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# The Death of the Letter? Epistolary Intent, Letterness and the Many Ends of Letter- Writing

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## Abstract

Is the letter now 'dead', in terminal decline because of the impact of new digital technologies? Such arguments raise important points. However, they fail to distinguish between prevailing genre conventions for letter-writing in different time periods and the underlying 'epistolary intent' and 'letterness' involved, and so overstate the newness of the changes discussed. Examples of over-time departures from 'the letter' but which display clear epistolary intent and deploy inventive forms of letterness are discussed, including the letters of Olive Schreiner, St Paul's epistles, communications between Roman legionaries, Second World War love letters, an exchange involving mathematicians, and student emails.

## Keywords

communications, digital communications, email, epistolary, epistolary theory, genre theory, letters, letter writing, Olive Schreiner

## Introduction

Recognising that cultural sociology is located at the crossroads of the wider discipline, Jacobs and Spillman's (2005) overview of its then-future raised useful questions concerning whether and how its conceptual apparatus would develop from the then relative under-emphasis of transnational processes and over-emphasis of specialised cultural systems. A decade on and the answer, abundantly evidenced, including by the existence of this journal, is that it has successfully done so (cf. Hall et al., 2012). But while there has been a decided upsurge of interest in popular cultural forms, there are some remaining lacunae regarding quotidian forms of cultural production. One such concerns letter-writing and its proxies.<sup>1</sup> This is perhaps surprising, for cognate areas of cultural anthropology

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and literary studies have produced influential work on letters and other everyday literacies as an important aspect of cultural production (Barton and Hamilton, 1998; Barton and Papen, 2010; Lyons, 2007). However, while cultural sociology, cultural anthropology and literary studies now have different concerns, they shared a starting point in re-thinking genres as what would now be termed 'cultural assemblages' (Bennett, 2007).

With somewhat contradictory bases in the work of Bakhtin (1986) and Derrida (1980), such work on genre formation and re-formation has included commemoration and memorialisation, collective memory, domestic popular cultural consumption, and literary genre codes and conventions (cf. Bawarshi, 2000; Bazerman, 1999; Desmondhaigh, 2012; Freedman and Medway, 1994; Olney, 2007; Stanley, 2002a, 2006; Storey, 1999; Todorov, 1990; Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz, 1991). In cultural sociology there is now a rich body of work around the conjunction of memory-making and collective memory and concerning more organised forms of cultural consumption, while in cultural anthropology and literary studies there has been greater emphasis on everyday literacies including letter-writing (cf. Barton and Hall, 1999; Jolly and Stanley, 2005; Lyons, 2007).

The present discussion brings these different trajectories together around an interrogation of whether new digital developments are heralding 'the death of the letter', for letter-writing has been depicted as in fatal decline because of these (e.g. Garfield, 2013). In significant respects debate here has concerned matters of genre, with 'the death' perceived in relation to presumptively tight genre conventions regarding the epistolary form, with opposing arguments seeing genres as cultural assemblages and 'the letter' as just one form that epistolarity can take, and present developments evidencing growth rather than decline. These wider matters about genre and everyday forms of epistolary cultural production will be returned to, while the significance of letter-writing for cultural sociology needs some underlining.

Letter-writing, including proxies such as notes, telegrams and cards and recent developments such as text, Twitter and email, is the form of cultural production that has involved and continues to involve more people than any other (Barton and Hall, 1999; Gerber, 2006; Lyons, 2007). 'Ordinary writing' has been a continuing feature in many cultures (cf. Lyons, 2012), with illiteracy or functional literacy little bar to engaging in letter-writing and reading, with both often being communal activities (Austin, 1999). Also and perhaps counter-intuitively, most archives, particularly non-specialist depositories, are replete with ordinary writings; and most collections, whether of 'ordinary' or elite families and individuals, overwhelmingly contain letters (Lyons, 2012; Whyman, 2009).

One of the founding texts of cultural and everyday life sociologies, Thomas and Znaniecki's (1958) *The Polish Peasant ...*, makes extensive use of letter-collections (see also Plummer, 2001; Stanley, 2013). For them, the porous character of the letter means it acts as a gauge of social changes, with their research exploring this in epistolary exchanges between 'New World' migrants and their families in Poland. They were especially interested in so-called 'bowing' letters in articulating hierarchies that were thereby expressed and also unsettled, and certainly now both stilted formalities and departures from these come across clearly. But they seem a universe away from emails travelling great distances to arrive within seconds and the informalities of text messages arriving even more swiftly. Clearly, new technologies and hardware, including the cell phone, laptop and tablet with accompanying software innovations have impacted on the form

and also the content of epistolary exchanges between people separated from each other (Danet, 2001; Horst and Miller, 2012; Ling, 2008).

So is the letter now dead, made redundant by new technologies and digital forms of communication like email, text and ‘instant’ messaging which enable much speedier communications to bridge absence? For some, ‘letter-writing may be about to come to an end’ (Garfield, 2013: back cover). However, has the letter perhaps witnessed earlier ‘deaths’ because of the impact of once-new technologies, but survived these? If the letter is not dead or dying, then what effects *are* digital communications having? And is the letter actually so important, or are there more fundamental aspects of epistolarity that might even be enhanced by current new developments?

These and related questions about ‘the death of the letter’ have become familiar, with an interesting literature debating the arguments (see Haggis and Holmes, 2011; Milne, 2010; Simon, 2002; Zuern, 2003; and for more cautious assessments Brant, 2006; Decker, 1998; Jolly, 2011; Yates, 1999). This has raised important points regarding definitional aspects of the letter, with the importance or otherwise of genre conventions and the porous boundaries of the letter, the propelling factor of absence, the time/space distance basis of letter-writing, its draw in providing a simulacra of presence of the writer, and the materiality of epistolary traces, usefully considered.

## The Death of the Letter?

The first and core ‘death of the letter’ argument is that, while in situations of absence people used to keep in touch primarily by letter-writing, the letter has now been superseded. A number of pieces of research have shown that when people need to keep in touch, only rarely now do they write letters but instead use a combination of email and text with the telephone (for overviews, see Licoppe, 2004; Wacjman, 2008).<sup>2</sup> However, this work is based on a very literal reading of what ‘the letter’ is, treating the prevailing conventions (Danet, 2001: 59) – opening salutation, formal address of someone, message with standard syntax and punctuation and layout, pre-closing, and closing with signature – as not just definitional but *sui generis*. Because many fewer letters are being written, at least in high technology parts of the world, this is taken to demonstrate if not ‘death’, then considerable malaise. This argument focuses on the conventions rather than examining the different forms that letter-writing takes in practice and more fundamental matters concerning what I have termed ‘epistolary intent’ and ‘letterness’ (Stanley, 2011, 2013, Stanley et al., 2012). But, looking more closely at the research drawn on, this shows it is ‘letter-like’ forms of digital communication that are favoured, with most people in such studies emailing, tweeting and texting several times a day.

The fundament of such exchanges is ‘epistolary intent’, which involves the intention to communicate, in writing or a cognate representational medium, to another person who is ‘not there’ because removed in time/space from the writer, and doing so with the hope or expectation of a response. The ‘standard letter’, sketched earlier, is actually a fairly late arrival on the epistolary scene, for its conventions – including a precise address, dating with days and months as well as years, in the handwriting of the person sending the message, the certainties of arrival, fixed addresses where letters are delivered – are largely 18th and 19th century and rich North in origin. However, the components of

epistolary intent just noted can be traced millennia earlier, and still flourish now, and are not conterminous with 'the letter'.

'Letterness' refers to another notable characteristic of epistolarity, which is the porous character of the letter and its ability to morph into other forms. The letter developed out of a variety of other kinds of communication – edicts about what was un/lawful from kings and emperors, public announcements carved on steles, officials sending official communications, letters patent, banknotes 'promising to pay the bearer on demand', scientific reports and so on – and letter-writers often draw on or mimic other genres. In recognition, Bazerman (1999) has called the letter a 'proto-genre', although its 'proto' aspect is perhaps better seen as fundamental.

The letter as a means to facilitate epistolary intent has its origins and purpose in situations of absence, where people who are separated want to communicate with each other, with separation in time/space and absence perceived as definitional to the genre. However, the second 'death of the letter' argument suggests that new digital forms of communication such as text, 'instant' messaging and push email are characterised by their immediacy and that these are to all intents and purposes synchronous forms of communication (akin to the face-to-face and talk) and very different from the asynchronous (time/space separation) characteristics of the letter (Milne, 2010; Simon, 2002; Zuern, 2003).

Absence is usually positioned as fundamentally definitional of the letter as a genre and is treated in the 'death of the letter' debate in a binary away: people are either present together in face-to-face ways or else separated from each other, with migrant letters viewed as the key exemplar (Elliott et al., 2006; Gerber, 2006). However, when letter collections are looked at en masse (Stanley, 2015; Whyman, 2009), the majority of ordinary letter-writing is the product of what I have termed 'interrupted presence'. That is, people who are 'together' are frequently but transitorily apart on a day-to-day basis and use notes, letters and related means to bridge their face-to-face encounters, rather than epistolarity signifying (semi-)permanent absence.

The letter's marked temporal aspect, concerning the intervals existing between someone writing and the other person receiving and reading a letter, is also seen as definitional. However, the third 'death of the letter' argument is that a fundamental change in time/space compression occurs in digital forms of communication, with the temporal rhythms of epistolary exchanges having been dissolved (become synchronous) because rendered so short as to be effectively instantaneous (Haggis and Holmes, 2011; Ling, 2008).

This is a very a-historical view of speed and its impact. For instance, in Britain the mail coach, the 1d post, the international telegraph and the postcard were successively seen in 'death of the letter' terms, because the time for consideration and reflection which the earlier slow speed of letter exchanges required had been made faster, but immense upsurges in ordinary letter-writing occurred around their successive introductions (Campbell-Smith, 2011; Standage, 1998). In addition, 'very quick' is not the same as, and in such arguments is mistaken for, instant and synchronous. Although digital forms such as text and 'instant' messaging certainly involve time/space compression, there is not time/space *dissolution*, with the separation at the root of epistolary intent still existing, albeit with the communications involved arriving with considerable rapidity and permitting similarly rapid response.

The letter's simulacra of presence character has been one of its most widely remarked upon aspects (cf. Milne, 2010), with its power for the recipient being that it bears many traces of its writer, such as their handwriting, touch on the paper, and licking of stamps. But the fourth 'death of the letter' argument is the claim that there is an absolute difference between the letter on paper and the electronic form that epistolary communications can take (cf. Jolly, 2011), with such traces of touch and presence being absent from the latter.

More prosaically, in fact many standard letters lack simulacra of presence aspects. Between familiars, for instance, letters need not include personal address or signature. And more generally, letters are now mainly word processed, not hand-written, and are frequently sent as file attachments with e-signatures. In addition, the digital form produces many simulacra of presence aspects; these include the use of emoticons, personalised sign-offs, accompanying photographs or other adornments. And they are often saved, including with personalisations like photographs attached (Danet, 2001; Milne, 2010).

Relatedly, the letter has also been definitionally associated with its material aspects, with these ensuring it can be re-read and saved and passed on by recipients. This in turn means that letters can be kept, bought, sold and collected, and consequently have historical afterlife and availability for researchers. But the fifth 'death of the letter' argument proposes that electronic media have introduced a major difference here, because of the absence of the material form and that in the future no letter collections will exist and be available to researchers. Digital communication is, however, a supremely material medium. It involves large amounts of hardware, including computers, cell phones and tablets, requires software platforms that shape in very material ways the communications engaged in, and is reliant on electricity supply systems or proxy-forms like batteries. Also, an array of traces remains that are or can be made material. Websites stay in existence long after hosting sites have vanished; email is 'there' and can be recovered; and text messages are similarly 'there' and available. In addition, people can and do engage in their own forms of archiving, some of which involves printing out and making as material and 'words on paper' as the conventional letter. The result is that, although seemingly ephemeral, digital communications are actually more durable than their material predecessors, for while messages may be deleted, this does not mean they are necessarily obliterated or destroyed, and anyway many users 'make material' against the general urge to make immaterial in a digital age.

These 'death of the letter' arguments raise interesting points concerning the impact of digital communications on contemporary forms of letter-writing. However, although they indicate important developments that are changing some aspects of epistolarity, they do not substantiate 'death of the letter' claims, for the epistolary intent at the root remains and new forms of letterness flourish. The broader arguments here about genre and epistolarity are returned to in the conclusion, while the discussion now steps back from 'death of the letter' claims to explore a range of letter-writing evidencing 'new' developments, focusing on their epistolary intent and letterness aspects. The examples discussed are late-nineteenth and early-20th century letters by feminist writer and social theorist Olive Schreiner, the 1st-century New Testament epistles of St Paul, 1st- and 2nd-century letters by Roman legionaries, some Second World War love letters, early-21st century exchanges between mathematicians, and student emails received during 2012–2014.

## Yours sincerely, Olive Schreiner

Much of the ‘death of the letter’ debate is predicated on there being an ‘it’, ‘the letter’, and ignores the different kinds of letters that people actually write and the porous borders between the letter and other genres. In practice there are many kinds of letter-writing, some evidencing departures from such apparently definitional aspects as absence/presence, the presumption or otherwise of response, and the letter’s materiality. The letters of Olive Schreiner (1850–1920) provide helpful examples.

When Schreiner died, some 20,000 of her letters existed; and although many were later destroyed by her estranged husband, still a large number – around 5,000 – survive ([www.oliveschreiner.org](http://www.oliveschreiner.org)).<sup>3</sup> Her letter-writing runs from 1850 to 1920, and began on the frontier of the Eastern Cape of South Africa when there was no ‘post’ and passing strangers or farm workers took letters to places where there was a collection point. There was no specific address for either writer or addressee, and postage stamps might or might not be used depending on a letter’s intended destination (Stanley and Salter, 2014). Schreiner also began letter-writing when the conventions are said to have been very constraining. Despite this, her letters are familiar, quirky and unsettle conventions. In mid-1902, for instance, she ended a letter to her sister-in-law Fan Schreiner (OS to FS, 30 June 1902) with ‘Good bye. “Hier eind it met mijn pen, maar niet mijn hart.” [Here it ends with my pen, but not with my heart]’. Its Dutch/taal makes a joke because Fan, Boer by birth, could not speak or write the vernacular while English-speaker Schreiner could. Such playfulness in departing from at the same time as observing epistolary convention is found in many Schreiner letters, perhaps for reasons of writing (because more interesting and fun than the routine), perhaps for reasons of reading (because she wrote very much for the other person and their concerns).

Firstly, Schreiner’s letters are very much ‘bird in flight’ in character. They contain additions and subtractions made as she wrote and these evidence her writing process in quite a close way. They also have an informal, personalised tone with, for example, 1870s letters to her eldest sister starting with the exclamatory ‘Dear Katie!’ and containing such fancifulness as inciting Katie to leave her many children and travel to New Rush, where diamonds had been discovered. Her letters also engage in explicit genre crossings, straying teasingly or seriously out of the letter and into other forms. An example of the former is a letter written as though a telegram to her friend Harry Gie, which also reflexively comments on itself (OS to HG, 24 July 1907); and, of the latter, a letter of May 1908 is ostensibly a private one to her acquaintance Emily Hobhouse but is actually a public address written for Hobhouse to read out on Schreiner’s behalf at a women’s suffrage meeting (OS to EH, 29 May 1908).

Secondly, the interrupted presence aspects of Schreiner’s letter-writing are very clear when she is in London or Cape Town (e.g. multiple letters to Havelock Ellis on 19 June 1884), with multiple collections and deliveries enabling exchanges of postcards and letters to facilitate ad hoc meetings. However, for much of her life she lived in country areas of South Africa, far from the metropole or urban centres, while her closest friends lived in Britain, or in Pretoria, Port Elizabeth and Cape Town. But although it might be expected that absence would define letters to them, what actually comes across is the importance of the face-to-face and letter-writing as a means of bridging meetings: past



meetings are commented on, present happenings detailed, and future meetings planned and expedited.

Thirdly, speed and time/space compression are not absolutes but are experienced relative to what existed before. Schreiner's letters provide many comments on such changes experienced as significant, including: in the 1870s, the unexpected arrivals of postboys with letters, leading her to reply at speed so her replies could be taken when they left the farm she lived on; in the 1890s, receiving and sending letters when trains stopped daily in Matjiesfontein; and during the Great War (1914–1918), writing hastily to catch the turn-around of the Cape mail steamer. However, the most consequential changes to the rhythms of Schreiner's letter-writing came from pony-carts replacing ox-wagons in transporting the post, steamers rather than sail, the Cape Town–Matjiesfontein–Johannesburg railway, and the laying of the oceanic telegraph, with their impact demonstrated by marked shifts in the numbers and dating of letters.

Fourthly, there are many Schreiner letters that avoid or obviate simulacra of presence aspects. These have an abstract quality, with the prime concern being conceptual or theoretical ideas she and her correspondents were interested in. Many of her letters to Karl Pearson, John Cross, John Merriman and Julia Solly, for instance, come under this heading, as do her public letters (like that ostensibly to Hobhouse) on political matters. There are personalisms regarding Schreiner and her addressee in such letters, but these are background to topics including the character of the emotions, whether beyond reproductive systems any important sex differences exist, whether racial oppression would worsen in South Africa, and different ways of conceptualising social change.

Fifthly, rather than valorising letters because of their material qualities, Schreiner rejected this, at a number of junctures requesting correspondents to destroy her letters, while in 1913 she burned thousands of people's letters to her and after this destroyed letters once answered. This was connected to Schreiner's awareness there would be a market value for her letters and papers and that because of this the lives of her correspondents might become public knowledge against their wishes, explaining such a request to her long-term friend Havelock Ellis in these terms (OS to HE, 29 June 1916). However, her destructions started before she became famous and included manuscripts as well as letters (OS to HE, 28 March 1886). Schreiner's feelings about the materiality of her many writings were clearly more complex, though, with comments across many letters indicating that her urge to make immaterial and reduce to the virtual was connected with her views about the gap between material representation and an imagined ideal in her mind (Stanley, 2002b).

It might perhaps be suggested that, as a writer of fiction as well as fact, Olive Schreiner's letters are exceptional in flouting or traversing genre conventions, because written by someone used to playing with words. However, these things are by no means rare, and many earlier and also later examples can be found. A number of these, starting with the 1st-century epistles of St Paul, and continuing through to the 21st-century emails of students, are now considered.

## **Paul ... to the Church of God which is at ...**

There are seven New Testament letters of St Paul accepted as genuine second generation ones (i.e. at one remove from the first generation who had known Jesus).<sup>4</sup> These were



written by Paul on his own or with other writers and most often Timothy, with other letters appearing under his name actually being third and fourth generation ones.<sup>5</sup> Six were written by a scribe with some concluding passages in Paul's own hand and mix both public and private characteristics, while the seventh (Philemon) is more straightforwardly a personal letter. They are the product and expression of Paul's mission, which concerned the 'Jesus group' communities he had founded in various non-Israelite cities.

The letters have no date or address, except for the time and place of writing with its uncertainties of travel and delivery. They also have both a unitary and a split authorship. They were authorised and probably dictated by Paul; the opening statement of authorship, although starting with Paul and his status, also includes Timothy, a close associate who carried out many co-tasks related to Paul's mission. The letters are addressed, with one exception (Philemon), to 'the Church' or 'brothers and sisters' and were intended to be read aloud, as probably around just 1–2% of people could read and fewer write. The letters require a high context of knowledge to unpack (e.g. 'to the Gentiles' means to Jesus group members living among Gentiles, 'Jews' means Judeans, and so on; see Malina and Pilch, 2006). Their content is concerned with specific situations and events, addressed in the letters. Notable features concern the absence of response, interrupted presence, the wider pattern of reciprocal exchanges, and the ends of the letters.

These letters by St Paul are 'ordinary letters', rather than epistles (a public form akin to an edict), for they have specific address (albeit of a collective kind) and are 'personal' in being sent by a named person and concerned with influencing the beliefs and practices of the people addressed. At the same time, rather like an epistle, Paul's letters do not require direct reply but are to be acted upon, with an epistolary response consequently inappropriate. That is, Paul's letters are concerned with promoting faith in action and were part of mechanisms to support, troubleshoot or admonish the Jesus groups regarding this.

It might be thought, given the wide dispersal of the groups concerned, that St Paul's letters were written in clear circumstances of absence. In fact they are of an interrupted presence kind. The groups were founded around Paul's face-to-face presence; and while the letters troubleshoot specific circumstances at a remove, the context is of further face-to-face visits by Paul and Timothy planned within the letters concerned (e.g. 2 Corinthians 12:14–13:4). The letters were in fact part of a continued pattern of relational exchanges involving but by no means confined to the epistolary. Thus information was clearly exchanged in multiple directions through the visits and face-to-face meetings as well as letters. There are other signs of relationality in the letters too, including the complex ways that 'you' and 'we' pronouns are used in indicating community and reciprocity (2 Corinthians 1:3–7, 1:8–11) and which change when dealing with conflicts and backsliding (Galatians 3:1).

The letters of St Paul trouble contemporary as well as present-day conventions concerning what a letter consists of. While they are clearly letters rather than epistles (although often referred to as such), the presumption they enshrine is of non-response. They have multiple writers but under the name of Paul; they are predominantly public documents for an oral purpose; and they were written at a remove but presume the face-to-face. Who writes, how, and for what practical purposes, trumps any conventions.

## Farewell, sister, my dearest soul as I hope to prosper, and hail

Equally complex issues exist concerning the Vindolanda tablets. These are postcard-sized wafer-thin pieces of wood on which Roman legionaries stationed at a garrison along Hadrian's Wall (in the north of Britain) wrote letters, inventories, accounts, reports and lists, mainly through their scribes. Preserved because thrown away as rubbish and covered by peat when the garrison moved on, their contents provide much information about everyday life at Vindolanda between 80 and 122 AD.

There are over 1600 Vindolanda tablets transcribed, with many also translated into English (<http://vindolanda.csad.ox.ac.uk/tablets/index.shtml>).<sup>6</sup> For many, fragments rather than the entirety of the tablets survive, but enough exists to discern that many conform to the conventions of the Roman letter regarding opening salutation and signature, message body, and closing formulations (Bowman, 2004; Ceccarelli, 2014; Stowers, 1986). The contents are very varied and include complaints about friends not replying to earlier letters (310, 311), requests for stores (255), inventories of goods (343), party invitations (291), letters of recommendation (250) and requests for leave (169). The Vindolanda letters also provide examples of departures from then-prevailing epistolary conventions. Three aspects, concerning the ends of the letter, the performative character of many, and the role of letters as a means to bridge interrupted presence and the face-to-face, are noteworthy.

The Vindolanda tablets were written between comrades and friends who were all part of the business of empire as carried out by frontier troops, with an effectively universal level of literacy. The people concerned lived in the equivalent of a small village and would have known each other face-to-face as well as through epistolary and associated exchanges. Their letters are embedded aspects of the workings of the garrison and its administrative and military hierarchies and are in effect business and organisational letters.

The garrison was composed of a tightly-knit and highly interdependent set of people, mainly but not exclusively male, organised around marked divisions of labour (Birley, 2002; Bowman, 2004; see 211, 248). In contemporary terms, it was a quasi-family with people connected by the ties of *amicitia*, in which friendship, economic activity, family and polity mapped onto each other (Stowers, 1986). Thus many Vindolanda letters use the language of *amicitia* in references to brothers and sisters, with the closeness of these bonds indicated by colloquialisms and warmth of expression (233, 260), and by frequent references to the face-to-face in recalling previous meetings and planning future ones (211, 292).

The divisions between 'letter' and 'not letter' at Vindolanda consequently have complexities, and many of them are highly performative in Austin's (1962) sense of the term, being in themselves the execution of their content. Military commands sent in epistolary form are the obvious example here (e.g. 215). Also, while many Vindolanda tablets have an epistolary form, their contents are, for instance, accounts or inventories sandwiched between the tight conventions of openings and closings; and these letter/accounts and letter/inventories too are performative in providing the account or listing the items concerned.

## WIN

In my mother's jewellery-box after her death there was a transparent heart-shaped piece of early plastic with 'WIN' in red inside it. This was made by my father after he was conscripted into the navy during the Second World War and sent to my mother, who was not a reading and writing woman. It is a letter in transparently material form: her name as its addressee is written large, his authorship can be seen in its making, their relationship and the sending of love from one to the other is made visible. My father died first; after my mother's death, there was a box in her dressing table containing sheets of paper in envelopes, perhaps fifty of them. The address they were from, on the envelope, was a holding one provided by the military authorities. They had been dispatched from various places including latterly a prisoner-of-war camp, and were dated only if postmarks were legible. Inside each a single sheet. All expressed similar messages to that of the plastic love-heart: my mother's name surrounded by many small hearts, both of their names inside a heart, messages with Joe and Win, Win and Joe, joined by verbs like love and miss, and ended always with kisses – 'XXX'. And also nearly always at the bottom was 'XXX to Bobby' (my brother).

The letter here was in a way tangible, but stripped to the bone, to elements my mother could read and write in return: a formal address she could copy, their names enjoined from one to the other, a message of continuing love expressed as hearts and kisses, and the repeated return gift of the letter. The past tense is used here, for they were cremated with my mother and both her and my father's ashes scattered together. I kept the heart, for love, and for remembering that while it may not be 'a letter' it articulates the quintessence of epistolary intent and displays considerable letterness.

## I = 0.99999999!?

Mathematicians do it differently. Two mathematician friends, one working in a large university and the other a nearby college, were debating a technical point about catastrophe theory when I knew them in the early 2000s.<sup>7</sup> They carried out long-running exchanges about this, combining face-to-face meetings, email, and occasional letters that accompanied journal articles and papers. Bumping into Z, the university component, he produced with both amusement and chagrin a postcard just received. Its entire message was '1 = 0.99999999!?!'. Z explained the mathematician's joke here, the equivalent of his colleague X saying 'you're making a mountain out of a molehill, don't forget the obvious, for all practical purposes the complexities add up to something quite clear'. X's postcard was making a serious point by using the simplest of all mathematical equations to indicate he thought something was being made over-complicated. His point was pushed home by being expressed in a succinct epistolary form, although softened by the 'it's a joke' exclamation mark, and the question mark raising the possibility of response.

Z and X's exchanges were 'high context' ones, needing specialist insider knowledge, including to be aware that the postcard's message was a joke. The postcard clearly had epistolary intent; it was sent as part of relational exchanges occurring in situations of interrupted presence combined with the face-to-face; and albeit a postcard, it incited response. The epistolary form was used in varied ways in my friends' exchanges; and this

particular example was written to make the point ‘in your face’. There is little of ‘the letter’ here, although epistolary intent is clear and the letterness aspect abounds.

## Hi Liz

The last example is a counter-case and concerns student emails. Danet’s (2001) discussion of some research she carried out comments on various departures, in the email she received about this from colleagues and students, from core aspects of what ‘the letter’ is, with such things as address, salutation and signature omitted. She notes that vestiges of the conventions remained, but sees the direction of change as moving away from epistolary conventions, with email and related digital forms of communication establishing their own counter-conventions.

More than a decade on, in reviewing the email sent to me by undergraduate students in the academic years 2012–2014 as their personal ‘director of studies’, and as course organiser of a large interdisciplinary course, what stood out is that these were predominantly written in a formal letter way, albeit with a ubiquitous ‘Hi Liz’ at the start. They have address, the body of the message is clear and ‘about something’ expressed in fairly standard ways, frequently propose face-to-face meetings, and sign off with precision by identifying their degree and year and any particular course referred to. The concluding signature, however, parallels the opening and is of a ‘Bye, John/Janet’ informal, quasi-conversational kind.

But is this a one-off exception to the more general rule Danet proposes, of students sending the equivalent of text messaging regardless of the communications medium and circumstances? A quick check with some colleagues indicates not, that others too receive similar rather formal email letters. Is it then a matter of context, of a particular university and its conventions, or that in formal situations or times of trouble, people fall back on conventional ways of conducting themselves? Perhaps something of both. And this is surely the point, that it might be expected that ‘at the start’ of new social practices, their newness is accentuated, while over time they become assimilated into pre-existing modes and to a (varying) extent normativised (Horst, 2012; Shove et al., 2012).

## The Letter and Letterness: The Phoenix and the Fire

What has been argued here regarding the different examples discussed is that it is by no means so simple as, ‘once there was the letter, now the letter is dead or dying’. From early on, departures from the conventions of form and content can be found. Some express the porous character of the epistolary form and the inventiveness of letterness, while others bring new practices and new forms of epistolarity into being. And so, what of ‘the letter’ and questions of genre and genre assemblage?

Genre conformity, porous departures from the normative and new departures have co-existed over time, and of course the existence of departures requires the existence of (changing) conventions. There is, as the discussion has shown, evidence of variability in forms of letterness and mixtures of (anti)conventions stretching from the 1st to the 21st century. However, epistolary intent has persisted and, the signs strongly suggest, has become enhanced in the recent period, although by slow accretion the processes of genre assemblage have eventuated in different prevailing conventions at different points in time.

Some aspects of this are connected with individual and group customising of the form in which particular epistolary exchanges occur. Aspects of the letters of St Paul regarding their mode of address, the ways in which blessings are given, as well as their bridging of the written and face-to-face, come under this heading. Other examples include Schreiner's early 1870s 'feast or famine' circumstances when no sooner did the post arrive than it had to be replied to, and my father and mother's innovations, which retained epistolary intent and letterness alongside the absence of the letter as such. The particular material form of the Vindolanda tablets, wooden rather than wax because of local circumstances, also comes under the heading of customising, while their content demonstrates the situational aspects of the form of and departures in epistolary exchanges. The 'brothers and comrades' emphasis in many of these exchanges, and particularly the strongly performative character of many Vindolanda letters, is relevant here, as is their mixture of the epistolary and face-to-face.

The existence of normativising trends is also clear, with technological, personal, contextual and situational changes becoming incorporated and made more or less consonant with what existed before. Schreiner's letter-writing practices, for instance, altered their rhythms according to changes of place, and quickly accommodated to technological developments. The exchanges between my parents, which had never occurred pre-war, accommodated both their particular circumstances and the externally imposed ones of compelled absence and the military structuring of place. And whatever the personal inclinations of the university students, their written engagements with 'authority' in situations of perceived necessity were also normativised, but in the direction of conformity to 'the letter' in its standard formulation.

However, what is certainly *not* being argued is that nothing has changed. All the examples discussed provide evidence of change, of small shifts and modifications and also of larger technological and other factors impacting on not only 'the letter' but also perceptions and deployments of letterness. To say that impact is patchy, that the effects differ in different circumstances and for different people, and that things become normativised, is, after all, no more than to say 'change'. But there are some developments associated with digital communications technologies, discussed earlier, which *do* seem to indicate significant departures, and these are now returned to.

Compression in time/space has been a feature of all the new communications technologies mentioned, from the ox-waggon to the pony-cart to the railway, the steamer, telegraph, 1d post, rapid deliveries, postcard and telegram. These have been accommodated, leaving the letter alive, and each time with the sense that communication was quicker, arrival more certain, and the form impacted on. Such changes have occurred in a context of relational exchanges which ordinary letter-writing was a part of but, except in specific circumstances, not the whole, and with the face-to-face and interrupted presence rather than permanent absence being key to most. However, while the time/space compressions that now exist – round-world exchanges in seconds – may not be different in kind from previous ones, they are different in degree, and the brevity is seductive.

The 'death of the letter' debate tends to conflate time and space; but although time spans have been greatly diminished in digital communications, this is not so for separations of space and place. Consequently, although reach has been enormously enhanced in temporal respects, in spatial terms it remains fairly unchanged.<sup>8</sup> Succinctly, there is still

a 'here and now' of writing and 'there and then' of reading, with significant changes to the relationship between 'now and then' but not between 'here and there'.

Nonetheless, there *is* that temporal compression, of diminishing time between writing and receiving, and this is clearly underpinning a sense that an 'in touch' ontology is developing, in fact has already developed for many people, perhaps by means of text messaging even more than other platforms. The exchanges of text messages can concern the monumental, although the indications are that it is the interrupted presence and ordinary life communications that are favoured, of making arrangements, fixing meetings, requesting information or help, and generally oiling the relational wheels (Ling, 2008).

It is not only the speed of possible exchanges that is involved here. Surely the more significant development is that, through a tacit mutual consent, the *form* is being used for writing of different and more equalising kind which – '♥ U 2' – approximates to functional literacy kinds of writing and reading. The enormous upsurges of email, text and 'instant' messaging, the brevity and stripped-down character of these messages, the toleration of mistakes and omissions, and the coming together of speech-like synchronous forms and asynchronous written ones, are producing a major extension of writing as a quotidian activity as an important if unanticipated result of developments in digital communications. The strongly evident persistent desire for connection across time and space and the ways in which digital technologies are used both to transform and to enhance this is surely remarkable and fascinating. Epistolary intent is fundamental to the ways in which people seek to communicate in circumstances of absence/interrupted presence, and the inventiveness in how they use digital communications to do so is helpfully seen in letterness terms as indicative of the porous and morphing ways in which this intent is made manifest.

Perhaps the appropriate conclusion to draw is that, while the letter may be ailing, new digital forms of communication are enabling the expression of epistolary intent in a wide array of ways, with letterness taking new forms around the time/space compressions involved. However, while time compression is 'real', that concerning space is not. Perhaps in the longer run new forms of epistolarity that make more of an impact on space as well as time might come into being, and so it might really be a matter of 'watch this space'.

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## Notes

1. Reviewing the contents of key journals and textbooks shows a dearth regarding everyday writings; for instance, while recognising reading as production, Storey's (1999) useful discussion of everyday cultural consumption does not engage with the everyday production of quotidian written forms such as notes, cards and letters.
2. For instance, in an interesting study of long-distance partnerships, 71% never wrote letters, but 62% emailed several times a day and 30% sent multiple texts a day (Holmes, 2006).
3. These are published in the *Olive Schreiner Letters Online* e-edition. This is free to access and fully searchable, with full and complete transcriptions showing all insertions, deletions and

mistakes. Schreiner letter references are all to this edition.

4. 1 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, Romans, Philemon.
5. Colossians, 2 Thessalonians, Ephesians, Hebrews, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus.
6. The *Vindolanda Tablets Online* is free access and fully searchable. References here are to tablet numbers, which can be searched on.
7. This is a branch of bifurcation theory that classifies sudden shifts that occur as a result of small changes and was first developed by mathematician René Thon.
8. Visual forms such as Skype appear to impact here, but this is as a simulacrum of presence, not actual presence.

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