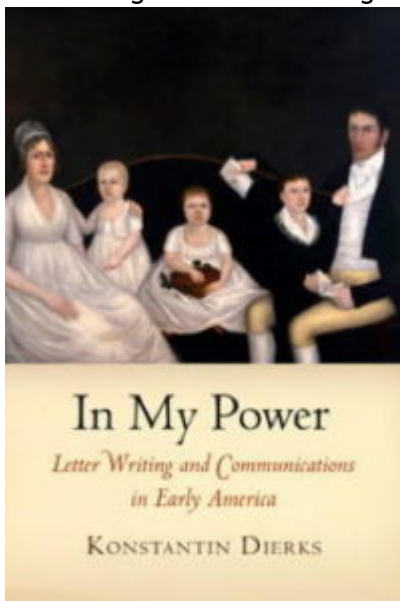


What we talk about when we talk about letters



“We Used to Wait,” the second single from Arcade Fire’s *The Suburbs* (2010), begins like most of the songs on the record—with a lamentation. The speaker distills his experience of suburban or exurban disaffection into a considerably less abstract set of images: “I used to write / I used to write letters / I used to sign my name / I used to sleep at night / Before the flashing light settled deep in my brain.” The line between the better past and the bitter present registers as an epistolary problem: before, there were letters and signatures—markers of an active self recording its own presence, leaving material traces of social relations—now, without the writing of letters, there is only sleeplessness and impotence. The flashing light is imperial, too much for the speaker to handle: the space of the suburb (in all of its ideological complexity) has separated him from the life he had and the future he had imagined. As the song progresses, though, there’s a critical shift. In spite of the helplessness, the “wilderness downtown,” the structural impossibility of living in the post-modern age, the speaker finds defiance: “I’m gonna write / A letter to my true love / I’m gonna sign my name / Like a patient on a table / I wanna walk again / Gonna move through the pain.” Letter writing becomes the first stage of a larger awakening—the speaker’s recuperation of his will, of his sense that the external forces aligned against him (here rendered as injury or disease) may be countered effectively. As a concrete assertion of the self and its relations to others—the “I” and the “true love”—the logic of the letter works against the logic of social and cultural alienation.



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As it happens, this relationship between the letter and the empowered self that Arcade Fire describes has a long history. In his closely argued, deeply researched, and unfailingly engaging *In My Power*, Konstantin Dierks takes on the personal side of the burgeoning documentary culture of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century anglophone Atlantic. Amassing and interpreting a remarkably broad archive of correspondence (by merchants and diplomats, housewives and frontiersmen, children and generals) Dierks finds in the material and rhetorical practices of letter writing new ways of understanding the relationship between Enlightenment-era Britons and the ideologies that structured their lives. Ultimately, he argues that the production and circulation of letters become a way of articulating individual agency against a backdrop of massive social change.

Dierks opens with the question of empire in the seventeenth century. At a moment in which instantaneous communication across long distances was unimaginable, letters form critical links between far-flung possessions and the metropole. From the colonies comes news of geographical exploration, territorial expansion, and intercultural relations; from the mother country come statements about governmental policy, commercial practice, and the disposition of resources. Even beyond the flows of information that such letters contain, Dierks argues, the mere fact that these pieces of marked paper could be conveyed over such long distances and through so many stages argued for imperial plausibility; without a communications infrastructure (including paper mills, post-roads, packet boats, and postmasters) and a steady flow of letters through it, the “fantastic leap of the imagination” (51) required to see diverse colonies as part of an integrating whole would have been impossible. In other words, letters and the cultural systems developed to produce and distribute them are critical to the consolidation and maintenance of Britain’s imperial ambitions. They are also signally important to the psychology of individual empire-builders—receiving and bearing letters from the imperial center, those on the expansionary front-lines are invested with the power of the mother country; receiving and bearing letters from the expansionary front-lines, those in the mother country are empowered by proofs of their ability to promote nationalist action at a distance.

This empowerment-by-letter works for mercantile concerns and migrating families as well. In his second, third, and fourth chapters, Dierks shows how letters construct business and social relations among the scattering peoples of the Atlantic world. For the merchant, letters contain critical data—about orders to place, prices to be asked and paid, new markets to consider, competitors to watch, and so forth—but also make reputations. Reliability and regularity in writing correlate neatly with trustworthiness in everything else: a good correspondent is a good man to do to business with. Dierks persuasively links this epistolary meritocracy with new ideas about the self; the routinization and standardization of business writing practice allows for an opening of the middle class—a route to material success for the modestly born. Manuals like Daniel Defoe’s *The Complete English Tradesman* (second ed., 1727) make the tricks of trade (including the composition of proper commercial correspondence)

available even to those without prior connections; young men who might have previously been destined for localized manual labor could learn the adaptable and remunerative skills necessary for global business and earn something like an independence. With this potential for advancement, though, comes anxiety about failure. What Dierks calls the “fraught imperatives of personal agency” in a documentary culture—“the tasks of investment, discipline, internalization, duty, and complaisance” (143)—in turn help to explain what we have come to think of as the “consumer revolution” of the eighteenth century. The more fluid the class dynamic, the more important the purchase and deployment of the material trappings of comfort become—the rise of letter writing and the rise of conspicuous consumption go hand in hand.

Class mobility and geographic mobility, of course, are two sides of the same coin: with the expansion of territory and the expansion of commercial interests to serve (and exploit) that territory comes emigration and the fracturing of kin groups. Sons and daughters leave home to seek their fortunes, then write back with news—about health, about letters received and sent, about everyday affairs. Again, the actual content of the correspondence is less important than the system that supports and conveys it: as proof of continuing personal relationships and identifications (as a Briton, as a member of a family), the regular exchange of letters posits stability in an unstable world. (Arcade Fire registers this too: “It may seem strange / How we used to wait for letters to arrive / But what’s stranger still / Is how something so small can keep you alive.”) More than this: as Dierks puts it, letter writing was also a form of existential order-making; it allowed an expressive medium for “description, explanation, desire, and aspiration—every intangible realm of meaning that underlay the taking of goal-oriented action in the world, whether felling trees, harvesting crops, stitching shoes, selling fabrics, whipping a slave, or killing an ‘Indian.’ Letter-writing helped turn all those actions into a struggle to make meaning out of the confusion of circumstance and change, dislocation and determination” (115).

An essential part of the colonizing process, correspondence is also instrumental in empowering the anti-colonial resistance of the second half of the eighteenth century. In the American Revolution, Dierks argues, “[l]etters did not cause anything in a reductive sense, but they were part of everything” (191). For the pre-Revolutionary moment, that means the interception and publication of Loyalist communiqués, the formation of Committees of Correspondence (in charge of orchestrating anti-government protests across geographical space), the building of a pro-colonial postal system to carry their messages. After Lexington and Concord, “part of everything” indicates the importance of sustained efforts to disrupt the British military post and the building of elaborate systems of messengers and cut-outs to convey written orders from Washington to his commanders in the field. Dierks is also admirably attentive to those disempowered by revolution—loyalists, foot soldiers and their spouses—and to the ways that their own correspondence affirms some manner of personal control over and against the situations in which they found themselves.

The final chapter of *In My Power* takes the problem of disempowerment even further, comparing the “universalist” rhetoric of middle-class agency (in which success is open, “without social limit” [236], to anyone who can acquire certain standardized literacy skills) with the exclusionary realities of eighteenth-century America. It charts what Dierks calls an “epistolary divide” between the haves and have-nots: as “writing literacy and letter writing became a baseline skill for participating in a modern commercial economy,” those people who remain largely unlettered—whites of the lower sort, Indians, free and enslaved blacks—are deemed unfit for anything other than menial labor. This in turn “silently and effectively compromised what was understood as a rising political impulse to democracy” in the post-Revolutionary period; “[t]he formal structures of government may have been given the appearance of egalitarianism, but the informal mechanisms of governance remained fundamentally elitist” (237). Such marginalized people work to subvert and exploit these cultural assumptions whenever and wherever they can—literate slaves would forge travel passes, for example; Phillis Wheatley writes epistolary protest poems addressed to colonial officials—but the epistolary divide is an essential (and lasting) barrier to full citizenship. Put another way, the unstated corollary to white middle-class literary empowerment is a race- and class-based disempowerment; the “universalist” possibility of personal agency is in many ways a useful cover for an increasingly asymmetrical power dynamic in the culture.

With this acknowledgment of the ways in which the textually mediated fantasy of liberal subjectivity fails—or papers over socially unethical behavior—Dierks’s conclusion moves usefully beyond history into polemic. The book’s final rhetorical questions—“What...if evil comes not only from the logic of racism and violence, but also from myopia and foreclosure, a failure to recognize the power embedded in material structures and the divide entrenched in cultural imaginaries, and a failure to imagine any human connection across that divide?”—are both spot-on and utterly deserving of non-rhetorical answers. Not coincidentally, the end of “We Used to Wait” provides one response worth considering. The last lines perform the joy of collective, connective action; they move beyond the subject empowered by writing to conjure a subject empowered by an ecstatic merge with a democratic crowd. “We used to wait for [those letters to arrive] / Now we scream and sing the chorus again / We used to wait for it / Now we scream and sing the chorus again.” Screaming and singing together is certainly not enough to undo the problems of what Dierks calls the “dark side of history”—but it could well be a start.