

## On Burning, Saving and Stealing Letters

### ABSTRACT

What happens when the social scientist's vulnerable, at risk subject meets the robust subject of oral history? I hope this seminar will tell me. For the subject I bring with me, from a training in literary criticism, is neither vulnerable nor robust but tragicomically both, agent of its own misfortune. This is the subject who puts their lover's letters in an archive for an uncertainly dreamed-for posterity; and the subject who discovers their letters have been put there by their ex-lesbian-ex-wife; and the subject who agrees to archive those texts for – well for more than the record. And, most of all, I bring along the subject who wishes then to read, quote, interpret such letters in her own uncertainly dreamed-for career-book.

How can we be ethical about using personal archives, while also enjoying the ambiguity of lovers', donors', archivists', researchers' stories? What codes of conduct might acknowledge the contrariness of all our characters, what forms of university research ethics may indeed be instrumental in producing a contrary subject? And can an ethics based on care rather than justice help? I will explore these questions in relation to my search for letters by women and men involved in women's liberation struggles since the 1970s, and why I ended my book with a meditation 'On Burning, Saving and Stealing Letters'.

Niamh Moore's elegant agenda for today asks us to consider how we are all affected by archive fever, a *mal d'archive*, but differently so according to disciplinary backgrounds. We all face a disproportionate amount of information in relation to our inability to save, interpret, use it. Qualitative data poses this problem in an extreme form, because its holistic epistemology means that the object's form and provenance is as meaningful as the object itself: you can't reduce a story like long division or even a French bouillon. Oral history particularly suffers from this *mal d'archive* because of the sheer laboriousness of moving from oral to the written medium, hence

acres of untranscribed, unsummarised, uninterpreted tapes and recordings – not used, let alone re-used.

On the other hand, oral historians are less feverish than the social scientists when it comes to the ethical challenges of re-using qualitative data. Valerie Yow's excellent handbook *Recording Oral History* tells us why. She argues that oral history interviews only proceed on the basis of 'informed consent', with identifiable individuals who are valued for their unique perspectives. Interviewees positively *want* to have their names and deeds recorded for posterity. Oral history therefore does not conform to the medical or social science model of human subject research and many of protocols of 'protection' do not apply. Linda Shopes, as past president of the Oral History Association, indeed negotiated oral history research's exemption from Institutional Review Boards in the US, (the equivalent to our Ethics Committees) on these grounds.

Here, then, is the 'agentic' subject, as opposed to the vulnerable subject of the social scientists and social workers. But my background is English, and in preparing for today, I have realised that the subject posed by this discipline is neither of agentic nor vulnerable but both: classically tragic, but importantly comic, and though nowadays often more tragic-comic, this is a good subject who suffers a reversal, either because of misrecognition or brought down by a fatal flaw. In tragedy, the ending may tell us something about how we overestimate our ability to control destiny, or it may shake us up to fight the forces that have brought us down: inner as well as outer. In comedy, we may not learn as much from reversal and misrecognition, but neither are we punished. The vulnerable agent bumbles on.

I have written elsewhere about my problems with contemporary literary critical fatefulness, relished so ironically by literary sophisticates. But perhaps it may

provide a refreshing change to oral historical naivete about ‘informed consent’ on the one hand, and sociological panic about getting sued on the other. Pinpointing this has, at least, made sense of the ethical tightropes I had to walk when doing my book *In Love and Struggle: Letters in Contemporary Feminism*.

My book is about letters that feminists wrote to each other in the heat of women’s liberation, including epistolary novels like *The Colour Purple*, Greenham chain letters, lesbian love letters and campaign letters, as well as a little look at what has happened with email groups. I’d like to say a few words about my it, to draw out the particular ethical challenges that I discovered both in the feminist content of the letters and in trying to use them. I had begun by exploring these letters as forms of everyday art springing out of extraordinary contexts of political communication. But the more I read, the more I realized I was studying relationships, tensions between so-called ‘sisters’, who were using the ambiguities of written correspondence to work out ambiguities in how they felt about each other. I traced a pattern that is familiar to those who have read feminist memoirs (or indeed lived through the period!), that of an intense love affair, then a kind of break up, and a purple memory.

But unlike autobiographies, letters are much more at the coalface, because they are not retrospective, and because they are also in a sense, the stuff of the relationship itself. At the same time, letters are neither straightforward nor confessional, but rhetorical, even manipulative forms. This ‘art’ is most obvious in the characteristic genre of the feminist ‘open letter’, the most famous of which is Audre Lorde’s Open Letter to Mary Daly. This was initially written as a private letter in 1979, but then published for all to see in 1982 in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writing by Radical Women of Color* and soon a key texts on white (lesbian) feminist racism. A less well-known but similarly complex demand is Maria Jastrzebska’s open

letter on the politics of disability. This writer wrote to fellow Myalgic Encephalomyelitis (chronic fatigue) sufferer Caiea March, who was editing an anthology on 'women and ME', about her anger that feminist friends wouldn't look after her because 'they'd had enough of self-sacrifice, of over-caring for others and not knowing how to put themselves at the centre of their own lives'. Jastrzebska describes the failure of a personal correspondence with an ex-lover who was also training to be a healer, and the open letter seems a way she returns to it as an unresolved puzzle about 'the issues of need and dependence – so complicated for women' (Jastrzebska 111):

I seethed at the thought of her seeing clients on a professional basis while avoiding a close friend who had become so seriously ill. She said I didn't understand the pressures she had in her life. She couldn't keep on top of things for herself, she didn't even have time to get her washing done, let alone deal with my guilt-tripping her. We exchanged angry letters. In the end I suggested we meet to try and sort it out; she refused. Perhaps she thought it was too late for that. She said she wanted to leave behind situations like the one she'd been in with a previous boyfriend. Some time before she'd been lovers with a man who had also had a (different) chronic illness. This man had manipulated and guilt-tripped her and in the end become violent and tried to kill her. I was devastated by the comparison – I felt ashamed of not recovering – and I gave up (113).

The real exchange of 'angry letters' mentioned in this displaced address, clearly turned on what each felt the other owed and could expect, and feminist reasoning could be claimed on both sides. Jastrzebska's feminist friend's decision to stop looking after her because she had to 'look after herself' checkmated her need, her demand, indeed, her feminist expectation of care.

I give this example to show why I moved from literary theories of epistolarity to sociological theories of the way that social movements develop, and then to anthropological theories of community in-groups and out-groups. Letters functioned for feminists as ritual gifts and demand in the context of the very special emotional and erotic dimensions of women's political relationship. But what also became clear

was that I had to attend to the ethical assumptions of the letter writers themselves. Letters like Jastrebska's are classic expressions of the feminist ideal of a women-centred *ethics of care*, the belief that women would look after each other in their new world, in a way that men had not. And indeed, 1982 was the year that Carol Gilligan's *In a Different Voice* famously formulated this as an aspect of a feminine value system that went beyond the traditional Kantian, and masculinised, model of impartial justice as the highest form of social psychology.

But though it was obvious that letter writers aspired to mutual care, it was just as obvious that they were caught up in a central problem for care ethics, of how to manage potentially bottomless needs as well as more measurable rights, and what to do when people assert their *right to be cared for*. Patricia Williams, for example, notes that for 'although rights may not be ends in themselves', rights rhetoric has been a more politically effective form of discourse for African Americans, and Ruth Lister, amongst many others, proposes that any feminist political philosophy needs to work out how to integrate care with rights ethics, and begins to do this in a 'tiered model of citizenship'.

I would love to hear how we might apply such a tiered model to the re-use of qualitative data. It might be one way of acknowledging that 'tragi-comic', mixed-motive subject that I found emerging in my research. For the moment, I want to give another example of these letters. For of course the more ethically inflamed the material, the more ethically inflamed was my own relationship to it. The example I will give also shows how feminist archives, which tend to specialize in qualitative data, become entangled in ethical expectations of care as well.

One of the best resources I found for my book was the legendary Lesbian Herstory Archives in Brooklyn, which entranced me with its stacks of colourful boxes

surveyed by a life size cut out of Gertrude Stein, photos of archivists on Pride demos, button displays and comfy rocking chair.<sup>1</sup> There I found a short set of letters which exemplified the ways in which the politics of identity fired, eroticized, and also combusted relationships between women influenced by feminism, even (perhaps especially), when they were literally lovers. Although these were never intended to be published, raggedly incomplete, these are even more eloquent than the open letter, arguably than the epistolary novel, on the painful end to an ethically conceived love. They speak to us of the personal investment in political relationship, and also how writing itself was part of that ideal.

Sent in 1982 with an anonymous covering note from one of the writers because they had heard that 'old love letters' were wanted by the Archives, it is self-described as a correspondence between 'a 21 year old white middle class jewish woman and a French Canadian irish catholic white working class woman, age 39'.<sup>2</sup> The younger woman's letters, in a staggered sequence written between 1980 and 1981, (dated in the feminist calendar as 9980-1), are filled with passionate references to shared women's identities and lesbian feminist culture: poetry-writing, moon worship, dreams, dancing, menstrual celebrations and tarot readings, including of the shapes of blood on the sheets. 'Mmm, its sweet to know you as comrade/lover/sister/witch/and lunatic' (19 Dec 9980), she declares, assuring her that she loves 'with her cunt', as well as her heart and wisdom. She remembers her lover talking of having to learn the jargon of the women's movement, yet is glad she may be learning from her in this respect; she berates herself for remaining attached to the privileges of her class, yet is angry that she has been made to feel alienated from her Jewish identity.

The mediation of their relationship through a proliferating discussion of political 'difference' is more bitterly expressed in the older woman's replies, written a year later. Angrily announcing that it was time for them to break up, that she had lost her sense of self, she reminds her lover that she is 'not the last strawberry in the patch, though you were the juiciest'. In a later letter, she refers to their pledge of honesty and truthfulness in an angry discussion where their differences of class, age, but principally, race, are signifiers of personal betrayal. Beginning with the acknowledgement that 'maybe in some insidious way we are all racist, on a conscious or un-conscious level', she covers pages with accusations that it is she, not her Jewish lover, who has dedicated herself to learning about Judaism and anti-Semitism, proposing that her own 'part-Indian' heritage has made of her a warrior who does not understand the resignation of some of the oppressed:

You have made our differences glaring & painful to me, when you rejected me because I was not a jew (one of the reasons) I almost went crazy with anger & pain & I couldn't understand how you seemed to know me so well in my spirituality & how hard I was trying to understand you as a jew & deal with my feelings of fear & hatred. It was all so complicated & it was tied up with my awe and my worship of your darkness yr hair, yr cunt, yr. spirituality yr powers, I know these feelings are real but it was so hard to relate to you as a sister as a warrior as another ☞ with a common bond of survival. You drew the lines, you created the boundaries, you refused to deal with hard stuff between us. You denied my experiences with jews in my own life & you glossed over my hatreds of what had brought me to these feelings. [...] I never got to hear or read yr poetry because you wouldn't let me & you excluded me from that experience. It seems to me that at times you just seem to learn what you have to for the occasion & that you don't go very deeply into matters. [...] You have separated us by tribes & I am not of yr tribe. [...] I said many things that I wanted you to deny to say were not true that you didn't leave me because I was too old & powerless & vain & insecure & I blamed you for all my insecurities. That is why I couldn't continue to hate you just to protect myself.

Realising that she wants more from the relationship than her ex, she presents their internal fight as a pitiful defeat of both of them by 'MAN'S HISTORY'. Yet this tips into a warning that oppression can become aggression if a sense of humanity is lost,

choosing the clearly inflammatory example of the Israelis in relation to the Palestinians. The competition fuelling the letter finally emerges explicitly when she says she is tired of competing with her lover, how angry she is that the lover has been ‘willing to give up everything for some boring big cunt because she was a jew with a car & nice hands’.

We see here how the rejected lover rages not only about the inefficacy of the language of respect for racial difference she has learned, but about the literary culture that had overdetermined the letters as women’s intimate identity but eventually become another marker of her exclusion, returning ‘cunt’ to its association with degrading insult and instructing her lover not to ‘write any more crummy poems about me’. No doubt the younger woman was still suffering when she sent in the correspondence to the Lesbian Herstory Archives (presumably having had her own letters returned to her by her ex) a year or so later. This is the covering note she put with them:

I heard you wanted old love letters, so I send these to you instead of burning them. [...] thank you for providing a place to save our herstory when it gets to be too much to keep it at home.<sup>3</sup>

To me, it is obvious that both of these letter writers are trapped in an idealism of the time that many of us will recognize. Of course there is no point in trying to interpret their relationship too closely: one of the good things about a literary approach is that one doesn’t try to, seeing these instead as careful – but also careless – texts. Yet I can certainly say that the personae in this affair are morally uneven, drawn in life-like shades of grey. Surely we can see a ‘reversal’ and a ‘misrecognition’ in the gentle tragedy of this relationship?

And if we consider the letters’ provenance, their ambiguity increases. Thinking she is contributing to lesbian herstory, the younger woman donates not only

her own letters but her lovers' (did she ask?), leaving their story vulnerably powerful for passing researchers like myself, misrecognising perhaps a scene of redemption that arose for me at least when I opened the box to find, along with the letters, a handmade talismanic necklace of 39 seeds and beads for her lover. A relic. These gifts she donated with the stricture that they should be catalogued anonymously, but with no other instructions about closure from use, copyright, or indeed, whether she'd told her ex she was donating them (she didn't have to, legally). We can surmise that the younger lover wished to contribute to the lesbian record, for a public readership, at least of some sort, at some stage, but more subtly, that the lesbian community will relieve her of the responsibility of deciding whether to burn or save her letters. Did the archivists also misrecognise what they were collecting? I am not sure. Archivists often occupy the paradoxical position of guardian for a public that cannot really be trusted to use its own goods. The LHA archivists have tried to avoid this in maintaining their close-knit voluntary status, but do they make themselves vulnerable to the contrary wishes of donors and users, as well as simply the difficulty of not being sufficiently used, in the inevitably somewhat makeshift result of a lesbians-only history?

To me, letters are valuable not only for the relationships they bring to life, but for the meaning of how they are saved, edited; here the inadvertency and mystery of the snippet creates its own poetry. I do not know who these two writers are, having been unable to trace them without invoking paid internet sleuths, which seemed worse leaving it. It is precious to me not only that they remain in the Lesbian Herstory Archives, but that Deborah Edel, founding and still present archivist, encouraged me to use them as anonymous, hitherto unpublished herstory. Yet for the sin of prurience, of the embarrassing pleasure of reading other people's break-up letters, I can only

describe myself as an equally tragic-comic character. My own misrecognition of what I was dealing with: bits of relationship, not aesthetic or political exercises, is astonishing in retrospect.

If I abstract my key ethical dilemmas, I can see that my repeated conundrum with using personal letters in or not in archives has been:

1. my lack of legal and procedural knowledge, but also general ambiguity about policy, e.g. 'fair use'; 'informed consent';
2. my lack of a sense of authority – trying to unearth letters with no book contract, no famous feminist names with which to gain interest
3. my difficulty in acknowledging self-interest in terms of career, alongside political allegiances
4. interviewees' ambivalence and mixed messages – their internal contradictions and difficulty in acknowledging self interests – and I haven't told you other, more complex stories, where I did in fact meet the writer
5. Archives' interest in getting material but without having secured clear rights for researcher's access – ambiguity in archival role as intermediary

An archival frame helps to a degree in the negotiating process of obtaining letters in an ethical manner, but as any archivist knows, there is no short cut to the continual balancing of the needs of donors, scholars and funders. This includes warning donors about third party concerns; deciding whether to undertake the laborious and expensive process of making uncopyrighted material available to researchers, and refusing donor requests to embargo access for centuries or to their enemies.<sup>4</sup> Archivists surely should not be made the moral guardians as well – why should they be more or less 'vulnerable' than the rest of us?

How to have an ethical policy that acknowledges the reality of all our mixed motives, especially of pride? As I suggested at the beginning, University Research Ethics committees are often over-controlling and also over-simplistic in constructing all research subjects as vulnerable, under their medicalised model of care. Again, an ethics of justice might sometimes be a more honest way to deal with conflicts of

interest, a way to position the subject as *not only vulnerable but agentic*. On the other hand, at least in principle, an ethics of care does have the advantage over an ethics of justice in acknowledging the complexity of the situation, and indeed the nature of qualitative data itself, through its:

- Principle of particularity: Looking at case by case basis
- Principle of no harm: this is surely the ultimate ethical goal
- Principle that personal information is relevant to public policy
- Principle that emotional and bodily is part of research and knowledge
- Principle of inequality, dependency and need are realistic starting points

This underlay my response to the problem and why I:

- Didn't do much without written permission, but did do some except LHA letters
- Offered pseudonyms and used them where wanted
- Sent drafts to people for comment and altered accordingly
- Put people in acknowledgements
- Added my story and letters to the book
- Wrote two chapters on the topic of burning, saving and stealing letters
- Gave copies of books to contributors
- Met up with key contributors afterwards as well as during the project

But can our desires ever be ethical? I came to think that burning letters is probably safer than any kind of hope that saving them, inside or outside the archive, will never harm anyone. I also conclude that I'll take the risk, and hope we can find a comic rather than tragic end to the inevitable reversals and misrecognitions.

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<sup>1</sup> See < <http://www.lesbianherstoryarchives.org/> >

<sup>2</sup> Love letters 1980-1982, accession number 83-18, Lesbian Herstory Archives, New York.

<sup>3</sup> Cover note, love letters 1980-1982, accession number 83-18, Lesbian Herstory Archives, New York.

<sup>4</sup> Kathryn Jacob, personal interview with the author, 16 October 2003. Jacob explained that preserving the anonymity of sensitive material involved photocopying it, blacking out all names and dates, and photocopying it again.