

# Introduction

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An article published in 1831 in the *Lady's Book* seems almost prescient in its delineation of the characteristics of epistolary writing that would attract critical and scholarly attention nearly two centuries later:

Few persons are ever obliged to produce a treatise, or a poem; but there is scarcely any one who is not occasionally compelled, by the circumstances of life, to write a letter. It is the remark of a very celebrated author, that the epistolary style deserves to be cultivated almost more than any other, since none is of more various or frequent use through the whole subordination of human life.... [T]he ability of writing letters clearly, and to the purpose, finds an opportunity of frequent exertion and display in every department of business, in every profession and employment, and in all the endearing offices of social relation. Most authors, who have occupied themselves with this subject, admit the difficulty—or, rather, the impossibility—of reducing it to any fixed rules; as letters are written on all subjects, and in almost every situation in which “the tide of event” can carry individuals. The general rules which govern other styles of composition, are, for the most part, applicable to letter writing: ease and simplicity, an even flow of unlaboured diction, and an artless arrangement of obvious sentiments, have been pronounced to be the qualities most frequently required: but it has also been stated, that a letter, having no peculiarity but its form, nothing is to be refused admission to it which would be proper in any other mode of treating the same subject.<sup>1</sup>

The anonymous author suggests that many of the dominant critical insights about epistolary writings in the scholarship of recent decades were nothing more than the commonly held assumptions of epistolary practitioners of the early nineteenth century. The writer simply presumes that readers share certain understandings of the letter: its status as the literary genre practiced by the widest range of Americans, potential to be put to more “various” uses than any other kind of writing, functionality in a variety of contexts ranging from the business and professional world to the sphere of intimate relations, resistance to “fixed rules,” diversity of subject and situation, characteristic and recognizable formal qualities, and broad openness to wide ranging kinds of content. The modern critic might append some additional characteristics to this listing, even while being forced to acknowledge

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<sup>1</sup> “The Escrutoire.”

the nagging and somewhat sheepish sense that eighteenth- and nineteenth-century letter writers seemed to have understood the genre and practice of letter writing in terms more sophisticated and theoretical than our own.<sup>2</sup>

For, as *Letters and Cultural Transformations in the United States, 1760-1860* demonstrates, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century correspondents conceived of the letter as a literary genre worthy of study, emulation, and practice. So significant did letter writing seem to Judith Sargent Murray, who also wrote in the genres of essays, poetry, and fiction, that she characterized it as the distinguishing trait of her very humanity. Writing to her sister in 1797, Murray explains that:

when setting with the pen of a letter Writer in my hand, it is then I am conscious of the value, and superiority of my existence .... A correspondence by letter partakes more of spirit than any other intercourse which, while clothed with mortality, we can support—and by this privilege we are more particularly distinguished from our four footed, and party coloured brethren of the creation who can not, as far as we know, boast a mode of communication that bears any resemblance thereto—I say then—blessings on the Man who first invented letter writing—<sup>3</sup>

Murray's comments reflect the late eighteenth-century's interest in practicing and theorizing letter writing as an artistic, communicative, and potentially transformative mode, one that situates correspondents in the world that surrounds them and allows them to explore and construct their relation to that world. *Letters and Cultural Transformations* heeds Murray's insight in its examination of how letters link individuals to the world. Rejecting limiting binaries of public/private, written/oral, or print/manuscript, *Letters and Cultural Transformations* advances emerging scholarship on U.S. letters by demonstrating the genre's persistent and often public engagements with transformations in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century American culture that have attracted recent critical notice.

Letter manuals, letters to editors, epistolary novels, and multiple other forms of the letter have pervaded U.S. culture and literary practices from Murray's era on, making them particularly well situated to broaden understandings of the revolutionary, early republican, and antebellum periods. Although literary scholars of the early to mid-twentieth century failed to maintain earlier writers' interest in theorizing letter writing, critics in recent years have returned to epistolarity as a significant site for critical exploration. Rejecting the view of letters as historical documents valuable only for revealing information about famous people or events, many scholars today accord letters an independent literary status. Yet how to

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<sup>2</sup> Recent critics have also examined letters' production by multiple authors, tendency toward intertextuality, relationship with other genres, connection to oral forms, resistance to closure, attunement to various audiences, shaping by material and technological factors, and participation in local, national, and international systems of transportation and exchange.

<sup>3</sup> "Judith Sargent Murray's Letterbooks."

consider letters on their own terms—not merely as a source of information nor only as a plot or structural device within fiction—proved an obstacle to scholars developing the field of inquiry. Studies in autobiographical writing in the 1980s identified letters’ potential literary value by categorizing them as an important form of life-writing; Domna Stanton’s edited collection *The Female Autograph: Theory and Practice of Autobiography from the Tenth to the Twentieth Century* (1984) contained several essays on letters, for example. Often lumped into a catch-all category with diaries and journals, however, letters received little distinct analysis as a unique genre within the broad field of autobiographical analyses. Janet Altman’s *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* (1982) importantly facilitated consideration of the letter as an independent genre by providing a model of how to approach the letter on its own terms. Still important to scholars of letter writing today, her analysis emphasized the means by which the genre’s formal characteristics create meaning. Perhaps her most influential formulation was her pinpointing of the letter’s ability to function as either a “bridge” or “barrier” between writer and recipient by either facilitating or interfering with the exchange that characterizes correspondence: “As an instrument of communication between sender and receiver, the letter straddles the gulf between presence and absence; the two persons who ‘meet’ through the letter are neither totally separated nor totally united. The letter lies halfway between the possibility of total communication and the risk of no communication at all.”<sup>4</sup> The social and political implications of what Altman called the letter’s “ambivalence as intermediary” has proven a fruitful terrain for recent critics’ explorations.<sup>5</sup>

Yet even as Altman’s influential text remains a standard in the field, it illustrated a common tendency of much criticism on letters in its reliance on readings of epistolary novels as a basis for theoretical postulations. Indeed, the most persistent emphasis within literary criticism has been on the epistolary as it is manifested within and through fictional forms—as the sheer number of books published on the epistolary novel reveals—rather than a focus on letter writing in its own right. While this focus has perhaps slowed the development of theories useful to scholars working with “actual” letters, many studies that focused primarily on epistolary novels—usually English and French—have nonetheless proven generative as these scholars searched for usable methods of examining and theorizing letters. Major texts in this phase of theoretical development included Elizabeth Heckendorn Cook’s *Epistolary Bodies: Gender and Genre in the Eighteenth-Century Republic of Letters* (1996), Mary Favret’s *Romantic Correspondence: Women, Politics, and the Fiction of Letters* (1993), Elizabeth Goldsmith’s collection *Writing the Female Voice: Essays on Epistolary Literature* (1989), Linda Kauffman’s *Discourses of Desire: Gender, Genre, and Epistolary Fictions* (1986) and *Special Delivery: Epistolary Modes in Modern Fiction* (1992), and Elizabeth Jane MacArthur’s *Extravagant Narratives: Closure and Dynamics in the Epistolary*

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<sup>4</sup> Janet Altman, *Epistolarity*, 43.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

*Form* (1990). The recovery of early American novels relying on epistolarity as either a structuring principle or a plot device—especially Susanna Rowson’s *Charlotte Temple* and Hannah Webster Foster’s *The Coquette* (1797)—prompted an array of critical efforts that guided scholars to increasingly complex understandings of the function of the letter in U.S. fiction. Two important early works in this vein were Ronald J. Zboray’s article “The Letter and the Fiction Reading Public in Antebellum America” (1987), which recognized the ways that Americans’ engagement with letter writing had implications for their fiction reading habits and vice versa, and Cathy Davidson’s *Revolution and the Word* (1984), which modeled a critical approach to early American epistolary novels that inspired many scholars to follow. To cite only one additional example of the substantial body of scholarship dealing with the early American epistolary novel, Julia A. Stern’s *The Plight of Feeling: Sympathy and Dissent in the Early American Novel* (1997) argues that the epistolary brings together performative, vocal, and textual modes to produce affect.

Some recent scholars have rejected the subordination of the epistolary to fictional forms, and a number of books largely focused on British or European letters opened up useful avenues of inquiry. Rebecca Earle’s collection of essays, *Epistolary Selves: Letters and Letter-writers, 1600-1945* (1999) presented a wide-ranging exploration of specific forms of letter writing (from the polite letter to diplomatic correspondence) in a mostly European context while emphasizing the means by which letters functioned as an important site for the construction of historically contingent versions of selfhood. Amanda Gilroy’s and W.M. Verhoeven’s collection *Epistolary Histories: Letters, Fiction, Culture* (2000) examined the cultural history of Anglo-American letters. Essays in the volume point to the ways that letters interrogate the supposed distinctions between the public and private spheres, with their implicitly gendered and ideological valances. Departing from the typical focus on the content of letters or what is expressed within them, the essays in David Barton and Nigel Hall’s *Letter Writing as a Social Practice* (2000) examined the activity of letter writing, letters as a genre, and letters as objects. Examining Anglo-American and European correspondence, the essays in Caroline Bland and Máire Cross’s collection *Gender and Politics in the Age of Letter Writing, 1750-2000* (2004) considered letters as discursive, politicized spaces within which writers explore their identities as gendered subjects. In *Epistolary Spaces: English Letter Writing from the Foundation of the Post Office to Richardson’s Clarissa* (2003), James How examined how improving postal services shaped writers’ epistolary exchanges, allowing for the development of various arenas of English political, cultural, and social life. *Letters Across Borders: The Epistolary Practices of International Migrants* (2006), edited by Bruce S. Elliot, David A. Gerber, and Suzanne M. Sinke, explored a phenomenon the editors call “transnationalized rootedness,” wherein migrants attempt to maintain continuity with their pasts even as they move into new environments and communities. The essays in the volume illuminate migrants’ use of letters to sustain contact with their homelands.

Scholarship on U.S. letters has lagged behind that on epistolary novels and British and European letters. William Merrill Decker's *Epistolary Practices: Letter Writing in America before Telecommunications* (1998) made an argument, however, for the need to attend to letters within a specifically U.S. context in order to advance understandings of the letter's place in the broader history of evolving systems of communications. A foundational consideration of letter writing as an influential genre and meaningful practice in the United States, *Epistolary Practices* claims that two prominent, if not exclusive, traits of American experience created a distinct development of the epistolary—mobility and migration, which created large-scale geographic separations amongst families and friends, and widespread literacy, which allowed large numbers of individuals to practice the genre.

Building on Decker's scholarship and embodying Barton and Hall's assertion that the attention to the particularized social contexts out of which letters are produced can reveal important clues to letters' cultural meanings, recent scholars of U.S. letters have radically rethought the range of letters' manifestations and their cultural impact. This work on U.S. letters has inevitably developed alongside and been influenced by trends in a number of related fields, particularly Cultural Studies' broadening of definitions of what comprises a text worthy of study, New Historicism's emphasis on examining the political, social, and historical contexts within which texts took their meaning, the History of the Book's attention to the condition of production, circulation, and consumption of manuscript and print texts, Women's, Race, and Working-Class Studies' reorienting of attention to the writing and reading practices of marginalized groups possessing uneven access to publication, and Early American Studies' opening up of the colonial, revolutionary, and early republican eras as crucial periods for understanding processes of nation formation, as well the origins and full development of important political, cultural, and social formulations in American society.

Two contributors to this volume have published important books that encapsulate trends in scholarship at the current moment. In their focus on letters' centrality to transatlantic and national political, cultural, and social developments, Elizabeth Hewitt's *Correspondence and American Literature, 1770-1865* (2004) and Eve Tavor Bannet's *Empire of Letters: Letter Manuals and Transatlantic Correspondence, 1680-1820* (2005) establish the groundwork upon which *Letters and Cultural Transformations* builds, while also indicating the growing importance and centrality of epistolary studies within literary scholarship.

One of the most important works in recent years has been Elizabeth Hewitt's *Correspondence and American Literature, 1770-1865* (2004). As Hewitt argues, the letter allowed for the interrogation of national union in the antebellum era, as writers for whom "issues of social mediation are paramount repeatedly turn to letter writing as both practice and theoretical model for conceiving of social reciprocity. Various considerations of union and disunion converge around both literal and theoretical correspondence."<sup>6</sup> Hewitt recognizes that, in spite of the

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<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth Hewitt, *Correspondence and American Literature 1770-1865*, 3.

common assertion that the letter as a genre has no national distinctiveness, the uses of the letter by U.S. writers in the early federal and antebellum eras articulates the exceptionalism of American democracy. While letter writing can veil the contradictions between power and liberty, coercion and consent,

epistolarity also functions to critique its own ideological assumptions. Because of the spatial and temporal distance a letter must span, letter-writing emblemizes not only a fully legitimized political model in which social intercourse is predicated on consent and unanimity, but it also reveals the obstacles to such socio-political organization. The possibility of dead, purloined, and/or miscarried letters serves to underscore the ways in which national ties may not be so easily secured.<sup>7</sup>

Thus Hewitt skillfully inserts Altman's universalizing formulation of letters' potential to either bridge or increase distances between writers and recipients within particularized early American social and political contexts. Further, Hewitt articulates the ways in which arguments over U.S. federalism put into competition differing epistolary theories—the anti-federalist emphasis on political reciprocity through individual citizens' correspondence with one another versus the federalist preference for a template correspondence that arranged political conversations between citizens and the nation. Examining the writings of Emerson, Fuller, Melville, Jacobs, and Whitman, Hewitt demonstrates the ways each writer's engagement with national debates is figured through his or her epistolary practices.

Eve Tavor Bannet's influential and comprehensive *Empire of Letters: Letter Manuals and Transatlantic Correspondence, 1680-1820* (2005) returns attention to the importance of the eighteenth-century book trade and letter-writing manuals to emphasize the political anatomy in which instruction in letter writing circulated. As Bannet recognizes, the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were paradoxical eras, at once extraordinary moments of a developing democratic public sphere and yet equally defined by evolving systems of state control over individuals' actions. Within this polarity, letters became the instruments of spreading news and information—"intelligence"—not only by governments but by individual citizens. As Bannet exposes, letter-writing manuals worked to the benefit of these seemingly disparate systems. Their inclusion of letters by and for masters and servants, the aristocracy and the middling class, the businessman and the young student offered a democratic genre in which all classes could find expression; at the same time, however, they reinscribed hierarchies through these social types—businessman, artisan, lady, servant—and could act as guides for exclusion as well as inclusion. As she examines how letter writers negotiated complex social hierarchies in their manipulations of conventional aspects of the letter, such as the date, superscription, and subscription, Bannet follows Altman in

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

turning to form as an important interpretive tool in understanding letters and joins Hewitt in anchoring Altman's generalizable principles regarding letters' functions to a specific moment of Anglo-American social and political formation. With her delineation of the recommended conversational style, which strove to achieve the instantiation of the writer's presence for the recipient, Bannet also importantly reminds scholars of an oft-forgotten dimension of epistolarity: because letters were so often read aloud to the recipient's family and friends (and manuals encouraged the writer to read the letter aloud before sending it), orality was integral to the practice of letter writing.

Two additional recent books indicate the heightened attention letters are receiving within varying interdisciplinary frameworks. David A. Gerber's *Authors of Their Lives: The Personal Correspondence of British Immigrants to North America in the Nineteenth Century* (2006) explores how nineteenth-century immigrants who settled in the United States and Canada strove to conserve a continuous sense of self by relying on letter writing to maintain the relationships that formed the basis of their personal identities. Given the dramatic ruptures in their lives that immigrants experienced, letters functioned as a powerful reiteration of personal identity by consolidating the writer's relations to the people and places which contributed to the construction of that identity. Attuned to such contingencies as literacy, fluency with the postal system, and immigrants' positioning in internationalized networks of transportation, commerce, and exchange, Gerber examines how even the seemingly most insignificant generic conventions of letters engaged and revealed correspondents' complex emotional needs. His outline of three types of epistolary negotiations into which immigrants entered is particularly useful: the regulative, which served to organize and maintain relationships; the expressive, which displays itself in writing about emotions and the orientation of writer and reader in time and space relative to each other; and the descriptive, comprised of expository writing about events and affairs. In his in-depth analyses of four widely divergent immigrants' correspondences with family and friends at home, Gerber, a historian, demonstrates the ways he has been influenced by and contributes ably to literary scholarship in his attention to purpose, voice, theme, and rhythm in letters.

David M. Henkins's *The Postal Age: The Emergence of Modern Communications in Nineteenth-Century America* (2006) traces the transition of the postal service from a bureaucracy intended to distribute information in the form of newspapers to an institution which profoundly transformed the lives of ordinary Americans. Because mid-century postal acts lowered the rates for mailing a letter and thus made letter writing an affordable activity, Americans for the first time conceived of themselves as correspondents who could maintain regular, not occasional, relations with people they could not see. As writing letters became an activity in which the mass of Americans engaged and on which they increasingly relied, Henkins details these new letter writers' participation in the formulation of the norms of this cultural practice. Henkins considers the shifting of older epistolary practices, such as correspondents exchanging newspapers through the mail, to emerging newer ones, like the sending of valentines, in order to enumerate the

cultural meanings that adhered to the mail. Henkins reads the content and formal characteristics of letters as indicators of how correspondents were reconsidering and reconceptualizing notions integral to conventional ideas about letters, including what he calls “the elaborate mythology of epistolary privacy.”<sup>8</sup>

Other noteworthy studies indicate that the study of letters can move in alternative and fruitful directions. Phillip H. Round’s essay “Neither Here Nor There: Transatlantic Epistolarity in Early America” (2005) argued that colonial American letters must be read with an awareness of early modern European uses of epistolarity. Konstantin Dierks’s several articles, taken together, revealed how early American letter writers participated in an emerging consumer culture which solidified and demonstrated their class status. Mark L. Kamrath and Sharon M. Harris’s *Periodical Literature in Eighteenth-Century America* (2005) highlighted the prolific use of letters in magazines and newspapers. In another study not focused solely on epistolary writings, Hilary Wyss examined numerous letters as some of the earliest manifestations of a longstanding tradition of Native American writing in *Writing Indians: Literacy, Christianity, and Native Community in Early America* (2000), and Dickson D. Bruce similarly recovers early examples of African American letter writing in his *The Origins of African American Literature: 1680-1865* (2001). Theresa Strouth Gaul’s *To Marry an Indian: The Marriage of Harriett Gold and Elias Boudinot in Letters, 1823-1839* (2005) demonstrated letters’ ability to function as a supple venue for negotiating fraught racial attitudes. Gaul’s substantial introduction established a theory for making sense of how material factors constrain and shape the form and content of letters; in her reading, for example, marginal insertions, often prompted by concerns about paper conservation and postage rates, become an important formal tool for understanding letters’ significance.

*Letters and Cultural Transformations* begins its consideration of U.S. letters in the pre-Revolutionary moment when colonial letter writers began to imagine themselves as American and use the space of the letter to construct a notion of American identity. The volume concludes on the eve of the Civil War, an event which threatened to splinter that identity and which prompted vast numbers of Americans to engage in letter writing, perhaps more than any other preceding moment in U.S. history. The span of the book thus encompasses important federal transformations of the postal system, including the Postal Act of 1792, which initiated the national system that transported letters, and Congress’s Acts in 1845 and 1851 to lower the cost of sending a letter, which granted access to the mails for vast numbers of ordinary Americans. While attending to the social and political dynamics of letters which have preoccupied recent critics, the essays in *Letters and Cultural Transformations* seek to define the “correspondences” between letters and developing facets of the U.S. cultural sphere. Noah Webster’s 1847

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<sup>8</sup> David M. Henkins, *The Postal Age*, 99.

definition of “correspondence” in his *American Dictionary*, which gives “Relation; fitness; congruity; mutual adaptation of one thing to another” as its first definition, foregrounds the central aim of this volume: charting the “mutual adaptation” existing between letters and transforming dimensions of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century culture and advancing the “congruity” between manuscript letters and contemporary scholarly critical and editing practices. To consider the ubiquitous and wildly varying manifestations, uses, and effects of letters during the century the volume traverses, *Letters and Cultural Transformations* is divided into four sections. The first three sections emphasize letters’ imbrication in transforming dimensions of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century culture, while the fourth section extends the volume’s consideration into the present by examining contemporary scholarly editing practices.

The essays in “Part I: Letters and Transnationalism” explore the ways writers composed, exchanged, and read their letters in situations shaped by currents and concerns that transcended national borders, giving a compelling demonstration of the fact that letters cannot be adequately considered within limiting national frameworks. Because letters as material objects traversed national borders, the genre offers particularly potent opportunities to dismantle nationalist paradigms that have heretofore dominated critical interpretations of early American literature. Chiara Cillerai’s “‘A continual and almost exclusive correspondence’: Philip Mazzei’s Transatlantic Citizenship” explores Italian émigré Philip Mazzei’s uses of letters during the revolutionary era to craft a cosmopolitan notion of American identity rooted in imperial commerce and internationalism. Eve Tavor Bannet extends the interrogation of American identity formation into the early republican era in “Letters on the Use of Letters in Narratives: Catherine Macauley, Susannah Rowson, and the Warren-Adams Correspondence” with her examination of Mercy Warren and John Adams’s exchange over the proper use of letters in narrative histories of the Revolutionary War. This correspondence emerged out of and responded to transatlantic debates over the nature of revolution and republicanism, and Bannet demonstrates, as does Cillerai, the ways that early Americans rejected narrow national identities to imagine themselves as participants in a global arena. Extending this analysis into the antebellum period, “Anticipating Colonialism: U.S. Letters on Cuba and Puerto Rico, 1831-1835” by Ivonne García investigates the ways in which the letters that Edward and Charles Emerson and Sophia Peabody mailed from Puerto Rico and Cuba back home to New England postulated an American identity premised on imperial power. These transoceanic letters conveyed images of the Spanish Caribbean region among New England’s intelligentsia and contributed to the United States’ emerging identification as a nation-empire.

“Part II: Letters and Authorship” examines the ways letter writers who also actively sought publication—including Charles Brockden Brown, Margaret Fuller, and Elizabeth Stoddard—used the epistolary form at crucial moments in their early careers as a means to construct various, shifting, and sometimes fictive authorial personas. Although all three essays amply demonstrate that letters are an

important means for authors to try out and test techniques and ideas for publication, this group of essays most importantly demonstrates that authorial selves emerge through epistolary exchange with others; the process of constructing an authorial persona does not occur in isolation but through the mechanisms of dialogue and response that letters facilitate. Elizabeth Hewitt's "The Authentic Fictional Letters of Charles Brockden Brown" shows how Brown in his early writings simultaneously appealed to and challenged letters' longstanding association with sincerity and in doing so called into question the divide between authentic and fictive letters. Hewitt's analysis culminates in a critical reassessment of the relation between the early novel and epistolarity while further elucidating her understanding of the letter as a central medium for theorizing social relations. Jeffrey Steele and Jennifer Putzi take their examination inward, exploring personal correspondence as a space within which women writers could prepare themselves and their ideas for publication. In "Keys to 'the labyrinth of my own being': Margaret Fuller's Epistolary Invention of the Self," Steele illuminates how, by exploiting the dialogic and relational nature of letters, Fuller engaged in a project of self-construction even as she first explored ideas and theories that would later appear in her published works. Her letters, as carefully crafted, literary productions, provided her with a flexible discursive space of exploration; Steele reads Fuller's letters as an epistolary *bildungsroman* of sorts. Putzi similarly considers the means by which letters mediate selves and relationships in "'Two single married women': The Correspondence of Elizabeth Stoddard and Margaret Sweat, 1851-1854." Putzi reads Stoddard's letters to Margaret Sweat as textual performances in which Stoddard, as a fledgling writer who is publishing her first works, negotiates her developing identity as a woman and an artist within the epistolary intimacy of an intense female friendship.

"Part III: Letters and Periodicals" explores the central role letters have played in U.S. print culture. Dispersed through the same bureaucratic system of the post office, letters and newspapers also shared similar functions in conveying information across geographic distances. Indeed, early newspaper editors filled their columns with the contributions of "correspondents"—letter writers, not formal journalists—to fill their columns; one might go so far as to say that letters are the foundational genre of American journalism. Focusing on letters that reached a wide audience because of their publication in periodicals, the essays in this section force a reconsideration of the assumption that letters are primarily private documents, a limiting critical commonplace that has dogged much scholarship on letters and possesses little usefulness for the analysis of many letters. Theresa Strouth Gaul examines letters from Catharine Brown, a young Cherokee woman, which were regularly published in religious periodicals and widely reprinted, though readers today know her only through her posthumously published memoir. In "Cherokee Catharine Brown's Epistolary Performances," Gaul recovers Brown's letters published in periodicals and investigates how reading Brown's letters within the contexts of periodical publication, epistolary education, and Cherokee and evangelical oral traditions profoundly alters critical assessments of

Brown's agency as a writer. Bonnie Carr O'Neill examines the dynamic exchange between a popular author, Fanny Fern, and her readers by turning to the pages of the *Olive Branch* in "'Does such a being exist?': *Olive Branch* Readers Respond to Fanny Fern." Interrogating reader's responses to Fern's public manipulations of her identity, O'Neill examines how Fern's readers engage her in a dialogue that reformulates notions of female identity and, indeed, interrogates the very gendering of identity itself. Sharon M. Harris considers the means by which the printing of letters in reform-oriented periodicals enabled the construction of communities of women driven by a common cause. In "Dr. Mary Walker and the Economies of Letter Writing," Harris argues that letters' foregrounding of exchange led Mary Walker, a physician, health reformer, and women's rights activist, to use them as her primary genre for social interventions during her long career. Turning her attention to the powerful impact letters can have on readers in "A Less Costly Ink: John Brown's Prison Letters and the Traditions of American Protest Literature," Zoe Trodd focuses on the letters John Brown wrote from his prison cell in 1859. Circulated among northern abolitionists and reprinted in newspapers, Brown's letters transformed public opinion of his raid of Harpers Ferry and initiated what Trodd terms an "abolitionist aesthetics" that anticipated later traditions of protest literature.

The final section, "Part IV: Letters and Twenty-First Century Editions," brings the volume's purview into the present by interrogating the politics and practices of letters' editing and publication in today's scholarly arena, especially as revealed in forthcoming and recently published editions. Prompted in part by William Merrill Decker's questioning in *Epistolary Practices* as to whether published letters rightfully occupy a distinct generic category because of the substantial transformation they undergo in the process of publication, the essays in this section consider the correspondences—or lack thereof—between manuscript and print forms. The first two essays in the section speak to the complexity of editing practices, as editors who have recently engaged in the work of publishing editions of correspondence meditate on their methods. In "Authorship, Network, Textuality: Editing Mercy Otis Warren's Letters," Jeffrey H. Richards explores the effects of an editorial shift of attention away from the contents of a letter to a focus on the letter as text, a "situated document" which is shaped as much by multiple cultural, social, and technological contexts as by the writer's experiences or ideas. Scott M. Korb illuminates the myriad tasks a documentary editor must address, including selection, transcription, research, and annotation, by focusing on a single letter, Harriet Jacobs's second longest piece of writing, in his essay, "The Request of a Line: On Editing Harriet Jacobs's 'Life Among the Contrabands.'" In the final piece in this section, Linda Grasso shifts the focus; by reading an edition of correspondence as an epistolary novel of sorts, she interrogates the editorial politics surrounding the production of scholarly editions in the twenty-first century. In "Edited Letter Collections as Epistolary Fictions: Imagining African American Women's History in *Beloved Sisters and Loving Friends*," Grasso reads an edition

as a fiction collaboratively constructed by editor, reader, and texts which fulfills twenty-first century readers' desires for community and collectivity.

With the recent and forthcoming publication of editions of correspondence by writers such as Samson Occom, Charles Brockden Brown, and Harriet Jacobs, and Eve Tavor Bannet's multi-volume reprinting of American and British letter-writing manuals, the genre is rapidly reshaping early American literary studies by forcing the recognition of the significance of letters to the emerging nation as its most prevalent literary form.<sup>9</sup> Taken together, the essays in *Letters and Cultural Transformations* indicate compelling directions for future scholarship. Some directions require the tracing of letters' links to other genres; their pervasive presence in contemporary periodicals, for example, suggests the need for even more exploration of the genre's engagement with print culture. Other directions necessitate the exploration of new interpretive frameworks and tools. Attending to the ways formal and material/technological properties shape letters' contents offers a challenging but potentially transforming lens, for example. Similarly transformative is the recognition that letters—by virtue of the fact that they traverse the continent and globe, rather than only spaces within New England—offer literary critics the opportunity to refocus their gaze from one limited region to broader national and transnational contexts. And, perhaps most obviously, a major contribution of epistolary studies rests in the potential of such scholarship to foreground the textual productions of broader and more diverse cross-sections of the U.S. populace than studies of some other literary genres. The wide-spread access to authorship through letter writing suggests that countless opportunities for innovative scholarship reside in the letters of “ordinary” people as well as in the process of rethinking and revising received notions about famous or otherwise noteworthy figures. As scholars seek to recover and find new ways to make meaning of the full range of women's, working class, and people of color's writings, the field of the epistolary can only become a more and more significant terrain of inquiry.

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<sup>9</sup> See Joanna Brooks, *The Collected Writings of Samson Occom, Mohegan*; Jean Fagin Yellin, *The Harriet Jacobs Family Papers*; Mark L. Kamrath, Philip Barnard, Elizabeth Hewitt, and John R. Holmes, *The Letters and Selected Poetry of Charles Brockden Brown*, Vol. 1; Bannet, *British and American Letter Manuals, 1680-1810*.

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