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Dear Lucy: A Multilogue Response to Lucy E. Bailey's "Epistolary Hauntings"

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Notes

¹ Lucy Bailey (32nd Annual International Society for Educational Biography Conference, St. Louis, MO, 2015), <http://www.isebio.com/archived/conferences.html>.

² Naomi Norquay, “‘Dear Family’: Preparing Personal Letters for the Archives” (32nd Annual International Society of Educational Biography Annual Conference, St. Louis, MO, 2015).

³ Jonathan Silin, “The Teacher as Accidental Archivist,” *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* 15, no. 2 (April 3, 2014): 133–42.

Dear Lucy: A Multilogue Response to Lucy E. Bailey’s “Epistolary Hauntings”

Naomi Norquay

Dear Lucy,

I read your paper, “Epistolary Hauntings: Working ‘With’ and ‘On’ Family Letters” with anticipatory excitement. I was curious to learn how the paper had developed since you presented on this topic in April, 2015 at the International Society for Education Biography annual conference in St. Louis.¹ You did not disappoint! I was inspired to craft my review as a letter.

Your key question, “what’s to be done with family letters?” is of interest to social historians, cultural historians, archivists, educators and the (likely) myriad relatives of the letter writers. As you know, I too have an interest in family letters and what it means to be their steward.² In my case, my mother’s letters to her family during WWII were sent to an archive as part of her estate, so I started my journey working through the issues surrounding family letters in a different place than you did. I envy you, as you have more options! Like Jonathan Silin, you have become an accidental archivist.³ Your paper examines the terrain of being an archivist who is very cognizant of the familial relations that produced the letters and the possibly competing demands of the generations which follow. Your “ancestor” was fortunate that the letters fell into your hands.

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As a descendant, relative, researcher and educator, your task is layered with both converging and competing expectations and preoccupations. Your paper makes it quite clear that you see your role as possibly more than simply providing safe storage for these family remnants. You carefully lay out a number of trajectories and caveats, and provide inspiration for others facing similar dilemmas.

I was struck by the juxtaposition of your “ancestor” as archivist and yourself as archivist. Your description of the carefully labeled boxes, the copies of responses to letters received, the photos and newspaper clippings suggests that your “ancestor” archived by choice: his actions seem quite deliberate, looking both backwards and forwards. Your archivist status is bequeathed, an inheritance, one might say, not something that you chose.

One small point: I am puzzled as to why you chose the term “ancestor.” Ancestor is defined in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English* as “any person from whom one’s father or mother is descended, a forefather.”⁴ I think the term is too distant for someone whose “tall frame lean[ed] in to place those initials in black ink.”⁵ I sense from your descriptions that you knew this person! I suggest that “relative” might suffice. It locates him as related to you, but it does the work you seem to want done: protecting the identity of this family archivist (and consequently, his siblings.)

Carolyn Steedman reminds us that “the infinite heap of things . . . recorded, the notes and traces . . . left behind, constitute practically nothing at all.”⁶ The archive’s content “sits there until it is read, and used, and narrativised.”⁷ The content of your archive is “nothing at all,” until it is acknowledged, valued, and engaged. This is where you shift from being an accidental archivist to being an interested and invested researcher. You might reiterate that archivist and researcher, while one and the same person (i.e., you!), are not interchangeable, but rather, distinct roles, that can be in conflict.

I think your acknowledgment of the power the researcher can have upon accessing an archive is important: “To pursue a particular analytic trajectory with historical materials is an act of power, a choice that frames and excludes.”⁸ You lay out several possible analytic trajectories: affirming

⁴ Henry Watson Fowler, John Bradbury Sykes, and Francis George Fowler, eds., *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English: Based on the Oxford English Dictionary and Its Supplements* (Clarendon Press, 1976), 34.

⁵ Lucy Bailey, “Epistolary Hauntings: Working ‘With’ and ‘On’ Family Letters.” *Education’s Histories*, 17 Oct. 2016. <http://www.educationshistories.org/epistolary-hauntings-working-with-and-on-family-letters/>.

⁶ Carolyn Steedman, *Dust: The Archive and Cultural History* (Manchester University Press, 2001), 18.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁸ Bailey, “Epistolary Hauntings.”

bloodlines; building a narrative inheritance; keeping family history alive; informing the larger domains of social, cultural, and political history; considering aspects of the letters' materiality. As a point of clarification, your use of Goodall's "narrative inheritance" falls under the subtitle, "Methodological Choices," but I do not understand it as a methodology—rather a frame for interpretation. Perhaps "Analytical Choices" might be a better fit. This leads to your final statement, "[t]he methodological complexities I narrate here."⁹ For me, "analytical" or "theoretical" seem a better fit than "methodological."

⁹ Ibid.

Your focus on the materiality of the letters reminds me of Steedman's chapter entitled, "'Something she called a fever': Michelet, Derrida and dust."¹⁰ In it she explores the dust produced by the leather-bound tomes in the archive. Archived materials are not inert! They continue their slow process to total disintegration. I really like how you imagined the "life-span" (or perhaps, temporality) of the paper, from seed to tree to pulp to paper to stationery to the letters "leaving traces of my ancestors' bodies on my own before they move through and out on their papyrological journeys."¹¹ The letters will not last forever! Your measured urgency to think through the issues surrounding their journey is timely.

¹⁰ Steedman, *Dust*, pp. 17-37.

¹¹ Bailey, "Epistolary Hauntings."

As it happened, whilst pondering this review of your paper, I read Tracy Chevalier's latest novel, *At the Edge of the Orchard*.¹² The story follows the son of a pioneer family in Black Swamp, Ohio, from 1838 to 1856, as he makes his journey into adulthood and across the continent to California. Key parts of the story are told through letters he sends home to his brothers and sisters. He writes sporadically—every couple of years, always on New Year's Day. In each letter he wistfully mentions that he has not heard from them and he wonders if they are still living. Near the end of the book is a series of letters his sister wrote to him, each one expressing the hope that they might find each other one day. What happened to these letters are important hinges for the turns of the story. Their journeys criss-crossing mid-nineteenth century America, the places where they were kept or hidden, their expressions of desire for connection, and their role as keepsakes and touchstones, resonate with the ways in which you have thought about your collection of letters between siblings in your own family.

¹² Tracy Chevalier, *At the Edge of the Orchard*, First Edition (Viking, 2016).

¹³ Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (University of Minnesota Press, 1997), quoted in Lucy Bailey, “Epistolary Hauntings.”

I know you will open those boxes with careful curiosity, mindful of the array of choices before you, in all their complexities and fraught-ness. Perhaps in so doing, the feeling that the letters haunt will dissipate, as “what’s been in your blind spot comes into view.”¹³

In solidarity,

Naomi Norquay



Education’s Histories would like to thank Naomi Norquay for her careful review of Lucy E. Bailey’s essay, “Epistolary Hauntings: Writing ‘With’ and ‘On’ Family Letters,” and for allowing us to publish her review in our multilogue format.



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