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ENGL 618 – Final Project

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Letter from Josefina Niggli to her family – October 12, 1935

*Biography/ Introduction*

Josefina María Niggli was in Monterrey, Mexico on July 13, 1910, but her family fled to Texas when violence emerged during the Mexican Revolution. Her family stayed roving back and forth across the border for many years and Josefina was home-schooled for the majority of her primary school years. She and her mother eventually established a new home in San Antonio, Texas when Josefina was fifteen where she went on to complete high school and pursue a higher education while her father stayed in Mexico “until near the time of his death”. Niggli would continue making visits to Mexico, but America was her country of residence starting in 1925 (Martinez 7-8).

Mexico would always influence her work. Being so close to both countries throughout her formative years, Niggli became a pioneer of both Mexican American writers as well as female writers. She was one of the first Mexican American writers to use her experiences in both countries as major themes in her work. Her plays and novels are typically set in Mexico. She was also one of the first female writers in the twentieth century to receive acclaim in a range of literary genres (Martinez 8).

In 1926, Niggli attended the University of Incarnate Word In San Antonio as well as spent her junior year at Columbia University in New York City. During college, Niggli’s father

published her first book of poetry, a small collection of eight poems, titled *Mexican Silhouettes* and she also took second place in the *Ladies' Home Journal* College Short Story Contest (Martinez 19). She also worked with the San Antonio Little Theater and gained popularity as a writer and producer of serial thriller shows for KTSA Radio during this time (Martinez 21).

In the 1930s, Niggli received important achievements including two Rockefeller for her playwriting studies, fellowships and grants from the University of North Carolina, several places in New York City, and the Bread Loaf Conference Fellowship. The Bread Loaf Writers' Conferences is the oldest writers' conference in America, which held its first session before creative writing became a course of study in the educational setting ("History").

When Niggli moved to North Carolina by 1935, she had found her niche using all the Mexican culture that she had gained in her childhood and define these traditions to an English-language audience. It could be said that Niggli was ahead of her time as she was the pioneering voice in portraying such culture between the borders. Niggli wrote many plays and novels and began publishing her plays while she worked on her Master's degree at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill. She also joined the theatre troupe that her professor Frederick H. Koch (nicknamed "Proff") began when he joined the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill in 1918.

This letter, one of Josefina Niggli's many letters addressed "Dearest Family," was written in pen on two small pieces of paper that I can best describe as "monogramed cardstock". The paper is woven like linen paper, but Niggli likely would not have been able to afford linen paper as a graduate student. Each page features a stylized "N" near the top of the front page, and her paper is folded in half to form two 5" x 7" half-pages with each divided section counting as four pages each. There are two separate pieces of paper, so the letter is eight pages at full length, and

her pagination is unique. She writes on the outer side of the first folded page then continues onto the right inner side before moving to the back of the first page and then to the back of page two. She repeats this process for the second piece of paper. It is unclear as to why she made this decision. (Photographs of the letters are provided in the appendix with numbers 1 and 2 used to denote the piece of paper and letters A, B, C, and D used to denote the page of the letter as it appears on the paper.) The second page of her letter is noted by a number two written in the top right corner margin. This helped in determining the intended pagination of her letter along with pairing words that ended certain pages with words that began other pages to match where her narrative connected. This is the pagination my transcription follows.

This document is addressed to “Dearest Family”, and includes specific address to her grandmother and father thanking them personally for individual gifts that they provided while also informing them rather quickly of many things she has been doing at Chapel Hill and overall giving them reasons as to why it had taken her so long to respond to their last correspondence or thank them for the package she received. A large part of this letter includes descriptions of her plays and a lot of work she had been doing with the Carolina Playmakers at the time. Based on my research, I believe that this letter contains some of the first recorded evidence that one of her earliest plays written with the Playmakers underwent a name change that she did not understand. *Tooth or Shave* went by a different name as Niggli was writing it. According to her in this letter, Niggli originally called the play “The Phonograph’s Front Tooth” and she goes on to say that the name was changed “for some reason unknown to me.”

Niggli’s penmanship is immaculate though her grammar and spelling contains some peculiarities in a few places, such as the period found inside her parenthesis next to the word me when she didn’t even write a complete sentence or “Halloween” being spelled “Haloween”. Her

use of “pyjamas” over “pajamas” happens in multiple letters written by Niggli. I have no way of knowing whether she spelled any of the names mentioned in this letter correctly or not, which played a factor as to why it was difficult for me to find them on any database or in any of the yearbooks through which I searched. I have decided to maintain all of these eccentricities in their original state for the preservation of authenticity. Such eccentricities include the way in which Josefina Niggli writes her the letter “t”. No matter if the words starts with the letter “t” or the letter is included within the word, Niggli more than likely crosses the “t” next to the letter. For example, if the word written is “the”, the cross bar of her “t” actually crosses the letter “h”. These letter have been transcribed as closely to the original in their entirety with most errors or perceived mistakes left as they appear in the document as best as a transcription can provide.

Much of this project was aided and made possible by Hunter Library’s Special Collections. George Frizzell and Jason Brady offered much appreciated assistance and information while also providing good company during the research process. I would also like to thank Peter Smith who was another valued resource as someone who had worked on his own transcription using letters written by Niggli

*Transcription*

Oct. 12, 1935.

Dearest Family –

I am awfully sorry that I have passed such a long time in writing to you, but I have been up to my ears in work. First of all I have rehearsals every night for “Three Cornered Moon.”<sup>1</sup> And what I mean is they are rehearsals! My lines are awfully hard to learn because they never grow out of anything that anybody else is saying. I just break out at intervals with brilliant observations such as “Love is not a potato.”<sup>2</sup> Then my play “The Red Velvet Goat”<sup>3</sup> which has 15 actors in it has gone into rehearsals with Jo Brown directing, but he insists that I be on tap<sup>4</sup>. He gathered together a swell cast, & Patsy McMullin<sup>5</sup>, who is playing the lead, told me that she really didn’t have time to do it, but that she was so anxious to be in it that she was just taking the time. Wasn’t that swell?

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<sup>1</sup> A play written in 1993 by Gertrude Tonkonogy Friedberg that was also produced as a motion picture in the same year (“Gertrude”).

<sup>2</sup> I was not able to find any source that could confirm Niggli’s role in this play. I tried to find a copy of Three Cornered Moon online, but could not find one to search for this specific line. The play was adapted, so there is a chance that very line might have been removed from the script. I could not find any evidence to connect this quote to either the play or the movie.

<sup>3</sup> *The Red Velvet Goat* was another comedy written by Niggli, which along with *Sunday Costs Five Pesos*, have become her two most frequently performed plays. It was originally published in *One Act Play Magazine* in July 1937 and was selected by Proff Koch (see footnote 10) for his *American Folk Plays* book in 1939. It was also included in Niggli’s own anthology in 1938 as well as in Samuel Selden’s *International Folk Plays* in 1949 (Martinez 39).

<sup>4</sup> “On tap” is an idiom with roots dating back to the mid-1800s that means to be readily available for immediate use or reference, alluding to beer that is ready to be drawn (“Tap”).

<sup>5</sup> After extensively searching the 1935 and 1936 UNC Chapel Hill yearbooks as well as NCPedia, I could not find any way of confirming Patsy’s identity or that of Jo Brown.

Also they have decided to take another play of mine (original title “The Phonograph’s Front Tooth” changed to “Tooth or Shave?”<sup>6</sup> for some reason unknown to me.) on tour with two other plays, and I had to write that one almost over-night.

I was supposed to play the lead in another one-act play, but I had to draw the line. I am not a cat, and I do not have nine lives.

On top of all this I have had Chaucer<sup>7</sup> and I have written the first act of my three-act play. The Chaucer is the largest and hardest item to fill. It takes me half an hour to read one page.

I hope, from this, you can understand why I have not written.

Some day this week, let me see, it must have been Wednesday night, the box arrived.

They held it at the post office for me, and luckily I was with Frank Durham who had his car. We were on our way to Darice’s<sup>8</sup>, so he drove me over there, & all of us stood around when I opened it. Grandma, that blouse is perfect! If I had stood over & directed every stitch, it could not have suited me more. Of course I had to put it & the skirt on, & they are the most becoming things I almost ever had. Just putting them on seemed to take me right back home to “Messico.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> *Tooth or Shave* was Niggli’s first play for the Carolina Playmakers in Chapel Hill. It is a comedy with only four characters that takes place in a village on the outsides of Monterrey called Santa Catarina. This village would go on to appear in nearly all of her writings (Martinez 31). The main character is a barber who is also the town’s dentist in emergencies, and is based on a person in a similar situation from Niggli’s childhood village. It was so popular that it was staged twice that year. As far as I can tell, this letter contains the first recorded notion that Niggli had a different title for the play during its development.

<sup>7</sup> Geoffrey Chaucer (1340 – 1400) was a poet born in London, England. His best known and most acclaimed work is *The Canterbury Tales*. He was the first to be buried in Westminster Abbey’s Poet’s Corner. (Bio.com). He is widely regarded one of the greatest poets of the Middle Ages. His literature is continues to be taught in some American high schools and in many colleges.

<sup>8</sup> Again, I had the same problem with Frank Durham and Darice as I did with Patsy and Jo Brown. I searched the yearbooks and couldn’t find any of the people named in this letter except for Koch.

<sup>9</sup> This appears to be some kind of a joke on spelling Mexico in English similar to the way it might be pronounced by a native Spanish speaker.

I had as grand a time going through those packages as though it had been Christmas. Daddy, those glass paper weights are the nicest I about ever saw. I have them in front of me now. The green one on the right & that perfectly beautiful purple one on the left. And the pyjamas! They are certainly the product of Halloween. And the candy, & the soap, and the pencil sharpener, and the knife! My voice just gets higher & higher on each one. That snack is a life-saver. I was certainly glad to get it.

Did I tell you that I was to speak before the council of directors that are to be held here this year next Saturday, & read one of my plays? By the way, this is the Playmaker's<sup>10</sup> silver jubilee, marking Proff's<sup>11</sup> 25<sup>th</sup> year of teaching, & so everything extra is to be done this year that can be done?

This morning I was appointed one of the judges for the play contest sponsored by the Federation of Music Clubs<sup>12</sup>. Where have I heard that phrase before?<sup>13</sup>

Well I must close & get to work. The silver voice of Chaucer is calling me.

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<sup>10</sup> The Carolina Playmakers is a theatre troupe that was founded by Dr. Frederick H. Koch in 1918. Performances were generally held outdoors in the Forest Theatre, which Koch designed himself. The group's purpose was "to produce student plays, and to provide theatrical events for an audience not necessarily knowledgeable about high theater." Niggli wrote many of her plays as part of the group and also performed in plays as well.

<sup>11</sup> Dr. Frederick H. Koch (1877-1944). He was hired by the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill in 1918 to teach playwriting courses. He started the Department of Drama as well as the Carolina Playmakers theatre group (*Yakety Yack*) when he joined the staff at UNC Chapel Hill.

<sup>12</sup> Founded in 1898. The National Federation of Music Clubs is a grassroots nonprofit organization. It is the largest of its kind in America to promote and support American music, musicians, and music education by giving anyone a chance to discover and appreciate music. ("National")

<sup>13</sup> Not exactly sure what phrase she may be referring to. Niggli had a tendency of writing multiple letters to the same people on the same day, so the answer to her question could likely be found in previous letters to her family even if they share the same date as this one.

By the way, about the box – Frank took it to Darice’s – Darice decided, because she is bigger than me to carry it to the restaurant – I carried it to rehearsal, & Harry<sup>14</sup> took it<sup>15</sup> home for me. I managed pretty well, didn’t I?

Much love,

Josephine.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Like Darice, Patsy, Jo, and Frank, I was not able to find any information on Harry. The lack of a surname made pinpointing any results more difficult, but even with a surname, the identities could not be found.

<sup>15</sup> The date “Oct 12 / 35” is written along the right margin beginning from this word. This is likely a cataloging practice employed by Western Carolina’s Special Collections staff to keep the pieces together if the pages ever got misplaced, as Niggli did not include the date on every page of her letter.

<sup>16</sup> Her first name is originally spelled “Josephine”, but she was often called “Josephina” because it was easier to say in Spanish. She chose to go with “Josefina” by the 1940s, but her name must be searched using both “f” and “ph” in databases because various print sources used both and some sources could be missed otherwise.



## Appendix

Oct. 12-1935.

N Dearest Family-

I am awfully sorry that I have passed such a long time in writing to you, but I have been up to my ears in work. First of all I have rehearsals every night for "Three Cornered Moon." And what I mean is, they are rehearsals! My lines are awfully hard to learn because they never grow out of anything that anybody else is saying. I just break out at intervals with

Figure 1: The first page (1.A)

Also they have decided to take another play of mine (original title "The Phonograph's Front Tooth" changed to "Tooth or Rhyme?" for some reason unknown to me.) on tour with two other plays, and I had to write that one almost over-night.

I was supposed to play the lead in another one-act play, but I had to draw the line. I am not a cat, and I do not have brilliant observations such as "Love is not a potato." Then my play "The Red Cocker-Goat" which has 15 actors in it has gone into rehearsal with Mr. Brown directing, but he insists that I be on top. He gathered together a swell cast, & Patsy Mc Mullin, who is playing the lead, told me that she really didn't have time to do it, but that she was so anxious to be in it that she was just taking the time. Wasn't that swell?

Figure 2 The second (1.B - right) and third (1.C - left) pages

nine lines.

On top of all this I have had Chaucer, and I have written the first act of my three-act play. The Chaucer is the largest & hardest item to fill. It takes me half an hour to read one page.

I hope, from this, you can understand why I have not written.

Some day this week, let me see, if it must have been Wednesday night, the box arrived.

Figure 3 The fourth page (1.D)

They held it at the post office for me, and luckily I was with Frank Durham who had his car. We were on our way to Darico's, so he drove me over there, & all of us stood around when I opened it. Grandma, that blouse is perfect! If I had stood over & directed every stitch, it could not have suited me more. Of course I had to put it & the skirt on, & they are the most becoming things I almost ever had. Just putting them on seemed to take me right back home to

Figure 4 the fifth page (2.A)

I was certainly glad to get it. Did I tell you that I was to speak before the council of directors that are to be held here this year next Saturday & read one of my plays? By the way, this is the Playmakers' Silver Jubilee, marking Proff's 25th year of teaching, & so every thing extra is to be done this year that can be done?

This morning I was appointed one of the judges for the play contest sponsored by the Federation of Music "Musicians."

I had as great a time going through these packages as though it had been Christmas. Daddy, those glass paper weights are the nicest I about ever saw. I have them in front of me now, the green one on the right & that perfectly beautiful purple one on the left. And the pyjamas! They are certainly the product of Halawren. And the candy, & the soap, and the pencil sharpener, and the knife! My voice just gets higher & higher on each one. That smack is a life-saver

Figure 5 the sixth (2.B - right) and seventh (2.C - left) pages

Clubs. Where have I heard  
that phrase before?

Well, I must close  
& get to work. The silver  
voice of Chauven is calling  
me.

By the way, about  
the box - Frank took it to  
Dorice's - Dorice decided, because  
she is bigger than me to carry  
it to the restaurant - I carried  
it to rehearsal, & Harry took it  
home for me. I managed pretty  
well, didn't I?

Thank love,

Josephine.

Oct. 12 / 35 -

Figure 6 the eighth and final page (2.D)

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