

## Family Letter Writing as Embodied Performance Praxis

Evan Mitchell Schares and Julia Kate Stanisci

Dear Reader,

We want to share something with you. Like other critical communication scholars who have come before us, we share our letter-essay as both a form of critical inquiry (Palczewski 1996) and performance manifesto (Calafell 2007). We write to know ourselves and to know more wholly the possibilities of epistolary performance. Moreover, we share with you how letter-writing performance may embody a world-making potential as our families make, maintain, and seek to heal themselves. Towards these ends, we believe:

1. Letter writing is embodied.
2. Letter writing is voice affirming.
3. Letter writing is therapeutic.
4. Letter writing is restorative.
5. Letter writing is temporally mobile.
6. Letter writing talks back against unjust systems.
7. Letter writing is performance praxis.

But when you think of family who do you think of? We know families can be a site of emancipation and sanctuary for some and deeply injurious and depleting for others. In this letter-essay, we write promiscuously about family and hope you think of those kinships, relationships, and connections of belonging that are life-sustaining when you need it most.

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**Evan Mitchell Schares** is an assistant professor of Performance Studies in the Department of Communication at Villanova University. A scholar/artist, his teaching and staged performance art focuses on narrative storytelling, poetic inquiry, and literary performance. **Julia Kate Stanisci** is a Master's candidate in the Department of Communication at Villanova University. She is a leader in mental health advocacy, and she is currently playwriting an original show on mental health advocacy campaigns in youth and young adult communities.

**First, family letter writing is embodied.** Anzaldúa writes that “only through the body, through the pulling of flesh, can the human soul be transformed. And for images, words, stories to have this transformative power, they must arise from the human body” (75). In those arresting moments when geography, time, and space keep us apart, it is often the case that we turn to paper and ink so that we may connect ourselves to those we call family. By turning inward and honestly asking ourselves what can possibly be put into words and then onto paper, we embody a type of corporeal performance that highlights how letter writing is not distinct from, but actually part of, other types of performance praxis. To this point, Harris and Jones similarly argue that “writing and performance are two arms on the same body” (1). Put simply, letters are a genre of performance text written by bodies, addressed to bodies, and ultimately read by bodies. It is not, we believe, *text before body*, but rather *text because of body*.

**Second, family letter writing is voice-affirming.** Letter writing performance is undeniably a way to maintain life-sustaining social structures, which makes it a relational performance of voice-affirming self-compassion. Our archival cache of letters, diaries, and other hand-written marginalia may grant us license to look inward and sense make of our relationships with those we hold dearly. For example, Calafell shares that she kept and has preserved decades old handwritten marginalia addressed to her “not only because I want to be nostalgic about the past but also because it came to represent a physical manifestation of the struggle to find my voice” (434). Similarly, the embodied act of writing, either addressed to others or to the self in the form of diary entries, was for hooks “a way to capture speech, to hold onto it, keeping it close,” it was, in short, a way to find and test one’s voice that had only been pushed into secrecy or silence (6).

**Third, family letter writing is therapeutic.** Letter writing performance is an opportunity to reconnect one’s mind and body, which has a therapeutic effect on both the author and audience/reader. Expressing oneself in the form of letters reduces stress and help us heal from trauma and violence, specifically in the context of mental illness. For Rombach (2003), letter writing gives writers a sense of personal agency while also giving them a sense of liberation from their problems. It allows us to take a step back from our trauma or distress and gain a sense of perspective, reducing the weight of our problems. Similarly, Prasko et. al (2009) shares that letter writing enables individuals, especially mental health patients, to work through their struggles at their own pace while also facilitating personal empowerment. Whether one sends the letter or not, letter writing is an opportunity for individuals to express and explore feelings, say what's on their mind, and track progress in their personal recovery.

**Fourth, family letter writing is restorative.** Letter writing performance also allows individuals to be honest with themselves and others, ultimately

facilitating the healing and rebuilding of relationships. Letter writing provides a space for one to share oneself with the world and express what they are going through, as well as how their loved ones can support them. For example, for individuals and families struggling with eating disorders, families often become divided by distance or understanding (Davidson & Birmingham, 2001). Letters allow families a communicative channel to dialogue with one another, and they “allow participation without stigma, real or perceived, and without force” (Davidson & Birmingham, 2001, p. 43).

**Fifth, family letter writing is temporally mobile.** We also hold that letter writing begets a unique form of evidentiary proof that can withstand the confines of geography and time. Like Benjamin describing the qualities of oral traditions, the performative power of letters lies in their temporally mobile qualities, for they “do not expend themselves but preserve and concentrate their strength, capable of releasing it even after a long time” (90). Epistolary address leaves traces that continue to flicker and spark well beyond the here and now, deep into the future. Given its temporally mobile qualities, letter writing can, to borrow the words of Muñoz, “stand as evidence of...lives, powers, and possibilities” (6). A horizontal embrace of the future possibilities of a letter’s power, is always intertwined with written word’s still-to-be-actualized potential. For his reason Cixous proclaims that “writing is never read, it always remains to be read, studied, sought, invented” (24). Letter writing performance, then, is in the here-and-now and also in the yet-to-have-happened

**Sixth, family letter writing talks back against unjust systems.** Letter writing performances may also embody what bell hooks refers to as the emancipatory potential of “true speech.” True speaking, for hooks, “is not solely an expression of creative power; it is an act of resistance, a political gesture that challenges politics of domination that would render us nameless and voiceless” (8). To resist is to certainly expose oneself and with exposure comes risk but, when the stars align, exposure can also beget salvation and redemption. Anzaldúa, in her letter to letter to 3<sup>rd</sup> World women writers, reminds us that “the danger in writing is not fusing our personal experience and world view with the social reality we live in, with our inner life, our history, our economics, and our vision. What validates us as human beings validates us as writers.” (170) Resistance, validation, and letter writing are intimately bound up in one another, like the tendons in our wrist, that fuel the power of our letter writing practice. Consider the hand-written letter composed in December 2021 by a trans woman (TheLivingMadMan) addressed to her parents:

*Mom and Dad, I write this letter to express what I am not brave enough to face you with myself. I'm not afraid of your shame or disapproval, but the shock it*

*can bring. For this, I apologize. Know that it was a feat of strength to bring this up. All I ask is to be heard, and for this whole confession to not be a big deal.*

As her letter progresses, the writer shares her true self, her trans self, with her parents in ways not physically possible in this moment except on the page. She concludes her letter with, “*I love you, and I hope you can understand. Because even if you don't, this is who I am.*” She anchors herself and her writing in her own body, in her own queer selfhood, and in her unconditional love. Yet she is careful to cement her speech, body, and self-compassion not in the hands of someone’s else’s hands, but in her own writing. Writing in this way certainly expresses a radical creative power and moves one from silence into speech.

**Seventh and finally, family letter writing is performance praxis.** Letter writing is a performance praxis of embodied memory. As we have demonstrated, it is the result of a highly embodied, relational, and restorative act for the self, reader, and culture writ large. The materiality of the letter, begot by an embodied memory, becomes the performance both for the present and the future. Like Taylor describing the transference of culture through performative acts, letters “reconstitute themselves, transmitting communal memories, histories, and values from one group/generation to the next” (19). As we struggle to maintain and heal our communal and familial memories, histories, and values, we believe that one way in which we do the labor is through epistolary address. In thinking through letter writing performance as a unique type of praxis, we hope that we have highlighted the transformative power of handwritten relationalities. Pedagogue Freire writes that “there is no true word that is not at the same time a praxis. Thus, to speak [or write] a true word is to transform the world” (68). In no uncertain terms, we hope you find truth in the claim, as we do, that epistolary performance has the power to heal and transform self, other, family, and the world.

Yours,

Evan & Julia

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