A Pleasurable Exertion: Writing an Immigrant Identity

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Migration—whether spiritual, psychological or physical, across oceans of space and time, or simply from one state to another—begins as a dramatic tension between resignation and restlessness, as a struggle between satisfaction with what one has and longing for something more, as a response to exigent circumstances such as political oppression, religious persecution or economic deprivation. The process of migration creates a need for someone to tell a story, to have his or her life heard, to make life sensible and significant. Immigrant letters record and give expression to such tensions and exigencies.

Millions of immigrants wrote letters as a way to grapple with the exigencies of migration, to hold fast to homeland connections, to report on new lives lived, and to come to terms with a shifting sense of self. Letters were forums for immigrants to create, maintain, and change their identity. Indeed, these were powerful mediums for a diaspora deprived of most access to political and social outlets. The historically appointed “huddled masses,” became more than lines on a ship’s manifest. They were mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters, sons and daughters—each with a former life remembered and a new life imagined. And whether “pushed” or “pulled,” forced out or

drawn to, every immigrant left something behind and anticipated what was yet to be. Many wrote about their transitions in journals, diaries, and letters. As a result we have a record of the great migrations in very personal terms.

This essay is designed to suggest strategies for reading immigrant correspondence so we might be better able to understand these primary texts as they chart migrations across international, national, state, even conceptual borders. While it is compelling to read letters as historical artifacts or as personal curiosities, reading rhetorically offers another perspective and helps us to understand the dimensionality of immigrant lives and how these lives were constructed. The mistake we make when considering immigrant letters is in reading them only for what they can contribute to our understanding of history, sociology, and other related disciplines. While making important contributions to these fields, immigrant letters are far more than data mines. They are also highly contextual moments of rhetorical identity, and as such are strategic social practices offering commanding agency to often-muted diasporas. This essay offers an exploration of the evolution of immigrant identity through an analysis of a select set of one family's immigrant letters. I begin with a brief discussion of symbolic construction of identity amidst challenges of migration, then focus on four specific exigencies within the Watson correspondence written in the early 1800's (edited by Benjamin Smith and published in London in 1829).

Naming and Social Order

In any transnational moment those on the move are challenged to resituate the self. In these moments, immigrants seek to make sense of all that is different and foreign from their perspective (dress, worldview, religion, food, government, etc.), and in so doing new and tentative meanings and understandings are created (Handlin 6). During such transitory periods, immigrants select symbols to create and sustain different worldviews, which then allows them to act within the New World according to this edited script (Duncan 21-22). A well-chosen symbol provides immigrants with "confidence to act in a present because it resolves difference, doubt and ambiguity" (Duncan 112). Such symbolic action allows immigrants to label and thus separate good from bad, resulting in a new social understanding and order which remains contingent in space and time. Assigning a name or a label is an action relative to the past and dependent upon the future—where they have been vis-à-vis where they are going. The ability to name or rename has powerful consequences, since, in this naming, immigrants are

constructing a new social order within which they choose to live. In the immigrant's transformation from emigrant to immigrant to citizen there is a constant process of differentiation occurring as is evidenced in the symbolic action of the letters analyzed in this study.

I argue that as enunciations of identity, immigrant letters made it possible for those who wrote to span literal and symbolic borderlands. Making the transition from Old World to New was not as simple as boarding a boat and crossing an ocean. Such breaks are never clean. Anzaldúa speaks of this tension when she writes, "Cradled in one culture, sandwiched between two cultures, straddling all three cultures and value systems," theirs was the "in-between consciousness" of the immigrant (Anzaldúa 78). Anzaldúa uses the terms "mestiza" and "borderlands" to express this inner struggle of borders in which the immigrant experiences a cultural collision and ends up on both shores. "A borderland," she writes, "is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition" (Anzaldúa 3). Bhabha labels it "a third space." Lavie and Swendenburg write of a "third time-space" (16) in which subjects "who are fragments of collectivities-that-were" return to a derived identity and cultural heritage (see also Trinh 14, 59)

Immigrant letters reflected and responded to exigencies experienced in the transition. Typically, these exigencies are reflected in recurrent themes ranging from finances to religion to birth to death, with this exploring specific themes of interpreting new world customs and cultures, navigating increased mobility, understanding changing conceptions of work, and maintaining family connections.

Although there has been extensive research into immigrant letters, none of this research considers these texts as forums for the development of a transnational immigrant identity. My analysis seeks to complement and extend scholarly understanding of these letters and to appreciate them for the critical merit they deserve.

Letter writing is a social practice, fulfilling needs normally associated with face-to-face encounters such as intimacy, care, concern, affection, and emotional support. (Maybin). Barton and Hall (1999) argue that letter writing "…mediate[s] a huge range of human interactions; through letters one can narrate experiences, dispute points, describe situations, offer explanations, give instructions and so on" (1). Letters provide a site where immigrants construct, articulate and deliberate their knowledge of the world.

Langellier (1999) refers to this as a "boundary phenomenon" and explores the movement "…between literary and social discourse, between written and oral communication, between public and private spheres of interaction, between ritual performance and incidental conversation, between fact and fiction" (138).

Some scholars place personal letters in the oral tradition. Nevalainen (2004) places them in the "involved category closer to comedies and fiction than to such literate genres as official documents, sermons, religious treatises and academic prose" (183).

Immigrant letters are not isolated acts, but overlapping waves of responses to the Old World and New. They possess an interactive quality whereby they intervene "… between experience and story, the way that narrative mediates experience even when a factual account is promised" (Langellier 128). There is a literal and metaphorical ebb and flow, which is in response to or in anticipation of other voices (Maybin 170). This relationship between writer and audience and the mediation of response, is further evidenced in immigrant letters.

For this essay, I have chosen letters written by John and Mary Watson. The Watsons and their children left Sussex County, England in late spring of 1819 arriving in New Brunswick, Canada June 16, ultimately settling in Aurora, Indiana, United States. Their collection of letters (1819-1828) is part of a larger volume, *Twenty-Four Letters from Labourers in America to Their Friends in England*. Published in 1829 from London, this book was intended to bring to print the letters of a community of emigrants from Sussex County. As the editor, Benjamin Smith (1829) notes, "No method of conveying the knowledge of these important facts to the working poor of England seems more effectual, than that of publishing a fair specimen of the letters, written by labourers in that country to their friends of the same class here" (iii). Not unlike millions of others, the Watsons chose to depart the homeland for economic reasons, leaving family, seeking work in Canada, then the United States, and hoping to create a better life for themselves and their children. Yet, even in this transition, with its focus on the future, there is loyalty to the past. This is the key tension. It is almost a perceptible stirring, a movement between forgetting and remembering, between holding fast to familial bonds, familial places and routines while embracing the exigencies of emigration and arguing that the decision to migrate was the right one.

John and Mary's letters portray immigrants who are responsible for much of what happens along their journey. This self-determination—one of the key themes appearing throughout these letters—reflects a much different attitude than other

immigrant letter collections, where some reveal experiences in which immigrants portray themselves as having little power or control over their unfolding lives.

Immigrants are not *a priori* historical objects, nor are they reconstructions; they are instead a product of rhetorical discourse out of which an ambivalent, shifting and ever emergent identity is born. Within this context, immigrant letters are self-generative in that they help immigrants negotiate their liminal, borderland existence.

Customs and Cultures

The western ideal in the 18th and early 19th centuries was that of the cosmopolitan citizen, a citizen of the world, embracing various philosophies and ideologies. Vestiges of Franklin, Jefferson and Melville helped to define the cosmopolitan and intellectual landscape as a response to a colonial life of living on the margins. The great migrations however, were no longer viewed as "cosmopolitan," particularly by those who defined themselves as Americans. The strength of the Protestant expansion, the Know Nothing Party, Eugenics, and Darwinism seemed to begin to redraw the lines so that immigrants in the late 1800s and early 1900s struggled to establish an identity of belonging. This tension appears in letters as they seek to place themselves into this landscape.

Letters about a new lifestyle were part of that negotiation process whereby immigrants constructed a space in a new homeland as their correspondence helped to establish a right to belong, a right to home. Further, their letters affirmed an immigrant's ethnicity as well as bridged the chasm between the Old World and New. On these pages, they could situate their selves in their new country—as participants in an American life of celebrations, religion, and politics, as well as consumers of the mundane.

The Watson letters paint a nearly idyllic immigration picture of the New World. Correspondence was a vital rhetorical space for immigrants in that it allowed immigrants to situate themselves in the favorable environment of their own construction. Thus in bridging these worlds, Watson letters had to possess an optimism that was persuasive and compelling. In their first letters, Watson's commentary frames the New World as a land of abundance. John writes in October of 1819, "A man may catch as many fish in an hour as would do for him and his family for a day….There is plenty of land, but we want men to work it. You would really wonder to see so many

thousands of acres of woody land idle, and good land." And again in August of 1820 his notes suggest success tied to a new consumerism:

> Butcher's meat of all kinds is exceedingly cheap; every farmer here has an orchard, in which the apples and peaches hang almost as thick as your hops. Clothing, is about the same here as in England; money is scarce at present, owing to there being no demand abroad for grain, but every thing else is in the utmost profusion; and I look forward with a confident and well-founded hope to the time, as not far distant, when I shall be a freeholder, and call no man by the degrading name of master. This you will possibly say is all idle rant; but no, I am acquainted with many here who came to this country poor and penniless, who now possess fine freeholds of from 100 to 300 acres, fine houses, barns, and orchards, thriving flocks of cattle, sheep, and etc. What others have done why may I not accomplish?

In writing about their new lives, the Watsons create symbolic capital, by which I mean the ability to recognize, to name and to value. They take great pains to differentiate and name; to distinguish themselves from less than desirable elements of the New World, to identify with the more favorable and to bridge the gap between Old and New. While it seems that they delight in describing all that they experience, their letters are not simply travel guides. Instead, these descriptions serve to shore up family connections by not only making sense of things American, perhaps more importantly they are justifications and demonstrations of success. The Watsons' descriptions of their experiences were also written in part to justify the dangers, expense, and inconvenience of the move.

In June of 1822 John Watson's depictions of potential catastrophe are framed as merely the result of being a foreigner.

> Here I found myself a stranger, without friends, acquaintance, utensils of any kind, or money, having spent our last dollar a day or two before; added to which myself and all our family were caught by illness for 6 or 8 weeks, without the power of doing anything. But no sooner was our situation known, than we had plenty of provisions, brought to us, and as our strength recovered…

Illustrating the kindness of strangers through gifts of provisions conveys images of a land brimming with goodness and prosperity. John and Mary take great care in constructing their epistolary identity.

By August of 1823, these letters are full of commentary on American taxes and farm life. Yet again, this commentary is not simply a listing of successes. Their correspondence is a means to define themselves by what they are and what they are not. Mary writes:

> We would recommend all our acquaintances who are tired of paying tythes and taxes to come here, where tythes are unknown, and taxes hardly worth mentioning, compared to what they are with you. The only tax we have paid is 1 day's work on the road, and 50 cents for 1 yoke of oxen. You say England is in a very bad state,

> and farmers are got very low (sic). We would say, let them come here: we were worth nothing when we landed at this place, and now we have 1 yoke of oxen, 1 cow, 9 hogs, and we intend having another cow…. We have just taken 10 acres upon these terms, and John is busily engaged in ploughing for corn; he wishes his uncle Edward was with him to help.

Already, Watson has moved into the borderland separating their old lives from the new, reflecting upon an in-between status for themselves. In this moment, the Watson correspondence enables a separation and creates distance from the Old World. After differentiating and separating from the "old," they then evaluate and name the new, finally associating or identifying with it. It is important to note this association with the prosperity of the New World. Indeed, the Watsons might have written about failure or loss or hardship. Instead they chose to write about the bounty around them, much of which was of their making as is evidenced in their letter of April 1823:

> Rabbits and pigeons, particularly the latter, are very abundant; and squirrels, which are very fine eating. There are also plenty of fish in the river, for those who take the trouble to catch them. Partridges are also very numerous, and wild turkeys. We bought 1 for 25 cents, which lasted us for 4 meals. Meat we buy for 2 cents per pound. John often talks of his grandmother, and says we could keep her without working. Whilst this letter is writing, my wife is eating preserved peaches and bread, and washing them down with good whiskey and water….

Fresh meat, good whiskey and caring for loved ones. Such extravagances were certainly not part of the laboring class in 19th century England. Yet it is now a reality in the Watsons' new home. In their letters, John and Mary Watson grappled with these changes and transitions as they sought to place themselves "within a communal context defined by the changing historical and cultural circumstances ..." (Aarons 5). They were dislocated in space and had to make sense of this New World, while at the same time holding fast to family back in the Old World.

This sense of belonging is important for both writer and audience. As such, the Watson correspondence is a demonstration of agency and control. By framing the North American experience as positive, immigrants ensure an ethos of success, as evidenced by this March 1825 letter. Note the great attention given to the evolution of their identities:

> We are still farming, have got this season about 10 acres of very promising wheat, 7 acres of oats, 13 acres of corn, 1 acre for flax, between 1 and 2 acres for potatoes and other garden stuff. We have got a horse, a yoke of oxen, a pair of young steers, a milk cow, and plenty of pigs and fowls. There are plenty of English people in and around our neighbourhood; we rent land of an English woman. We feel ourselves at home among the people; we have regular preaching by the Methodists and Baptists, but no parsons to tyths us. We make our own soap and candles; we have just got between 40 and 50 yards of linen from the loom, from our last year's flax.

Themes of prosperity, of finding home, of being able to build a new life evidence immigrants who use letters to construct an identity of their own devising amidst the North American landscape.

Immigrants and Movement

One of the most exceptional of these American encounters was the concept of movement. A great part of the immigrant psyche was about moving around. From the first steps out of the native home, the immigrant was constantly in motion—on boats, wagons, feet, bicycles, trains—either across town or across the ocean. In the early 1800s Alexis de Tocqueville noted this primarily American phenomenon:

> A man who has set his heart on nothing but the good things of this world is always in a hurry, for he has only a limited time in which to find them, get them, and enjoy them. Remembrance of the shortness of life continually goads him on.... This thought [of death] fills him with distress, fear, and regret and keeps his mind continually in agitation, so that he is always changing his plans and his abode. (de Tocqueville 536)

Throughout their letters, many immigrants acknowledge this restless exigence, while sometimes framing these choices as being of either divine intervention or as predestination. Winthrop Hudson writes in his book, *American Protestantism*, that Calvinism was well suited to the immigrant life, "to the needs of men struggling to tame a wilderness." The requirements were, "Sturdy virtues...stern imperatives and high destiny... restless energy, unfaltering confidence, and unblinking acceptance of the harsh facts of life" (Hudson 23). Hudson's "restless energy" is also manifested as "action and activity," core tenets of the Reformed theology. Calvin compared the Christian life to that of a journey or a movement toward a goal. "Our life is like a journey," Calvin asserted; yet "it is not God's will that we should march along casually as we please, but he sets the goal before us, and also directs us on the right way to it." These concepts were critical to the immigrant experience. By validating and sanctifying their migration as somehow providential, immigrants could assuage the guilt for having left.

Immigrant correspondence is filled with discussions of mobility—movement from one town to another, from a small plot of land to a larger farm, from the East coast to the Midwest, from Canada to the United States. Typically, land ownership was the motivating force for immigrant mobility.

> [As an] "ancestral resource" formerly unobtainable for most, land in the New World "gave identity and status to a family and helped tie them to their past and their community. As a result, traditional practices of landed inheritance, part of the ethnic heritage of immigrants, guided their long-term economic goals and priorities to a remarkable extent." (Beltman 11)

Beltman also writes that land helped the immigrant to acquire a sense of place and to establish feelings of security in the wake of the constant migrant transitions (88). Mobility or the simple opportunity to uproot and start anew, while novel for most, seemed to be a significant part of the immigrant mentality. Obviously, letters were one of the few ways to notify family and friends of a changed address. However, and more importantly, letters about a new home, more land, a new farm, resonated with success. Research into immigrant mobility shows that movement resulted in improved income, more profits, greater wealth, and increased opportunity (Ferrie). Further, Ferrie documents a "duration effect," whereby immigrant wealth increased by 15% per year. Thus, as immigrants remained in the US and were consciously mobile, their wealth increased dramatically (188).

The contrasts making this phenomenon all the more noteworthy were obvious. Most native countries were small and developed compared to the wide open spaces of the United States. Throughout most of Europe, mobility was fairly limited, particularly for the middle and lower classes since travel was not a cultural norm, and at the same time was quite expensive. Further, barriers and borders were well established throughout European countries making intracontinental migration difficult. As such, narratives about immigrant mobility are compelling rhetorical forums. This was no less true for the Watson correspondence:

> October 15th, 1819, I arrived in Saint John the 16th day of June, after a disagreeable passage. We were struck with lightening in a storm, in which we lost one of our sailors. When I came into the above place I saw no prospect of doing any thing there, and proceeded to Frederictons, [sic] and had many proposals made me there, but did not accept them. I am now situated 120 miles up the river St. John; the gentleman in whose employ I am has built me a house in which I now live. I am to have it, and 10 or 12 acres of land, rent free, for three years. I expect to be able to maintain my family on this, until I get land from Government. Every married man is entitled to 200 acres, and every single man 100. As to saying positively what labourers get, I could not; but they are paid according to what they can do. I got five pounds the first months, and my diet. I must now tell you we are not pestered with Revenue officers. We are a free people, free from rates and taxes.

Here, Watson frames movement as a choice, as a symbolic and literal passage from Old World to New. For this family, the danger of a transatlantic journey yielded independence and freedom.

Mobility while foreign to those left behind, seemed part of the immigrant imperative, part of the immigration narrative. Their moves occurred from barn to apartment to house to larger house; from farm to city (or more often city to farm), or city to suburb; from state to state; from job to job. Final settlement choices were often determined by financial status, that is, immigrants stopped moving when they ran out of money, although, mobility often yielded increasing opportunity, greater income, mounting capital, and larger profits.

By March, 1820 while having been in North America for less than a year, the Watson family decides to uproot again and venture to warmer climates. They document the journey in their correspondence of June, 1822:

> You will recollect that I started with my wife and our children in the spring Wellington for St. John's, New Brunswick, where we arrived June 15th, 1819…; there we remained till March 15th, 1820. Now in Brunswick the winter too severe to profit much by farming, I determined to leave it, at all hazards; I therefore with my wife got a hand-sleigh, in which I placed the children, and drew them on the ice up the St. John's river about 360 miles, Mary and myself walking, drawing the children after us. You must also recollect that 100 miles of this was not settled being all wood. We arrived at the head of St. John's river. We traveled on in the same manner across snow and ice to the great river St. Laurence, about 180 miles below Quebec there we found the country along the bank thickly settled. I then built myself a light wagon, and had all our family provisioned during the time of making the wagon…; the good people who were French Canadians wishing us very much to stay with them. In this wagon our children were drawn by myself for upwards of 400 miles to Kingston; at the mouth of the lake Ontario. There as every other place, we met with uncommon kindness; a gentleman quite a stranger not only sent us by the steamboat free of all expense to Fort George, but put 6 or 7 dollars in our pockets besides. From Fort George we crossed into the United States, and passed the summer at Geneva, Ontario County, New York State. Hearing a more favourable account of the State of Indiana, I once more started on a ramble, and traveling across the State of New York, I came to O'Lean Point on the Allegany river, which river, a very rapid one, I came down in a flat boat to Pittsburgh; here I staid two days, and passing on, after being detained by head winds, and the water being very low, landed at Aurora; situated at the mouth of Hogan Creek.

Not content with his circumstances, it seems that Watson was restless. Yet, there was a certain determination in his trajectory, a design. One would obviously take note that a journey such as this involved great challenge and hardship. Therefore, Watson had to justify risk, both to himself and to his readers. Destitution, cold, exhaustion, illness, all were juxtaposed against agency, promise, generosity, and goodwill.

In search for "the good things of this world," immigrants used their letters to demonstrate that they had indeed found their sought after desires. For John and Mary Watson, their success was earned literally step by step. And in this journey, their

successes were acted out in stories of endurance, experience, wealth, and contentment as we see in this November, 1828 letter:

> We embrace this opportunity of writing to you, to say that we are all enjoying good health at present…. And we are glad to hear that some of you intend coming to America; and we greatly desire that you would all come to this rich fertile country; for we assure you that there is sufficient room for you all in this Palestine land; though we do not believe every part of America so good as where we live, and especially the part of America where brother Stephen lives; for we know by experience, that it is not half so good a country for a poor man to get a living as where we are, though they are well satisfied where they live, and we believe their country far better than Old England. Yet we know that their country is not half so good a part of America as where we live. But they know no better, for they have not traveled through America to see the difference. But it is not so with us; for we traveled 2000 or 3000 miles through America before we settled ourselves; therefore we are better judges than they can be… [A]nd finally, we think it too tedious to mention all the good things in America, but invite you to come and see for yourselves. So no more at present from your affectionate son and daughter.

As they moved through this landscape negotiating new customs and cultures, letters frequently focused far more specifically on labor, employment, and occupations as a way to justify success or failure.

Immigrants and Work

Immigrants experienced tensions tied to their altered work status, and the changing nature of work from Old World to New. As labor economist John R. Commons (1978) notes, “Migration tears a man away from the traditions, the routine, the social props on which he has learned to rely .... Partly fear, partly hope, make the fresh immigrant the hardest...worker in our industries” (as cited in Rodgers 173). Watson reflects upon the nature of work in America, an exigency that dominates his correspondence. Through his letters he negotiates his liminal status by allowing himself to define and differentiate himself as being different from workers in the Old World. “I arrived here about the middle of June,” John writes in August of 1820, “…and have been for the principal part of the time since in the employ of a Mr. Watson [sic–a different Watson], an Englishman from Northumberland, of whom I bought a cow, for which I paid him in work, besides supporting my family. An honest industrious man can maintain his family better by 3 days work here, then he can in England by 6.” Although not self-employed, it was important for Watson to cast himself as the lead character in his immigration success story. “This is in truth the land of hope; labour is a pleasurable exertion, because all its profits go to enrich yourself, and not another.” Coming from an indentured past, most

immigrants similar to Watson tried very hard to leave behind the pitiful existence 18th and 19th century England offered the working class.

Yans-McLaughlin writes that work in the Old World was not a means to an end. It was "hardly a rewarding, profitable, or hopeful activity" (265). Still, for many this new work provided a source of self-satisfaction and self-respect. Their work supplied them with a "corporate identity that established their exclusiveness and stability in a society undergoing traumatic change" (Cantor 10). Work in the New World, however, was at once the "cornerstone of individualism," as Emerson suggested (Gilbert 4). "America," Gilbert writes, "is and always has been a nation defined by devotion to work," which served as a "sacred myth of mobility and individualism" (vii). Prior to industrialization, work was the means for immigrants to establish a sense of individuality often lost in transition. When all else seemed to be foreign (food, customs, architecture, clothing, language, etc.), work was easily translated. This "means to an end" philosophy appears in the letter of June 15th, 1822:

> I obtained work at digging, etc. My wife took in sewing, and by degrees we have worked it to that. I have 2 cows, 2 calves, 9 pigs, and 1 calf expected in August. James is now at school, and I intend to send two in the winter. I have joined with a farmer in cropping: that is I received one-half of the produce…. I now am working for an English gentleman named Harris, who is building in Aurora, and owns four-quarter sections up the creek. Much good land can be bought far distant for 1 dollar and ¼ per acre, and improved land for not much more: indeed, so good is that prospect for a man who must live by industry, that I wish all my friends and acquaintance were here with me. I can safely say, I would not, nor would my Mary, return to England on any account whatever.

In this statement, Watson is not simply establishing that he is better off, but he is also arguing that the decision to emigrate was economically sound. In this transactional space Watson defends the decision to himself and to his loved ones. Letter writing enabled John and Mary to devise and give expression to their evolution from cautious emigrants swept along by the tides of fortune, to self-assured entrepreneurs who chose to belong. In his April 26th letter of 1823, he adds a "PS":

> Mary has just made a bushel of soap, which cost me nothing but her attention and a little labour. Those animals called in your country "Excisemen," are not known in this country, so that we boil soap, make candles, gather hops, and many other things, without fear, which you must not do. We are under no fear about our children not having food: we have finer pork and fowls than you have, and plenty of them….

Writing about work provided an opportunity for the Watsons to maintain familial connections, to justify their decision to emigrate and to negotiate their transnational identity. Mediating his work identity offers Watson the opportunity to reconstruct

himself several times. This transition is made in such a way that implicit in Watson's message is an evaluative position: working hard is valued; working for oneself and one's family is better than being indentured; success comes to those who are industrious and diligent.

Immigrants and Family

Immigration necessitates that family members negotiate temporal and spatial separations; otherwise, migration can ultimately lead to the severing of familial connections. In the transnational moment, an immigrant changes in ways the family left behind cannot experience. And these changes, if not mitigated, can contribute to separation. The Watson letters offered support, advice, motivation, and affection. They were their only way "to express, to feel, to be," as well as "the only real relief the agonized soul can experience" (Lewis 225):

> June 15th, 1822 Recollecting my promise to you not to write till I was perfectly settled, you would not expect a letter so soon as you might otherwise have done. I now consider myself as so settled and thought I have some time ago written a letter to you, yet it may have miscarried, and I not only think it right that you should be acquainted with my situation, but I wish that you with all our family and friends could be with us. We have suffered many hardships, as the statement of our journey will show you; but they were occasioned by my being a stranger to the country.

"I now write with greater pleasure than I have ever yet done, as it is answer to yours, dated February the 2nd, the only one I have received; the others I suppose must have gone to Canada, where you might think I was settled," writes John Watson in April of 1823:

> It proved very gratifying to us to hear that you all enjoy such general good health, excepting father Vaughan and sister, who could not have been expected to remain long, having been ill so long. Though your letter was written by several persons, we cannot answer them separately, but must beg of you to read all to them. You should have mentioned who my brother James married; we suppose it must be Henry Freeland's sister.

Watson's letters were the means to exercise familial duties, to demonstrate their continued affection, and to maintain those ties so important to the preservation of family. Their April letter of 1823 while seemingly a simple list of children also serves to characterize the general health, well-being, and success of this newly immigrated family: "You express a wish to know all our children: John, born April 22nd, 1809; James, October 18th, 1813; Naomi, February 7th, 1815; Henry, April 11th, 1818; Eliza Anne, born January 21st, 1821. Henry is very well, generally in mischief like all other

children….” None of these letters mentions the loss of a child through miscarriage, disease or accident—a rarity particularly for immigrant families during this era.

Letter writing provides a medium through which John and Mary were able to maintain their roles of parents, children, and siblings. Here the letter functions as a deliberative forum in which questions are asked, conversations are carried on, and debates are engaged. Again this same letter invites the intended reader into familial dialogue:

> Our brother William, and sister Sarah, and our dear mother must not be hurt if we did not mention them in our last letter; it was not an intentional neglect, for our affections for them are as strong as ever, and very often do we wish they were here…. Mary begs you will be particular in mentioning her relations in your next letter which you must not be angry if we ask to be written closer, so as to contain more information; as the postage of letters is rather expensive; not that we grudge the money, but we think the sheet might be made to hold more.
>
> And now, our dear Father and Mother, as it is not very likely that we shall meet on this side the grave, may it be our fervent prayer, that in the life to come, where there shall be no alloy, no griefs or difficulties, we may all unite; and there may you with all the blessed, salute your ever dutiful and affectionate children.

There is an inherent tension reflected here. As Higham (1955) notes, “To exist and yet not to exist, to be needed and yet to be unimportant, to be different and yet to be the same, to be integrated and yet to be separate” (12). Like many immigrants then and now, John and Mary Watson were caught in these tensions presented by the interstitial nature of the diaspora.

As expressions of his heartfelt familial bonds, letters are also Watson’s long-distance means of preserving a presence, sustaining status and maintaining roles. Their struggle to maintain familial relationships is evident in their concerns for the welfare of the family back home as letters enabled them to provide guidance and approve or disapprove of choices and actions:

> March 9th, 1825: It is now two years since we heard from you, excepting in a letter from brother Stephen, saying you were all well. We are longing to hear what you are all doing, the particulars of all the family: when you sent the letter, you did not say anything about William and Sarah, neither who James and Ann were married to. I want to know what is become of William Blover, and whether he loves drink as well as he used to do; if he does, tell him there is plenty of whiskey here; if a man wants to kill himself, he need not be long about it, for he may get a gallon a day and his board; but I hope better things of him; I hope he has seen into the folly of it before this. We should be very glad to hear from all our friends: we think they would do a great deal better here than in England; we cannot think what makes so many of them go back, for we would not come back again.

The exigencies characteristic of any family life afford the Watsons numerous opportunities to maintain familial connections via letter writing. Clearly, the conversational quality of their letters ties readers to absent writers. These letters are written so that the extended family can sit and "hear" their now-distant relatives. Regardless of the topic, the Watson letters create a present writer, one who despite the distance still cares for the souls of those left behind:

> March 9th, 1825, PS: We should be very happy to see you; but as we do not expect to see you this side of Eternity, we beseech you to prepare for the awful day, when we must all give account of the deeds done in the body; it is the one thing needful; do not put it off till it is too late, but fly to the arms of a bleeding Redeemer, who is willing to save you.

Conclusion: Signing Off

Letters have served as noteworthy rhetorical forums for generations of immigrants. At the very least letters are of great consequence for the socially marginalized, "huddled masses" who sought to enact new lives. Occurring at the intersection between writing and speech, and constituted identity, social knowledge and cultural practice (Pollack), letters are at once mirrors and lenses into social reality reflecting and focusing upon what individuals and groups perceived as "what matters." Pollack provides an apt metaphor of "textual travel…drawing one charged moment into another constituting knowledge in an ongoing process of transmission and transferal…" (91). This ability to constitute knowledge, to bridge disparate worlds of reality and experience, and to recalibrate difference accords immigrant letters enormous significance and cultural capital.

This analysis extends our understanding of migrations by demonstrating that these letters, while important historical artifacts, do far more than trace the travels of generations of immigrants. Through liminal spaces, immigrants are able to negotiate borders and then to stake a claim. Indeed, letters are voices of and for a liminal existence. Further, this research broadens the scope of migration studies to include the thousands and thousands of epistolary utterances which helped shape the imaginations of men, women, and children who sought a new life in a new world. We should seek letters in archives and attics and study them, looking for the language of a transitional moment in time.

The Watson correspondence illustrates how the immigrant self is rhetorically fashioned, staged, and articulated via the forum of letters. John and Mary faced tensions of change and loyalty, of holding on to the past, and embracing the new, while

creating a present and future in which to place themselves and their family. Letters were their means to deal with these tensions while facilitating shifting identities. This agency was achieved as they grappled with the exigencies generated by the displacement of immigration. The Watsons deliberate, ask questions, and stress certain facts while strategically omitting or neglecting others in an interpretation of American material and social culture. Via letters, they constitute a world, redefine identity, and then situate themselves in the context of this newly created world.

Immigration at any point in history by any ethnic group is typically marked by a potential loss of voice. This was certainly the case for many immigrants. For them, letters were a space where meaning could be constructed and legitimated. These were powerful moments of agency—to be able to decide what was recalled, recorded and transmitted; to be able to label experience as true, just, inferior or excessive; to be able to place oneself into the historical record; to be able to transform life into imagined reality. These were spaces for memory production where the immigrant could re-arrange, re-present, re-create, re-store, re-buke, re-fashion, re-enact, re-generate, re-act, re-birth, and re-vise the self and experience (Roach 43-61).

Immigrant letters served as a means of justifying the decision to migrate, as a method of negotiating changing identity, and as a way of maintaining familial connections. As social practice, immigrant letters lent importance to typically mundane things as work and food in order to emphasize the economic soundness of the decision, and to illustrate how they were claiming a changed identity for their new world. And in devaluing such dangers and difficulties as cold, hunger, and poverty these letters allow writers to reassure themselves and their families that life would indeed be better. These persuasive elements were intended not only for a distant audience, but also as reflexive moments. John and Mary in particular were constantly engaged in persuading self and family: “This was a good decision.” “We made the right choice.” “It is good that we are here.” In addition, letters were a means to maintain their place in the family, thousands of miles away. By way of correspondence, therefore the Watsons (re)presented as necessary, the role of naive strangers, industrious workers, devoted parents, loving children, experienced travelers, or a savvy entrepreneurs.

Letters are sites of identity construction and cultural negotiation for displaced people. As such, this essay draws on letters produced in the course of an emigration from England to Canada, and finally to the United States. Thus, it is significant to note that this research specifically represents an “English” immigration experience, which

differs in some respects from the experiences of other groups. The English were a highly literate population for whom letter writing was a “normal” form of discourse. Nevertheless, diasporic dislodgings are not limited to Europeans—Asian immigrants, Native Americans, African Americans, Latinos—all have had their own diasporas, and all have need to address many of the same exigencies of displacement faced by the Watsons: interpreting customs and cultures, framing mobility, finding work, maintaining family connections and negotiating a shifting identity.

The issue of how different ethnic experiences might affect similar research must be considered. Immigration is prompted for many reasons. Rhetorical strategies may differ. Displacement coping might differ. But some things will remain the same. Ritual moments of the journey will be remarkably similar. There will always be a passage from one shore to another—be it physical or psychological. Immigrants by and large will be compelled to create forums for preservation of family, religion, and community. More than anything else, they will be motivated to reconstruct an identity for themselves and a place in the world. And their letters will serve as instruments of control or expressions of uncertainties along the way.

Letter writing is the product of an age that was more in touch with traditional technologies of communication. While technologies of circulation and transportation did sustain a communication community unique to its times, the strategies of identifying a self-based upon physical disconnectedness, family separation, and little anticipated contact may have lent special constraints to the rhetorical situation. Today’s immigrant populations may not have the same expectations, and electronic means of communication have eradicated some of these constraints. Given the ephemeral nature of contemporary communication technologies, it is doubtful that today’s immigrants will leave as rich a record of their journeys. Indeed, this study invites further comparative research to explore the issues of the extent to which the 18th, 19th, and early 20th centuries diasporic rhetoric finds similar and different forms of expression in the late 20th and 21st centuries. Regardless of the epoch, however, people displaced in space and time still need to justify their migration decisions, to maintain familial connections, and to grapple with their identities

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