

Dear Matilda: Letter Writing as Research Method

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An Introductory Poem

The Sunday Afternoon You Were Born

How come no one sings “Happy Birthday” on your actual birthday? (They’re too exhausted, that’s why). The hospital bed feels like another country. The plastic tube jabbed into my arm is a siren. Walls of pain go off inside me like dull fireworks. *The baby doesn’t like this position*, the nurse says. Then, just as suddenly: *We’re going to start pushing now, okay?* It’s not like the movies. No shouting or swearing. Instead, I am sharp. Quiet. Focused. Twelve minutes. Twelve minutes and you are pushed out of my imaginings and into the world. Howling. Your screaming is justified. Who wants to go out on a Sunday, anyway? How shocking it must be to arrive and be plunked down on a pediatric scale: 5 pounds, 12 ounces, and a head full of hair! In Korea, babies are considered to be one on the day they’re born—is this your first birthday already? While the one o’clock world eats lunch, drinks coffee, takes out the dogs, we are here in the woozy hangover of birth. The hospital is an airport. We are outside of time, yet numbers are so important: Birth unit 311. 05/20/2018. 13:12. 2,610 g. Scientific notes: Cord milking done. Cord clamping @1 min–3 min. 1st breath, less than 10 sec. 1st cry, less than 10 sec. Hat applied. Pre-warmed blankets. Skin to skin. No matter what, the first moments of your life were on my chest. Two people meeting for the first time. From now on, whenever I hear a love song it is about you.

Letter Writing as a Research Tool

I gave birth to my daughter, Matilda, six weeks before beginning my doctoral studies in Education. Each day was a whirlwind of classwork, books, and baby bottles. While many mothers have lovely professional photos of their newborns in ethereal settings, I have a photo of Matilda sleeping on a blanket beside my well-worn copy of John Dewey's *Education and Experience*.

Our doctoral cohort often discussed the inherent subjectivity of research and the importance of positionality. Quickly, I became uncomfortable with the idea of having a sharp divide between my life as a mother and my life as a student. After a member of our cohort suggested that we read the work of a researcher who used the form of letter writing to shape her doctoral dissertation (Rautio, 2009), I started writing letters to Matilda. Other researchers have used letter writing as a pedagogical teaching tool (Dunn, 2000; May, 1995; Parkinson, 2005; Samaras & Sell, 2013; White, Wright-Soika, & Russell, 2007), as a way to reflect on their identity as teachers and/or researchers (Channa, 2017; Knowles & Cole, 1994; Yang & Bautisa, 2008), and as a way to handle the emotionality of research (Pithouse-Morgan, Khau, Masinga, & Van de Ruit, 2012). In my case, the letters provided a space that allowed me to navigate the development of my doctoral research on disruptive art curation, while incorporating reflexivity into the research process (and in light of the fact that undisturbed sleep was unheard of during this period of nighttime screaming and feeding, the letters also served the more basic aim of helping me to retain what I'd been reading).

Art Curation in Service of Social Justice

As a lifelong writer and artist, I undertook my doctoral work with the idea of exploring what we can learn about

storytelling from the process of art curation. More specifically, I am interested in the knowledge we can gain from disruptive art curation. This practice seeks to overturn the exclusionary nature of the traditional art gallery/museum in order to create space for those who have been marginalized within the canon of art history and, in many cases, throughout the unfolding of Canadian history as well. Disruptive curators work to challenge colonial ways of thinking and knowing by prioritizing Indigenous knowledges (Kisin, 2017; Monkman, 2018), disabled (Cachia, 2013; Power, 2017), feminist, queer, and black perspectives (Crooks, Fontaine, & Forni, 2019; Fatona, 2019; Van de Pol, 2016). While this work increasingly creates space for itself in museums and galleries, it has also sprung free from these institutions, permeating public places and spaces. The work of disruptive curators is important because it offers us the opportunity to think differently about issues such as identity, social justice, and the framing of history.

Dear Matilda—An Initial Research Letter

As Carolyn Ellis (2004) notes, when one writes for the purpose of inquiry, the writing process becomes a continual process of discovery, allowing the researcher to learn about her topic and herself (p. 337). I also agree with Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre's assertion that "writing *is* thinking, writing *is* analysis, writing *is* indeed a seductive and tangled *method* of discovery" (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 967). The following is one of the first in an ongoing collection of research letters to my daughter:

February 25, 2019

Dear Matilda,

I was just reading a study about using correspondence as a method for data collection. The researcher exchanged letters with a group of women from a tiny village in Finland for one year

(Rautio, 2009). I Googled the village, Suvanto, and saw how cold and desolate it looks. Yet, the wooden houses are painted bright red and they stand out proudly on the horizon precisely because there are so few houses around. Only thirty people live there. Can you imagine a village of thirty people? There are more people living in our apartment building. But back to Finland, the researcher wanted to explore beauty in everyday life because she wanted to uncover the connection between beauty and the driving forces behind our daily actions (Rautio, 2009). Things that the researcher expected to hear about in the letters—beautiful objects, sights, sounds—weren't exactly what she got. The letters described how beauty could be found in webs of significance, ultimately, connected to resilience. She writes,

A yellow peg is not beautiful because one likes yellow or pegs; it is beautiful precisely on one autumn day when one is alone and feeling a bit lost and notices the peg along with other random yellow objects in her garden and decides to plan one's day a little differently. (Rautio, 2009, p. 29)

I keep thinking about the yellow peg. A little wooden peg. Bright yellow. Embedded in the dirt. After reading the women's letters throughout the year, the researcher noted,

Everyone writes of piles of snow, low degrees of frost, wet summers, old houses, long drives to work, and seasons of unemployment. Everyone also writes of the majestic fells and of growing plants, picking berries, and spotting black grouse and reindeer here and there. (Rautio, 2009, p. 28)

I wonder whether beauty is relational. Would the berries and reindeer still be as beautiful if it weren't for the inconvenient piles of snow and tedious drives to work? Isn't there something even more beautiful about the fact that even our inconveniences are connected, in some way, to our joy? From this perspective, beauty is not frivolity, as we sometimes conceive of it.

I used to value the idea of art for art's sake. Some people mistakenly assume that art and beauty are synonymous. After beginning my research, I saw the importance of art that takes a stand. As the writer and artist Suzi Gablik (1991) suggests,

If modern aesthetics was inherently isolationist, aimed at disengagement and purity, my sense is that what we will be seeing over the next few decades is art that is essentially social and purposeful, art that rejects the myths of neutrality and autonomy. (p. 2)

Your father recently asked why my research on disruptive art curation matters. Historically, people have viewed the narratives of history that museums present as accurate or truthful. As researcher Bryony Onciul (2013) asserts, "Museums are political spaces where society frames its authorized culture, history and identity" (p. 84). But what if your culture was not *authorized*?

Kent Monkman, artist and curator of *Shame and Prejudice: A Story of Resilience*, writes about how he never saw his history represented in a museum:

I could not think of any history paintings that conveyed or authorized Indigenous experience into the canon of art history. Where were the paintings from the nineteenth century that recounted, with passion and empathy, the dispossession, starvation, incarceration and genocide of Indigenous people here on Turtle Island? Could my own paintings reach forward a hundred and fifty years to tell our history of the colonization of our people? (Monkman, 2018, n.p.)

I think that Canadians often hear about reconciliation on the news but they're often "too busy" to question their own worldviews. News segments flash on and off and people care about the things that seem to most directly affect them. Art that takes a stand matters because it can jolt people out of complacency. You

were born in May, and I saw Kent Monkman's work for the first time in August. As I stood in front of his painting *The Scream* (2017), which is seven by ten-and-a-half feet, I cried. The painting shows Indigenous mothers reaching into the air as their children are torn away by Mounties. One group of kids on the horizon tries to run away and escape, but there are Nuns snatching up children, ready to take them off to residential schools. While Mounties and Nuns represented safety for some, these were kidnappers. Monkman explains,

They wanted to take the Indian out of us; they couldn't do that, but they did beat down our spirits. Generation after generation of us spent our childhoods in the residential schools, being told over and over again that we were inferior, until we believed it ourselves. One hundred and fifty thousand of us were told that our loving parents were bad, that our devoted grandparents practiced Devil worship, that we were dirty, inside and out. (Monkman, 2018, n.p.)

Maxine Greene (1995), your honorary grandmother, suggests the next step when it comes to art that points us toward injustice in the world, "We may, after the outrage and passion, also feel a longing for resolution and repair" (p. 72).

Art, and Monkman's art specifically, offers us the chance to critique "history." Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) writes that history is about power, "It is the story of the powerful and how they become powerful, and then how they use their power to keep them in positions in which they can continue to dominate others" (p. 35). Monkman's work shows us colonization in Canada, which is not a version of Canadian history that I learned in school. But let's not forget the title of the exhibition, *Shame and Prejudice: A Story of Resilience*. Ultimately, Monkman's goal is to celebrate the resilience of Indigenous people. Always hold onto your identity

Matilda, no matter who tells you otherwise. Disruptive curation matters because it is time we start hearing all the stories, not just the ones that have been curated by ‘history.’ And art matters because by exposing us to the unfamiliar—or by exposing us to the familiar, but in new ways—it can help us to deeply care about others.

If I think about the bright yellow peg in the dirt again, I am reminded that joy in life is often kind of weird. The writer, Anne Lamott (2017), says that life is “filled simultaneously with heartbreaking sweetness and beauty, desperate poverty, floods, and babies, and acne, and Mozart all swirled together.” You’ve only been around for nine months now. I guess my advice is to appreciate the yellow pegs when you come across them.

Love You,
Mom

The Art of Letter Writing

Letter writing situates ideas within a specific time frame. When I began this type of research, I was writing letters to my baby daughter; suddenly, it seems, I am writing letters to the toddler version of Matilda. While there might be something eternal in the loops and swirls of a mother’s handwriting, I cannot lay claim to having undertaken the romantic practice of crafting handwritten letters. This is largely because of the pragmatic need for academic citation. However, I do find Catherine Field’s words on the fading art of letter writing persuasive:

A good handwritten letter is a creative act, and not just because it is a visual and tactile pleasure. It is a deliberate act of exposure, a form of vulnerability, because handwriting opens a window on the soul in a way that cyber communication can never do. (2011, para. 12)

I would suggest that whether a letter is handwritten or not, the author is still taking the risk of exposing herself to scrutiny from others. Unlike a research journal, which likely does not have an audience aside from the researcher herself, a letter has an intended recipient, and the reader may add her own interpretation to the content. Furthermore, a researcher who chooses to bring her own life into her work leaves herself wide open to charges of self-absorption. On the other hand, researcher Margaret H. Vickers (2002) argues that we should be using our personal voices in order to keep our research from being dry, inaccessible, and boring (p. 613). Prompting us to once again think about the importance of disruption, she asserts, “Remember, the essence of scholarly work remains with new ideas, new knowledge, and new vantage points” (p. 611). Bill Green reminds us that Barthes once said research “Must be conceived in desire” otherwise “the work is morose, functional, alienated” (Green, 2015, p. 9). Academics often joke that undertaking a doctoral dissertation is akin to having a baby, so why not do both? As my doctoral supervisor, Ardra Cole, suggests, “The form of letters also clearly acknowledges an audience which, for a writer, creates a certain ease of articulation, but also sets a context for the reader as a reminder of the big ‘Why?’ and ‘What for?’” (personal communication, March 5, 2019). Through my research, I hope to spark deep conversation about the power of art to transform. I agree with Jeanette Winterson (1995) who asserts,

If we say that art, all art is no longer relevant to our lives, then we might at least risk the question ‘What has happened to our lives?’ The usual question ‘What has happened to art?’ is all too easy an escape route. (p. 21)

As I reflect on disruptive art curation and motherhood, I begin to understand that mothers are both storytellers and curators. Our children, of course, are not the recipients of our own

neutral observations about the world. As Lori Nilsen (2002) notes, “Knowledge reads, tastes, sounds, dances, informs, speaks in one way from my ideological perspective, another way from yours” (p. 208). From this perspective, the big “Why?” might become more of a big “How?” How can I split the world open for Matilda? And in doing so, show her that the things that matter the most are full of complexity.

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