun thus not only authenticates motives for and moments of protest but, through its relation to the experiencing individual grounded in a historical moment, can facilitate the moment's reconstruction.

The use of the present tense as pivot in epistolary writing provides a further key rhetorical device in women's letters of protest and progression.<sup>64</sup> In Chapter Two, Plath and Durneen considered personal memories in active portrayal of their own identities and experiences, engaging with notions of individual consciousness-raising in relation to the oppression of the self by the patriarchy. In the letters that follow, Phyllis Chesler and Huang Haisu consider their past experiences in order to draw attention to the historical prevalence of the social and political injustices they are protesting, and provide a form of public consciousness raising. In 1996, Chesler published twenty-two *Letters to a Young Feminist*, the first of which begins 'Here I sit, head bent, writing you an intimate letter...You are my heir. This letter is your legacy.'<sup>65</sup> In endeavouring to raise the consciousness of young readers to the social injustice of sexism, the writer invokes her own memories of gender discrimination:

In my time, older women told younger women very little about what it takes for a woman to become whole, stay whole, and survive... In my time, catcalls, smacking noises, and offers of money were what constituted "the outside world" for most unaccompanied young women... *Yes, the world is different now than it was when I was your age... But the truth is, women are still far from free. We're not even within striking range.*<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form*, p.112.

<sup>65</sup> Phyllis Chesler, 'Letter One', *Letters to a Young Feminist* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1997), <<http://www.phyllis-chesler.com/120/letters-to-a-young-feminist>> [Date accessed: 21/05/2015], n.p.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., n.p.





This act of past remembrance in relation to the pivotal moment of the writing present enables Chesler to compare 'focalized' historical experiences of sexism with her newly raised consciousness as an adult, a technique that Pearce acknowledges allows women writers of social and political critique to 'confer additional authority' on the subjects of their polemics.<sup>67</sup> Chesler endeavours to progress knowledge of sexism and patriarchal oppression through a public conveyance of personal memory. This rhetorical technique of consciousness raising through consideration of the past is of paramount importance to Professor Huang Haisu's epistolary submission to Issue 5 of *The Letters Page* (see Appendix C for further references), written to urge participants in the September 2014 pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong to send her students their personal accounts of their struggle. In remembering the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989, and equating the plight of protestors to those in Hong Kong, Haisu writes:

The last time I saw anything like this was twenty-five years ago, long before most of you were born. I was 'too young, too naïve' to recall much, but I do remember youthful faces like yours with optimistic hopes and firm wills. *Who could possibly forget the selflessness of fearless souls in the square! But you see, one can only remember if he ever knows.* [italics mine]

In her letter of urgent application to the student protestors of Hong Kong to provide consciousness raising for her own students in China, Haisu employs a rhetorical engagement with personal memory in a direct critique of the censorship of the protest's violence on the Chinese mainland, comparing her own memories of political injustice to the possibility of social and political unconsciousness of mainland Chinese youth.<sup>68</sup>

<sup>67</sup> Pearce, *The Rhetorics of Feminism*, p. 175

<sup>68</sup> Jonathan Kaiman, 'China censors images of Hong Kong protests in TV broadcasts to mainland', *The Guardian*, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/29/china-censors-images-hong-kong-protests>, [Date accessed: 21/05/15]

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Pearce notes that the use of 'personal memory as a springboard into cultural history is more than a rhetorical strategy; it is...a mode of criticism that registers its political commitment through a degree of personal accountability.'<sup>69</sup> In inscribing her own memories of the democracy protests in 1989, Haisu not only protests against the Chinese censorship of the Hong Kong protests, but endeavours to raise awareness of, and provide memories for, the contemporary Chinese public, through a process of progressive reciprocal rhetoric. In *Epistolary Histories*, Gilroy and Verhoeven note the potential for epistolary writers to 'deessentialize the "personal" nature of the letter and show its disruptive potential'.<sup>70</sup> In Haisu's, and the preceding letters of this chapter, the personal aspects of the epistolary form have been re-incentivised and re-inscribed by women of protest and progression in order to publicly challenge issues of social and political injustice through the widely accessible, dialogue-encouraging form of correspondence.

## ***Conclusion***

This essay has provided an analysis of women's rhetorical employment of the letter in the subversion of patriarchal limitation and oppression. Throughout, I have identified key features of the epistle used in women's rhetoric and explicated their historical prevalence, in acknowledgement that 'the higher a genre develops and the more complex it becomes, the better it remembers its past.'<sup>71</sup> I determined three key thematic areas: love and relationships, identity and experience, and protest and progression. In 'Chapter One', Mary Wollstonecraft and Selma Dabbagh employed the

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<sup>69</sup> Pearce, *The Rhetorics of Feminism*, pp.90-1

<sup>70</sup> Amanda Gilroy, and W.M. Verhoeven (eds.) *Epistolary Histories: letters, fiction, culture* (Charlottesville, VA: UPV, 2000), pp.10-11.

<sup>71</sup> Kauffman, *Discourses of Desire*, p. 25.



first-person personal pronoun dichotomy in amorous epistolary discourse in order to facilitate and necessitate an engagement with their addressees that liberated both writers from the physical and emotional distance imposed upon them. By writing the 'I', and simultaneously engaging with textual and extra-textual structures of the letter form, both writers performed the rhetoric of patriarchal subversion through the inscription of their physicality, engaging with Cixous' notion that 'Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement.'<sup>72</sup> In 'Chapter Two', I explicated the use of temporal and spatial reference and the pivotal present tense of the letter in relation to Sylvia Plath and Lucy Durneen's active engagement with identity and experience. Comparing these epistolary features with contemporary research in feminist psychology, I analysed the writers' employment of cognitive mapping processes used to subvert systematic objectification through self-representation. In 'Chapter Three' I highlighted the epistle's historic suitability to women's direct contention of social and political injustice, elucidating Elizabeth Henderson Cook's acknowledgement that 'the letter was always already political, and crucially transnational.'<sup>73</sup> I elucidated the women writers' re-incentivising of personal epistolary features to create a strategic re-figuring of the self in relation to the issues of protest and progression; Emily Wilding Davison and Angela Finn employed the first-person personal pronoun as an enunciative strategy to emphasise the experience of protest, while Phyllis Chesler and Huang Haisu utilised the epistolary possibilities for memory engagement to raise public consciousness, assuming a 'personal accountability' as part of their 'political commitment'.<sup>74</sup> In asserting the prevalence of a patriarchal political and academic society that systematically oppresses the voice of woman, Cixous notes that 'writing is precisely *the very possibility of change*,

<sup>72</sup> Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', p. 875.

<sup>73</sup> Elizabeth Henderson Cook, *Epistolary Bodies* (Stanford: SUP, 1996), pp. 45-6.

<sup>74</sup> Pearce, *The Rhetorics of Feminism*, pp. 90-1.

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*the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought'*, further asserting that a realisation of this subversion 'will take place in areas other than those subordinated to philosophico-theoretical domination'.<sup>75</sup> This essay's analysis of the rhetorics of women's literary letter writing illustrates an example of one such area, historically dominated by woman, manipulated by woman, which provides the inscriptive space for challenging the patriarchy in writing.

Word Count: 7,421

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<sup>75</sup> Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', pp. 886, 883.



Appendix A – Selma Dabbagh, 'Dear You', *The Letters* Page 3 Nottingham: University of Nottingham, (2014). p.15.

Dear You,<sup>12</sup>

It seems the pattern is that you arrive with heavy bottomed bottles and leave me with the corners of the oily foil of condom packets sprinkled around my room. You take the bottle (now empty) and the other stuff that could be connected to your visit and this is kind I guess although I know it is because it is also evidence of what happened, which is a filling of me and a stillness in me which is so complete that sometimes I feel I was a wired puppet who had become frazzled in my strings and you made them lace, or silk, as then I am still in my lace & silk & messy with you. And you and I we get to the point where you ask me to tell you of all the times when I felt you before you were there and there were many times when I wished for you and you weren't. Like the time today earlier when I was held for hours trying to get out of the airport I had you calming me and they were going through my equipment + I thought it's ok because I was on my way to you. And then the silly stuff you are so anxious to ask about like when I was 24 and in a room in Alexandria + there was the sea + I was studying lying on a bed (why did you ask about the bedcover?) + the window was open a bit + I lay there with dreams of a knuckled hand on my hip bone – a grasp of desire – which I can only describe as being you and all the decisions and choices I have taken to lead me to where I am that I can only say were because I one day wanted to explain them to you. You were there when I dreamed of kisses and fairy tale princes. You were there in the US Army bar in Baghdad when the man, the soldier with the biceps (I can't spell, sorry I'm still a bit whirling & buzzed. I'm not a speller I'm a doer) and small, reckless eyes leant for me, not at all scared of the face that I have, that I have had to professionally train to be angular (so angular now I feel I am nothing but a skull trying to grow on a stick) and prim, to portray competence, reliability + trust, to be UTTERLY UNAPPROACHABLE because there shouldn't be a single asshole out there who watches the news who hasn't seen my perfected mug beamed into their space on their screen but that asshole had

the AUDACITY to lean at me going on about my skinny ass & they laughed, the group. Why he got to me I don't know but I had just come back from the South and had the stink of bodies + gas in my nose and the grab, grinding rush of flying over dust roads in a jeep with a tag car + a lead + even then you know I felt you were there.

And today you were there but I didn't want to tell you about the cameraman who they've been going for saying he's Intelligence and I'm now the most senior and they treat me like it's my show (I'm not ringmaster but hey, I'm close) that I'm resp'd to get him out + there we were with my phone blipping away on the desk with like a gazillion texts + emails from London, Washington, NY, Head Office ping-pong through + I just had to say what the fuck? You know I needed you because, hey, you might come with a heavy bottomed bottle of bubbly + I can glam the whole thing up and you can turn me into lace-stringed limp loveliness and transform me back into a girl in this hotel room so I don't have to cope with all the shit going on out there which was insane today btw if you haven't seen the news but I needed you and I knew it would just be a couple of hours because then you are XXXX XXXX XXXX XXXX wife GONE which is you know, the deal which I took on board from the outset + that's cool except it's hard when I see you like the line of constant that has run throughout my life + when you are so intent on knowing every part of it + I feel sometimes that it was easier when you existed in my life before I knew you.





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Appendix B – Lucy Durneen, 'There is No One to Turn to and Ask', *The Letters* Page 4  
(Nottingham: University of Nottingham, 2014), n.p.

Lucy Durneen  
*St Ives / Liskeard*

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Dear L --,

Hi. I'm in Paris. The last time I was in Paris was probably the last time I wrote a letter. I'll apologise right off for my handwriting; I want to say it's screwed from years of typing but the truth is I'm just impatient and ink hurts. And yes, I have a passport now, I can go anywhere, which is a thing I haven't been able to say for more than ten years, (did I tell you this story? It ends with the lesson – never destroy your marriage certificate, no matter how much you hate the bastard...). The first thing the Immigration guy said to me was, hey – now you can flee if you want to – like running away was something I'd won. Did I want to? Is this what I'm doing? It was you who told me once, all that stands between the moment of disaster and the collapse of humanity is seven days. Or perhaps it was less optimistic – five. I try to imagine you striding out against the apocalypse with a gun and can only suppose you must be right. I think what I'm saying is: aren't we all, always, ready to flee – at some level?

I'm writing this from a Salon de Thé on the rue de Rivoli.<sup>1</sup> The signature drink is hot chocolate, strong as coffee, the milk served in white china jugs and rosettes of Chantilly cream on gilt-edged saucers. None of it looks particularly generous at first, but I promise you, five minutes in and you're seeing stars. The queue to get in the place was long; I was an hour just in line on the street, not even inside, face pressed to the window looking at the macaroons like they were terracotta kings in the Forbidden Palace. Not everybody would consider patisserie to be worth the ordeal – but there's a signature drink! And the all-important question: milk or chocolate in first? The waitress was definitely telling me something about the correct order but I wasn't going to ask her to speak, thinking the system would be self-evident. Here's a sign the establishment you're in is way out of your usual league; your drink has a system and an understanding of it cannot be assumed. It goes where? And – when? (A measure of one's loneliness: that there is no-one to turn and ask. Or this, learned at a talk at the Polar Institute right before I left; there are whole islands in 'existence', literally imagined by explorers, willed into being by the enormity of the emptinesses they were trying to chart...)

There is an American girl at the table opposite. Long-haired and kind of hip. She's with a Frenchman, he's older, of course. Sometimes she looks over from her Chocolat Africain and catches my eye and I think of the last time I was with someone this way, doing that thing where the conversation is mostly about figuring out which parts of yourself you're going to conceal. And don't think badly of me that I imagine them in bed later – I mean after – and if, sans l'urgence, they will lie in separate silences, if he will be cold, if this will confuse her – if everyone feels this. Fifty Euros says he'll be fucking someone else this time next year. And yet. Maybe I should have done this; loved less, and more often.

I am trying to tell you --. I'm writing everything down as if I will forget it.

When I came here last, the beautiful girl I was travelling with was stopped on the steps of the Montmartre funicular by a stranger who wanted to take her photograph. Her surprised face, turning from the light of a winter-pallid sun: that is the picture of her I carry in my mind, as if I were the camera, the composition my own. I was 19 when I came here last, when I



## Appendix B cont.

last wrote letters. It seems an impossibility, that I was ever that age. And then there will be the time when I will think it an impossibility that I was ever 37. Is this the best I can say, that the past seems like a time when I was almost alive? Just this morning I saw something when I crossed the street at Solferino, a bird in the road, hit by a car and thrashing into the tarmac, its neck and legs broken in opposite directions like someone had stamped on a clockwork toy. Not death throes, life throes, shaking loose the last of its life. I wonder if this is what I am doing in Paris. I wonder if I am shaking loose the last of a life.

They're warriors, not kings – aren't they? You called me at 3am. It was a mistake, I know that – for you it would have been, what, evening maybe? I'm not good with the time difference. I don't know whether you're even in New York; it is that time of year when there is no way to find you if you do not want to be found. It would have been a pressure in your pocket, an accidental combination of buttons pressed, or missed, at just the right moments – not a decision, not desire. And if most of me believes in Baudrillard's hypotheses of Chance, there is equally a part that made you an island, willed into being by something I need that I can't explain. It is just possible that maybe, on the other side of the world, you were writing, looking out of a window, and some word or song made you stop, put down your pen, (oh who of us really does this?) and this something made me worthy of your call. I know it isn't true, but because I didn't answer --.

What you asked me to tell you was the story of the human heart. But L--, my heart is tired. It disappoints me that all I can manage is this, and I don't even know if I should send it.

X.<sup>3,4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> To be precise, *Café Angelina* on the rue de Rivoli, in Paris's 4th arrondissement.

<sup>2</sup> As seems to have become traditional for us, we somewhat intrusively asked whether this piece was fiction or non-fiction; and, as is also traditional, we received an elegantly ambiguous response: 'This piece is a mix of non-fiction and fiction. Maybe I should leave it up to the imagination as to which bits are most made-up, but it's certainly true that I would go to extraordinary lengths for good patisserie. (And I also wouldn't recommend pretending to be Nicole Kidman when your decree absolute arrives...)'

<sup>3</sup> Lucy Durneen grew up in the Fens, but has lived and worked in Berlin, Brussels and York, before moving to Cornwall. She has a PhD in Creative Writing from Plymouth University and lectures in Creative Writing at Anglia Ruskin University in Cambridge. Her stories and poems have been published in *The Manchester Review*, *Short Fiction* and *Poetry Ireland Review*. She is currently completing her first short story collection. Lucy divides her time between St Ives, Cambridgeshire, and Liskeard, Cornwall.

<sup>4</sup> Yes, we do wish her Cornwall home was in St Ives, so that we could have ended the issue by saying that she divided her time between St Ives and St Ives. But you can't have everything. Is it not enough that we brought you a letter from St Ives, Cornwall, and a letter from St Ives, Cambridgeshire?



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Appendix C – Huang Haisu, 'Dear Hong Kong Students', *The Letters* Page 5 (Nottingham: University of Nottingham, 2014), 19-22.

22

nes. You tell me people  
them myself. The quiet  
our English classes and  
told me later that they  
we weren't planning a  
Your phones have been  
st. You hear stories of  
and for nothing.  
rise up against it. Why  
using on the moment. It's better  
there were more things  
not for you, but for the  
ring at 4am - you told me -  
fields. Mindless planting  
dull, wearing the resistance  
ck. Then there were the  
su in their image.

Emma Chapman is the author of the critically acclaimed psychological thriller *How To Be A Good Wife*, which is a New York Times Notable Book, a Target Book Club Pick and a longlist-selected title for the Dylan Thomas Prize. She is currently working on her second novel, which is about a British war photographer's experiences during the Vietnam War. In 2012, Emma founded Vietnam Volunteer Teachers, an organisation which organises voluntary teaching placements in Vietnam. For more information, see [www.vietnamvolunteerteachers.com](http://www.vietnamvolunteerteachers.com)

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Huang Haisu  
*North-eastern China*

Dear Hong Kong Students,

Watching you live on CNN was how I spent my evenings during the week before the Chinese National Day holiday.<sup>1</sup> Footage of your stand was better than any TV program, for as I watched, I travelled through the magic of airwaves to be with you. Above me was a red umbrella, on my wrist a yellow ribbon, on my eyes a pair of goggles coated with a layer of plastic film, and on my face a mask. My skin burned when you were assaulted with pepper spray. My lungs protested as you ran away from the tear gas. Feeling your exhaustion, my eyes could not remain open as the midnight deadline passed.

The last time I saw anything like this was twenty-five years ago, long before most of you were born.<sup>2</sup> I was 'too young, too naïve' to recall much, but I do remember youthful faces like yours with optimistic hopes and firm wills. Who could possibly forget the selflessness of fearless souls on the square! But you see, one can only remember if he ever knows. Even if he knows, he can only recall if he wants to.

So your street solidarity is beyond the comprehension of many university students on the other side of the train to Lo Wu<sup>3</sup> - 'why are they on that fragrant island always the unreasonable ones?' And more often, 'Are their protests real?'

How do I know this? Because I am their teacher. And I make a simple request of you. Please write to my students and tell them your stories. Describe that night in Central,<sup>4</sup> how warm it felt when friends and strangers held hands and dared to dream one united dream. Compare Hong Kong old and new: What changes have you experienced? What was it that propelled you onto the street to make a stand?

You may wonder whether your letters could arrive. To be honest, I wonder, too. Yet once your letters run the gauntlet to reach only one student, be assured that he or she will spread the word about you. And then... A class. A cohort. A college. A university. A community. A city. A province. A country.

Staring at the black hole where you had been on the TV screen, I realise while you are risking your lives, I am only venturing to write this letter. The absence of you and the helplessness in





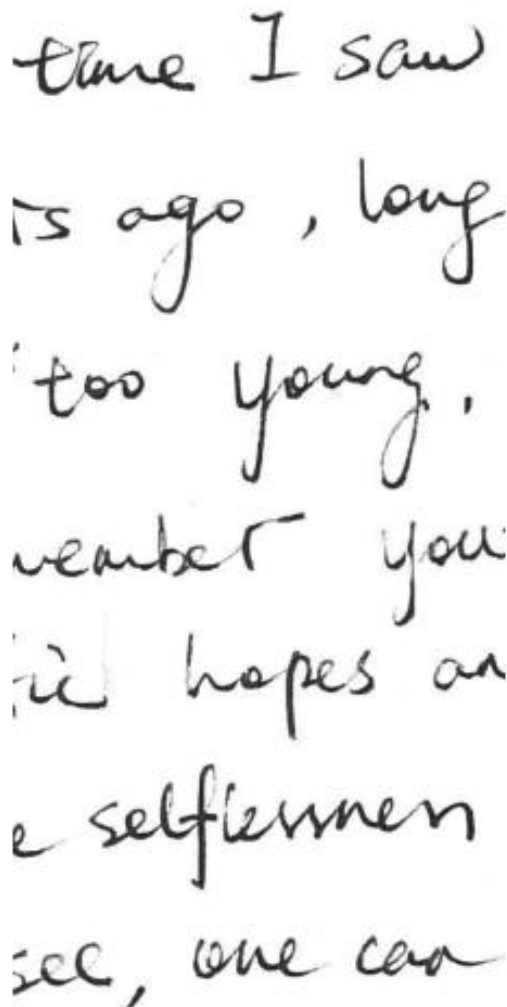
Appendix C cont.

# ***Writing Back through Our Mothers: An Analysis of Rhetoric in Women's Literary Letters***

***Ellen Hart***

20

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time I saw  
is ago, long  
too young,  
want you  
in hopes an  
e selfmen  
see, one can

<sup>5</sup> Letters sent to this email address will reach Haisu Huang directly.

Haisu Huang (H.H.) was born and raised in north-eastern China near the Russian border. From being unable to recite all twenty-six letters twenty years ago to now writing stories in English, she has been fortunate to study with outstanding teachers and mentors. While passing her love of the language to her own students, H.H. earned an MFA in Creative Writing from City University of Hong Kong.

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me made this holiday the most tedious of all. Your webpage news went blank. Baidu abandoned you, and you became Who? in my inquiries. As if you were a dream. As if I was insane.

On the street, when you have finished reading and geared up for upcoming danger, be proud of your influence and write to your press across the border. Send your letters to 1597451582@qq.com to start with.<sup>5</sup> I will make certain they first go to my one hundred and seven readers.

Stay safe,  
An English Language teacher from mainland China



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