

Colonial Letters: Towards a Taxonomy

Despite the fact that one of the foundational works of postcolonial criticism is entitled *The Empire Writes Back* (abbreviated from a phrase by novelist Salman Rushdie, “the Empire writes back to the Centre”), comparative analysis and modeling of the role of letters as a fundamental form of expression for the colonial as well as the post-colonial condition is currently lacking. This paper explores some aspects of this relationship between colonial letters and colonial subjects. The taxonomy of my title applies not so much to letters (though at one time I had hoped it would) as to the perspectives, heuristics, and models for reading colonial and postcolonial literature.

Letters have been used, and in many cases must be used, in order to gain factual knowledge about events and attitudes in historical situations. An example has been the use of the Jesuit letters and relations from the New World in order to discern differences in the actual treatment, say of the Huron nation by different writers. Yet, as Abé Takao has pointed out, there are different levels of publicness and formality in Jesuit letters — letters to superiors, letters to members of the Society in general, those addressed to the public at large, and personal letters. The release by the Society of private letters from Japan, for example, reveal contradictory information and attitudes on the part of the same letter-writer. This should not surprise students of the epistolary novel, some of whose most memorable characters, such as Lovelace and Madame de Merteuil, assume a variety of *personae*, depending on the addressee. Similarly, cases for which we have other forms of testimony to supplement letters foreground the literariness, performativity, perspectivism, and rhetorical strategy and tactics of such letters. Historian David Gerber notes two trends in the editing of letters as historical documents: one is the

tendency away from bold modification of texts, such as the correction of spelling, and towards more apparatus for reading the letter in context; the second is towards a more sophisticated theory of reading. In Gerber's words: "Narratology, post-behaviorist psychology, discourse theory, and feminist criticism, as well as the recognition by historians of the interpretive relevance of decades of analysis of the epistolary novel by literary scholars, have led to a growing sensitivity to both epistolarity (the generic features of letters) and the role of the exchange of letters in the processes of interpersonal relations" (307). We see here the familiar divide between focusing on the content of letters and on their form, with the recognition that form is what makes content interpretable. In Jacques Derrida's pronouncement: "the letter, the epistle [...] is not a genre but all genres, literature itself (48)," which addresses the very theme of this panel. Every personal letter constructs a self, which the physical absence of the sender renders a literary fiction (a status which in no way excludes the letter's function of reporting truth and facts). We may posit a roughly inverse relationship between distance (spatial, temporal, and cultural) and the degree of fictionality invoked. This dilemma between content and form is confronted no less by literary scholars, assuming that they buy into the ideas underlying postcolonialism, than by historians. Though different disciplines may place different weighting on content or on form, each is only discernible when foregrounded against the other, and hence they need each other. My own approach emphasizes the performativity, self-making, and world-making of all colonial letters. The colonial letter-writer is also imagining colonialism in some way, and hence bringing it into being or altering its status. Here as well, taxonomizing is less about creating categories than about observing the tensions and ambiguities between such categories.

This is the first full-length comparative study of this topic. While the title of Eve Bannet's 2005 *Empire of Letters* resonates with the themes investigated here, and the book provides much information, it is restricted both in its linguistic and generic scope. In fact, it reads not actual correspondence, but manuals, and only in the context of Great Britain and North America.

In my book, *Epistolary Fiction in Europe*, I argued several points that I would like to bring to the study of colonial letters. The book as a whole delineated the close interactions between "real" letters, models used for letter-writing, and epistolary fiction. In the period of discovery and empire building, the writing of letters was according to form, rather than according to naturalness or "to the moment." Models for letter-writing, for explorers no less than for those in Europe, lie between specific example and mimetic structure. As has been demonstrated with other literary genres, the models, examples, and formulae brought from Europe prove inadequate in the new contexts. Writers in all categories made use of letter-writing manuals on European models — manuals such as John Hill's *Young Secretary's Guide*, first published in London in 1687, are ubiquitous in merchants' libraries and in the Library Company of Philadelphia, for example. However, Toby Ditz has argued that the scale of commerce and the importance of personal connections gave rise to a new genre — the "letter of advice" — that did not quite fit any of the models. Hence, merchants were free to follow one or the other model in constructing their letters. Ditz has given an interesting contrast between styles of "letters of advice." The merchants Henry Drinker and Abel James, in recommending merchants to English dry goods houses, would number them and provide laconic commentaries: "No. 105 J---C----B is an industrious young man and

supposed to be with money,” and so forth. Other letters, however, in other circumstances, gave a fuller diegesis. Another young man is reckoned to be “in for four or five thousand [pounds] worse than nothing: Cawthorn Its immagined is in much the same way. I have heard he has stopped paymt. Its certain he owes large Sums to the Custo’ House [...] incredible sums for such a Stripling to the Portuguese who trusted him with their wine” (Ditz 67). In this letter, verbs of reckoning and imagination sum up to certainty. Despite their different styles, these letters resemble each other in their ability to concretize and to fix hearsay into usable discourse, and in the actual work they do in creating networks of trust.

Leonard Tennenhouse and Nancy Armstrong have even argued that the captivity narrative formed in the New World returned to Europe and influenced the epistolary novel.

A second axiom of my study of epistolary fiction was that we look beyond the dyadic model of sender-receiver, and read out of letters the social and economic conditions that make them possible — not from the text of the letter, but from its production, transmission, and material condition. Just as television as a cultural phenomenon cannot be understood from its scripts, so too the letter cannot be understood apart from its folding, handwriting, paper, margins, envelope, seal, post office or servant, and so forth. Nor, during the colonial period, should a letter be read without the frequent plant, animal, or mineral specimens that accompanied it. For example, sender and receiver of the vast majority of letters in the early-modern period are merely the central points of what I call an “aureole” of social networks to whom the letters will be of interest, a point all the more applicable to colonial situations. Let us take as an example the letters of the chief Jesuit missionary to India, Francisco Xavier. The circulation of letters among the Jesuits was encouraged by the founder

Ignatius Loyola, as a way of letting the widely scattered members of the Society know of each other's doings. At the same time, however, letters, or versions of the letters, could be shown to a wider public and especially to friends of the Society as proof of the efficacy of their work. Under the careful supervision of Loyola, Xavier's missives in Portuguese were translated into a variety of languages, and circulated widely in Europe. Beyond issues of translation, "With an apologetic and apostolic rather than a historical end in view, the Indian letters were touched up, or summarized, or enlarged, or embellished" (Correia 35). All letters from India were sent first to Coimbra, so that they could be published under a single editorial policy and achieve uniformity. Of course, once the letters hit the printing press, their proliferation and fictionalization was virtually guaranteed.

Part of the equation of correspondence is secrecy and its counterpart, snooper. We owe to Eve Bannet a demonstration of just how pervasive these two opposing impetuses were to the flow of letters between the American colonies and England:

fictional exposures of hidden epistolary transcripts re-present the more threatening aspect of epistolography in a British-American culture where awareness that all the public aspects of political, economic, social and domestic life involved a hidden transcript led to attempts by all sides to buy, steal, intercept, capture or get "sight" of the hidden epistolary transcripts of others. While the British government regularly intercepted and copied letters passing between British-American agents and their home colonies, colonial agents arranged with clerks, for a surreptitious fee, to give them "sight" of confidential correspondence that the government expected to hide from them.

(251)

Thirdly, I noted a sort of thermodynamic law of epistolary communication. Just as water cannot run uphill by itself, so too letters come into being and move towards their recipients along a power-knowledge gradient. As a stream turns a mill, so too a power-knowledge dynamic keeps the circulation of letters underway. Writers from the metropolis frequently are exerting political, economic, or doctrinal power over recipients through their letters; colonial senders, conversely, are closer to native informants (or are themselves such informants) and are more familiar with conditions on the ground in the colony. This information gradient can work to their advantage, and the will to level it off can represent the main cultural capital of the letter-writer. Writers may feel compelled to write to superiors or to family to maintain relations and exact favors and resources. The letters of superiors may contain instructions, reprimands, exhortations to keep the faith or to keep it more orthodox, etc. For individuals, letters “were central to the reproduction of the colonist’s kinship and familial ties. [...] Letters were almost the sole channel through which personal relationships could be maintained[. ...] Correspondence was also the vital nexus through which contact with metropolitan society in a wider sense persisted” (Thomas & Eves 4-5).

Helen Valle has provided an interesting analysis of the gradients driving the intense correspondence between John Bartram, a Pennsylvania farmer, and Peter Collinson, a member of the Royal Society, during the eighteenth century. Valle sorts these gradients into seven categories: the scientific; the cultural; the social; the national; the religious; the economic; and the personal. Two of these, for example the scientific, are balanced, several more, for example the personal, relatively balanced, and only one, which Valle calls the “cultural,” is distinctly unbalanced, since Bartram inhabits the periphery and Collinson

the center. Valle posits that it “is presumably the relatively balanced sum of these characteristics that allows the exchanges to take place and the friendship to grow and endure for more than forty years, despite the frequent friction over money and Collinson’s somewhat patronising attitude” (321). But since the friction over money becomes a topic of frequent conversation in the letters, it would seem to contribute to rather than hinder the exchange of correspondence. Furthermore, within categories described as “balanced,” there are asymmetries of which finance is but one example. Valle herself points out that the scientific knowledge of the two men, while it overlaps in many areas, is also divided by the same periphery-center dichotomy as their cultural identities. Bartram’s job is to provide specimens and observations from his part of the world to Collinson, who brings these to the meetings of the Royal Society where they are processed by the members, turned into knowledge as it were. Some are farmed out to world experts, such as Carl Linneus, who of course never reside in the colonies. The whole process of epistolary knowledge exchange, as Valle points out, resembles the overall colonial economic relationship, where the latter regions supply raw materials for processing by the metropole, which then sells the processed products to the colonies.

I use the term “inscription” for this phenomenon. Inscription differs from more usual mimetic approaches to the role of writing as a constative use of language that merely reports a reality that is “dehors de texte.” In colonial Spanish America, as Rebecca Earle has shown, familiar letters home tended to be from married men to the wives they had left behind. The performance in such letters was of loyalty; the rhetorical labor was frequently blatant persuasion that the Americas could be as good a place to live as Spain.

John Bogle, an employee of the East India Company sent as envoy to Bhutan, wrote the following letter somewhere on the road:

You must not mind my Dates. As the Folks in this Country are ignorant of the Julian Calender, and the new stile I am obliged to keep a Reckoning like Robinson Crusoe or Sterns Captive and if I make a Mistake it is impossible to rectify it now. I have some doubts about my Epochs, but there is to be an Eclipse which will bring me up. (Teltscher 79)

Both Crusoe and the Captive use tally sticks to keep track of time. As Kate Teltscher remarks, Defoe and Sterne supply Bogle with two of his epistolary identities. She does not remark on the obvious self-reflexivity of Bogle's search for temporal markers. Being "lost" in time and space has shaken his sense of identity. In writing his letter, he anchors himself in the literary landmarks that are his own "tally sticks" for locating his Self.

As Jacques Lacan and others have argued, epistolary communication is not dyadic (its supposed privacy being one aspect of its fictionality), but inevitably triangular. Whereas the most common model in the European epistolary novel occupies the points of this triangle with Sender, Receiver, and Interceptor/Relayer, colonial letters are those that conform to the model of Sender (on the periphery), Receiver (in the metropole), and Object, the last being frequently an alien culture or landscape, in short, the Other. The dynamics of writing in such cases involve redefinitions of the Sender's self as it is confronted not only with the Other, but with the power differential between center and margin. In addition, since every letter is written from its own "center of the world," the letters change rather than merely reconstitute perceptions of center and margin. A text which follows this model closely is José Eduardo Aqualusa's *Nação crioula: A Correspondência Secreta de Fradique Mendes* (1997;

Creole Nation: The Secret Correspondence of Fradique Mendes), which continues into Angola the world travels of a fictional adventurer, raconteur, and correspondent invented by the Portuguese novelist Eça de Queiroz. Agualusa, who was born and grew up in Angola, implies with this strategy not only a double vision of colonial and post-colonial Angola, but also that any communication of this vision will inevitably be mediated, in this case through the fictional letter-writer invented by a Portuguese author. Agualusa not only uses Fradique to expand and complicate the reader's view of Angola, but he also uses Angola to profoundly alter, in fact to hybridize Eça's European character. In his letters back to Eça and others in Europe, Fradique reports the alien and unusual aspects of colonial Angola that become simultaneously reports on his own Africanization, scandalously signing one letter, "Seu afilhado quase africano (25; "Your almost-African godson"). For centuries, the sign-offs of letters have been enmeshed in the power structures of society. Some studies read shifts in the frequency of various sign-offs in a letter corpus as indicative of changes in actual social conditions. Under such circumstances, we should notice the social vandalism Fradique is wreaking with this phrase. We also should note its double direction: his qualifying of himself as African implies that he knows what it means to be African, essentializes what it means to be African, and generally anticipates in the "imperial gaze" that allows his travel to the region (and later his escape from it on board a slave ship). At the same time, of course, he hybridizes himself with the term, deconstructs European essentialism or superiority, and no doubt scandalizes the recipient of the letter. Fradique marries an African woman and purchases a Bahian fazenda, not bothering to add that he is now "almost-Bahian," as if to be Bahian were to be anything other than an almost-African.

A similar point can be made about the letters of discovery written by Italians in exile. Neither Christopher Columbus, Giovanni da Verrazano, nor Amerigo Vespucci ever returned to his native Italy, but they all wrote letters home. That these letters, among others, were responsible for the creation of the New World has become a truism. Similarly, it is well known that the language of Columbus's descriptions derives from prophecy, that Verrazano's Indians resemble the shepherds of Renaissance pastoral, and so forth. Finally, however, their letters about a new land "manage to 'territorialize' an otherwise deracinated expatriate self" (Cachey 24).

The information and transformation connected with colonialism and colonial letters helped bring about Enlightenment in Europe; concomitantly, many important texts of the Enlightenment maintain the model adumbrated above of someone on the periphery sending reports on the Other back to the center, but shifting the positionality so that the Other is now Europe. To my knowledge, the exact moment at which this shift takes place has not been identified, but the example above reminds us that Europe can function as its own Other. The forerunner is Marana's *L'Esploratore turco* (1684). Is it merely coincidence that Giovanni-Paolo Marana, whose *L'Espion turque* (1684) began the alien spy tradition of Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes* (1721), to which Graffigny's *Lettres d'une Péruvienne* (1748) also belong, was, like Columbus, a displaced Genoese? All these texts, I argue, are made possible through the epistemology and psychology of the colonial letter that reverses center and margin; on the other hand, only fully fictionalized, novelized forms of such letters could serve the purpose of Enlightenment self-reflexivity.