Migrant Letters Enter The Digital Age: The Digitizing Immigrant Letters Project at the IHRC

The Immigration History Research Center's Digitizing Immigrant Letters Project was conceived in 2009 to survey the range of emotions and presence of affect in letters. These letters were written between 1850 and 1970 either by immigrants or written and sent to them by friends and family members. The letters were written in a wide variety of languages.

Cicero wrote letters. Christine de Pizan, Thomas Jefferson, Mme de Staël, George Sand, and Antonio Gramsci wrote letters. Prominent people began writing letters long before the masses of the world had acquired literacy. From the nineteenth century onwards, however, the task of building nations in Europe, North America and beyond became synonymous with creating a literate nation--by providing greater access to education to a nation's mass populations--and by creating a national postal service. Thus, alongside the local priests and politicians, nuns, lawyers, doctors, and educated individuals, ordinary, newly-literate people--soldiers, working-class wives, farmers, and children--would also write letters, especially during periods of war, military service, urbanization and revolution. Over the past two centuries, mass international migration also separated large numbers of people, creating the need and the desire to write letters for personal rather than for business or official purposes.

While it is true that each historical context contributes to the distinctiveness of every collection of letters that remains in family or institutional archives, it is also arguably true that all letters were written with the objective to overcome separation and distance; letters thus share some common features. As migration scholars, we are interested in exploring ways in
which letters written in contexts of mobility and migration are distinctive. In the nineteenth century, for example, separations were often lengthy and many letter writers might never see seeing their correspondents again. Not only do we view such letters as valuable archives of empirical data about the process and experience of migration, but also, and perhaps more poignantly, as fundamental modes of communication and self-making. Recent studies that underscore issues related to affect and emotions, gender, personal subjectivities and intimacies in migrant letters help us to gain a more nuanced portrait of migrants and their correspondents, be they, family members, spouses or lovers, friends, neighbors, or others.

For the Digitizing Immigrant Letters Project, we have selected letters written in languages other than English from the IHRC Collections; we have chosen letters that communicate and share strong feelings and emotions aroused by the experience of separation through migration. Our selection criteria have been influenced by an interpretive approach to letters analysis that is increasingly used by humanities scholars. This approach invites readers and researchers to examine migrant letters as texts--texts of self-making, identity building, literary creativity and subjectivity; texts of emotions; texts of familial, gender, class and racial dynamics. Readers interpret such themes both when letter-writers express them overtly (as they sometimes do) and when they express them in ways that hover beneath the surface of their letters. Letters, in short, can be analyzed as literary texts. Like all texts, migrant letters cannot speak for themselves in isolation, but humanities scholars often now seek to interpret and understand them as closely as possible on their own terms and to enter the intellectual, emotional and spiritual realm of communication the letters create. This interpretive approach contrasts with
but also complements empirical methods used by historians and also by social scientists working with data mining methods.

Beyond the ubiquitous reminders to keep writing, the formulaic salutations, and the transmission of remittances, news, and information, migrant letters were vital forms of communication and central to maintaining close ties—of affection or animosity—during separations. As historians have noted, letters and the practice of writing them also created opportunities for individuals to construct a self, and to articulate, deliberate, construct and shape their knowledge of the world and their own cosmologies.

According to both Thomas and Znaniecki, (authors of the five-volume *Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, 1918-1920), and the group of Scandinavian migration experts associated with the Minnesota School of Immigration and Refugee Studies,¹ the migrant letter was a great spur to mass migration, transforming both Europe and North America, and linking their histories inseparably (Gerber 2006, 41). Their recognition of the importance of letters as sources for the study of migration sparked the first systematic efforts to collect letters, and especially to collect the so-called America letters, written by immigrants and scattered widely in family and national repositories in the European homelands of the migrants. With the later emergence of the 1960s' human rights movements again generating appreciation of the common individual as an historical actor in her own right, a growing number of edited collections of migrant letters appeared in print.² The many publications of letter collections that appeared in the second half of the twentieth century contrasted sharply with the rather limited uses to which migrant letters were put in historical studies at the time. Historians and social scientists drew upon
letters to illustrate demographic or statistical evidence, to exemplify experiences relating to work, family, farming, and community and political activities of migrants, and to provide anecdotal evidence of migrants settling into their new lives.

By contrast, the recent work of Fitzpatrick, Gerber, Sinke, Liu, Cancian, and others has pushed the disciplinary boundaries of the study of migrant letters with new concerns and new methodologies. As these scholars demonstrate, geographic and temporal distances, mediated by letter-writing, have also have produced abundant expressions of nostalgia, affect and emotions. They have engendered a kaleidoscope of imagery, reveries, and reconstructions of the creative, literary, and psychological selves and relationships or ordinary people faced with long-term separations through migration. Rather than taking the letters as archives of information, historians have sought to interpret them as texts—first, by digging deeper into the histories of their writers, the socio-familial, economic-cultural, and political contexts surrounding the words in the letters, and second by attending to the silences, voids, and unanswered or ambiguous questions that are akin to pregnant pauses between lines. Taken together, these innovative approaches explore new ways of working with letters so as to better gauge the state of mind and heart of migrants and their significant others across diasporic spaces.

By aiming, initially, to make digitally accessible twelve sets of letters, and by providing transcriptions and translations of the original letters--archived and catalogued at the IHRC³--the Digitizing Immigrant Letters project invites students, teachers, researchers, and the public to read through the lens of affect and intimacy, and to observe the socio-cultural dynamics that
maintain familial relations across distance and time. Readers will find the entire gamut of human emotions here, as well gain a sense of the symbolic and linguistic worlds within which the letter writers operated. Selecting these letters required the IHRC researchers to come to terms with the complexities of emotions and affect, and the varied ways in which emotions were culturally and linguistically identified and articulated in letters across class, ethnicity, race, gender, time, and space by the collections' letter-writers.

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3 With the exception of the Antonietta Petris and Loris Palma letter collection which remains a Private Collection.