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Desirable Futures: Write Me a Letter

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Article abstract

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Desirable Futures: Write Me a Letter

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Abstract

In this special issue, we propose the letter as a form with geographic potential. Building on prior work on letters in geography, Black feminism, and Indigenous studies, we draw on a collection of sixteen letters in the section to build a case for letters as time travel, anticolonial epistemology, feminist geographic method, and worldmaking praxis. We bring together letter writers who speak to their ancestors known and unknown, to future generations, to ideas, to activists, to places, and to strangers—and weave them into a messy and generative conversation on the kinds of spaces that letters make between and among us. Our intention is to build on recent work in geography to experiment with what the letter makes possible for us as geographers.

Keywords

Anticolonial praxis, feminist methods, letters, worldbuilding futurists, temporality, futures

Introduction

Dear Reader,

We send you this collection of letters, and with them, our reflections on letters as a form of time travel: a means to transmit thoughts, feelings, and the present moment across space and time. As academics, we are swimming in letters. Cover letters. Letters of recommendation. Petitions. Letters to administrators and letters to task forces. Letters to the editor. Responses to reviewers 1, 2, and 3.

Letters can enact denial, perform refusal, and evoke absence. Governments, colonizers, and carceral systems operate through letters—as our reviewer Sneha Krishnan observed (see also Luk 2018). A letter can end a marriage, ruin a friendship, or reveal a world-rending family secret. The absence of a letter—the lack of response—can signal the most poignant refusal. Here, we turn our attention to letters of loss, desire, *and* connection. In these pages, to write a letter is to express longing, and to enshrine that yearning in a physical document. A collection of letters constitutes an archive of desire. A letter is a breach, a rupturing of your interior world and that of the reader, so at moments, one floods into the other—an “affective archive of relationality,” in Sneha’s words. Folding a letter into the envelope, we fold time and space, bringing someone distant closer, bridging this day with the future present in which they will read it. The letter, once written, becomes a sliver of the past, a personal archive that persists for some unknown time.

We invite you to step into intimate spaces and conversations. Being privy to these hopes, histories, memories, relationships, and trepidations is a startling privilege. We found ourselves deeply moved to be given access to others’ thoughts and feelings in such an unguarded, unmediated way. Reading these letters could be simultaneously gripping, devastating, and heartening – affecting each of us deeply in different ways. As you read this collection, we invite you too to take note of your own reactions, feelings, and resonances. Letters exist in relation; as readers, we too become part of their affective geography. Letters made public create publics.

In writing a letter, we tell one story; in sharing it, another is layered upon the first. Pavithra Vasudevan's letter to her child reads, "Our lives, individually and collectively, beginning from before any point we choose as origin, are already accumulations." Letters, too, are accumulations. Here, sediments of meaning accumulate—in the letter written for the child, now shared with the editors, now with you, the reader. Each sharing initiates a vulnerable breaching, asking us to let down our academic armor, and inviting us instead, into intimacy, into our yearnings. Letters to children, letters to collective entities named but not in receipt of the letter, such as the Indian farmer, also create publics—not necessarily those addressed directly, but rather, created from you—the reader here. For this reason, we refer to letter writers by first name to bring you into this intimate public we are making together. In taking this approach, and in letters that bridge and break colonial geographies, we also seek to subvert the letter form.

This themed section for *ACME* opened with an invitation: "Write me a letter," sent to a loosely organized constellation of scholars writing about "Desirable Futures." Our projects, including this collection of letters, build on the American Association of Geographers Conference 2021, at which we convened a series of the same name with over 30 presenters and nearly a hundred attendees (see also Gergan *et al* 2024). In the collaborative online space, we wrestled with the devastations of the COVID-19 pandemic, and we heard a call for different ways of relating to one another that countered or perhaps exceeded the constraints of the academy. In the conversations that followed, we landed on the letter as a method that allows us to not only think about and theorize time, but to feel and articulate the relations between different times and places, to aspire to and enact different relations. The letter also allows us to be personal in what can be an abstracted academic space, and to theorize in a more vernacular way, from a situated space that is foremost led by the personal—which, of course, is also political. We chose *ACME* for this adventure because they had recently introduced the letter form as a possibility, making space for the kind of work we wanted to do.

What do letters do?

The letters in this special issue are addressed to ancestors, future and past. They speak to hometowns both known and unknown. Reading these letters, that may or may not reach the person or place they address, reminds us that the temporality and purpose of communication are hardly linear. We are inspired by scholars who have exchanged letters to discuss differences, disjunctures, and convergences in scholarship and experience, bringing intimacy and connection into scholarly writing that is often solitary and impersonal.

Audre Lorde's (1984) "Open Letter to Mary Daly" critiques Daly's shallow engagement with Black and non-European women's scholarship and experience but is also an effort to recognize one another and remake the future. *ACME*'s recent exchanges between Debanuj DasGupta, Rae Roseberg, JP Catungal, and Jack Giesecking use a queer epistolary form "to drift between each other's narratives of the personal and political experiences of engaging queer geographical pedagogy and, consequently, knowledge production" (2021, 493; also in this vein see Bammer *et al* 1998). If you, our reader, have ever felt alone at work, we recommend you read these letters for the sense of possibility in making worlds across space. Here in our set of letters, writers make very personal and intimate connections with the

intergenerational politics of abolition, sovereignty, social, ecological, and cultural transformation, place, and the possibilities of radical worldmaking.

Black feminists have long drawn on the letter form in academic spaces. Recently, Desireé Melonas (2021, 38) reads letters from her grandmother side-by-side with the letters exchanged between Pat Parker and Audre Lorde in *Sister Love* (Lorde and Parker 1989), giving us a vision of letters as “a portal to a sacred site.” Here, “space and time compressed into the other, producing the experience of feeling as though [my grandmother] was there, with me.” This space, for Melonas, is one of radical self-care for Black women. Of the letters she received from her grandmother while at college, she writes, “Fifteen years later, her letter prose is still able to carry me to a place where I feel held, seen, cared for, and renewed” (2021, 38). What would the world be like if everyone received letters like this?

Nora Alba Cisneros’s (2018) call for an Indigenous Epistolary Methodology includes excerpts from letters exchanged by women in her family, to articulate the value of the epistolary form as an Indigenous and Chicana epistemic tradition that creates a space of strength. Building from there, she explains how letter writing can “strengthen students’ sense of community and self,” as well as form an intuitive and illuminating form of qualitative research (Cisneros 2018, 199). Letters time travel: “Connecting the writing that has been done by family and tribal members in the past to the present writing that Indigenous youth engage in can help young students ‘write back’ to relatives, institutional agents, and futures relations,” which can also be a form of Indigenous refusal, that is, a way of refusing to participate in knowledge production under settler terms (2018, 192; citing A. Simpson 2007).

A letter requires you to slow down. “The practice of sitting, gathering, and being still, of slowing-down enough to write a letter is a rejection of a neoliberal imperative that prioritizes speed and acceleration over ease and taking one’s time” (Melonas 2021, 39). We wonder how it feels to read this call for slowness on a busy day, trying to read a little between meetings, or on your phone or on a bus, or on a Saturday afternoon. This temporal reframing makes letter-writing a political act, especially for those who “are made to more clumsily bear the burden of speed and expedited labor practices” under neoliberalism, rejecting how “Black women are looked upon as beings capable of working without ceasing” (Melonas 2021, 39).

In their letters, June Jordan and Audre Lorde push back against barriers to their exchange—broken typewriter, lack of time, illness—and affirm one another. Writing creates a virtual space that those in the exchange inhabit together; reading their words, we are gifted with a glimpse into what a space between two people might be. The letters exchanged between DasGupta, Roseberg, Catungal, and Giesecking (2021) similarly grant us a vision of a world coming-into-being. We imagine and call for a nascent undercommons existing beneath the ordinary ground of academia, making the current reality livable, while also making a different world possible (Harney and Moten 2013). This possibility resonates in the letters exchanged between Mabel Gergan and Dolly Kikon (2021) in their “Letters between a Lepcha Geographer and a Naga Anthropologist,” as they write their way through and into a new understanding of their situated positions in the academic landscape. Writing from their experiences as Indigenous scholars from the Himalayan region, they also make a new world between them in which they can share strategies for surviving a toxic academic industry and

build a community of practice grounded in solidarity and alliance—one that they invite us to enter by sharing these missives.

The intimacy of the epistolary form carries radical potentiality in a world in which disembodied abstraction becomes the currency of knowledge. For Hema'ny Molina Vargas, Camila Marambio and Nina Lykke (2020), letter-writing opens specific possibilities for Indigenous futures. They write letters to ancestors, places, to "anyone who voluntarily or not, is carrying a Chilean identity card" and to a grandson. In declaring these letters to be world-making, they show us that with the Selk'nam people of Karokynka/Tierra del Fuego, world-making takes the form of a decolonial mourning, resisting narratives that disappear the Selk'nam (2020, 191). In their texts, we see how the letter form enables time travel: for Lykke to speak frankly with the anthropologists who both documented the Selk'nam and froze them in the past; for Vargas to make requests of and promises to kin.

Diana María Acevedo-Zapata (2020, 410-11) figures letters as distinct because they exist outside "capitalist colonial systems" of academic writing – in the first person, they sideline the idea of universal subjectivity in favor of situatedness (Acevedo-Zapata 2020, 412): this is evident in the "'grammatical person,' that is, the way in which the writer is presented within the text." Against the canon that frustrates her, she counters:

I will write free prose, or a poem, or a letter, to you, or us, or them, on a paper, with my hands...I will write making sure that what matters to me, whether or not it matters to the universal subject, is visible in its relation to what I write...I will write from me (Acevedo-Zapata 2020, 417).

In positioning the self as always diverse and in relation to others, Acevedo-Zapata expresses the layering that many of the letters in this special issue also reflect, a layering of subjects, histories, ontologies and epistemologies that are captured through this intimate and personal form of writing.

We write here of letters as a political art of love and refusal, and as Sneha reminded us in her review of this piece, letters are simultaneously a tool of colonial domination. She pens: "colonialism itself was and is conducted almost entirely through letters...in fact the abundance of letters is much of what makes the colonial record a meticulous, detailed collection." Thus, we are wary of our own impulse to romanticize the letter form. Letters can also be a denial, an institutional refusal to see you as human, or a production of discourse that seeks to obscure and mislead, rather than clarify. Letters have been a means by which colonial and antiblack states and their agents have realized colonial desires (Fuentes 2016), and they continue to be a tool for making institutional worlds that harm, inhibit, and other their subjects (De Leeuw 2017).

We live in "the world that letters made," as Luk (2018, 5) reminds us in her lyrical book, *The Life of Paper*. Letters are both a carceral technology and one that built empire. Letters remain both as evidence of absence, censorship, and containment and also—as in Luk's exploration of longing across incarceration—letters and the archive that they make can be a way to "honor the countless communities of people who toil to transform suffering into something usable, and even beautiful: labors of love for which the letter is but one sign" (Luk 2018, 223). Perhaps it is this holographic nature of the letter that speaks to us: even ordinary letters in the colonial archive are written as though with an invisible ink between the lines that

can be read differently, inverted, redacted, or remixed to tell time differently. Our writers at times take documents from the colonial archive and hold them to the light to reveal a different timeline that we might enter.

In this series, we seek to disrupt silences in the archive that allow colonial knowledge to flourish by cultivating the ways that the letter can be a distinct kind of instrument for making our own futures in relation to our situated positions in past and present. Letters can create a space of care and renewal that transcends time, and letters can also refuse the white western universal through their insistence in being located; the letters of Mabel and Dolly, and then, in this collection, Dolly and Elspeth Iralu, intervene and disrupt the making of the colonial archive in layered and nuanced ways. These letters seek redress to the violence of colonial archive making while making an archive of desire.

Notes on the letters in this collection

The letter enacts relations across time and space, a creative mode of intimate communication that offers a radical and fluid process of archiving and worldmaking. Letters travel across time, make worlds, and comprise a method for learning the world. Pavithra and Caitilin McMillan's letters to their children echo this practice, in the ways that they both capture the past and the present-soon-to-be past as a crystalline time capsule so that Noor Momo and Clyde might know our world, and know their parents, differently for the future that they both make and inhabit. Nearly every letter describes the dangers and violences of the present as well as uncertainty about the future world (especially Caitilin, Christian Anderson, and Anisa Bhutia), and possibility not yet realized (Danielle Purifoy, Mia Dawson, Elspeth Iralu, Dolly, Anisa, Pavithra, and Deondre Smiles). There is also a way that the practice of giving and taking come to blend and co-produce one another: Mia, Christian and Deondre offer advice; Sandeep Kandikuppa, Pallavi Gupta, Cristina Faiver-Serna, and Michelle Lanier offer gratitude; each suggests a way of processing the broken pieces of our world without seeking resolution.

Letters are also full of absences: the things that do not need to be said because of the relationship between two people. In witnessing those absences we are also witness to intimacy. These letters offer new insight into what places may come to mean to our trajectories through time and space. Many of these letters, like those between Orlando Ochoa and León Ozuna, evoke the power of intimacy. Theirs is a poetic letter exchange of dyke and queer desires and friendship in the Rio Grande Valley of south Texas, reminding us that the texture of our desired futures is already present in our existing relations with friends and lovers, in the ways we lay, sing, and eat together. "Will you tell me the ways you've been keeping beautiful to stay alive?" immerses us in that immediacy of attention to when desire shows up in your life as a reminder of past pleasures—and therefore as the potential of future ones.

Some contributors destabilize social hierarchies through horizontality, by writing to people placed in specific locations within power structures, or even writing to institutions themselves. Cristina writes to a precariously-positioned undocumented health care worker she knows who has been working to protect the health of young people and mothers in the face of environmental racism. "Querida promotora" is a love letter to health workers in a failing public healthcare system. Promotoras de salud are expected to support families struggling with chronic asthma in the context of severe industrial pollution. She validates the heavy toll

that labor entails, even as she reframes the significance of that work as a sacred and communal inheritance, “a theory and a practice of care grounded in ancient cultural knowledge that far precedes us but is alive en nuestra sangre.” We are reminded that scholarship grounded in reciprocity can reverberate in unexpected ways, embodying the radical care (Hobart and Kneese 2020) we desire in and through our existing relations, in scholarship as in life.

Mia writes to themselves in the past, the day after Michael Brown’s killer was not indicted, marking a turning point in their life. Mia begins, “Dear Mia, I’m afraid this won’t reach you,” even though Mia writes to their younger self. This beginning speaks to time travel and world making. Mia warns themselves what they will experience in the wake of the non-indictment of Michael Brown’s murderer

when a resounding silence in my college physics class sparked a fire in me and a journey of awakening and action. Somewhere between a love letter and a condolence, a reassurance and a forewarning, these words serve to soften my stumble towards empowerment and insight as I grow as a young organizer in the Black Lives Matter movement.

This letter reverberated with the words of young activists that some of us knew through struggles at our own universities (FLOCK 2021). Dawson’s words are also a love letter to young activists feeling isolated and alone.

Other letters in this collection, written across generations reimagine the terms of kinship. Dewitt King writes to Dr. Donald Deskin, Jr., a Black geographer and football player who passed away before Dewitt could meet him; Deondre writes to a future Ojibwe geographer about his aspirations for the future of land relations. Alana de Hinojosa receives a poem letter from her grandmother, composed of fragments of letters addressed to her own mother, while Caitilin writes in conversation with her mother about dying and about the black walnut trees that she plants. Christian, writing to his late father, also inquires into his future ancestors. Elspeth replies to her Naga grandfather’s letters that were found in the Smithsonian Institution Archives after her family thought they had been burned, reverberating with Dolly’s letters on her ancestors who must be brought home.

Michelle’s letter to Harriet Ann Jacobs, written for the occasion of a Black women’s retreat, reimagines Jacob’s hiding place in the garret as a womb. There, nurtured by her grandmother Molly Horniblow, Jacobs performed “the miracle of [her] making, of [her] autonomous self-taking.” Lanier evokes place and kin – the jessamine bloom, the sycamore, the soil – as witnesses to Black survival and care. In Lanier’s poetics, the elegy becomes ode, celebrating Blackness as a “livingness” (Quashie 2021), that exceeds the geographies of containment (McKittrick 2006). In proclaiming herself, and the “sister-daughters of [Jacob’s] home soils” in AfroCarolina, as hearths keeping Jacobs’ fire alive, Lanier traces Black feminism as sacred lineage, as “a form of love, communion, protest, and prophecy” (Lindsey and Gumbs 2021) that calls forth desirable futures.

Dolly’s letter to her Naga elders connects their experience of being taken from their homeland and put on display in distant museums to her mother’s experience being made to strip for security at the airport, to her own experiences traveling and remembering Naga home through taste and smell. It also is a promise that is both to the elders and to their

descendants. Dolly explains her work, her choices to write in the colonizers' language, and to travel and teach about Naga food and about colonization, but she also asks questions of her ancestors: "What stories did you carry in your hearts? What did love mean for you? How were you carried away from your land? Did you travel in bags and suitcases?" These powerful questions bring us into loss and mourning but also into the ways that she is making a different world, with her promises:

You are packed away in a storage facility. It sounds like a fable, a colonial fable of terror.
 But we will bring you back.
 And it is only a matter of time.
 Until then, rest well and dream of the land you will return one day.

The themes of this letter echo through Elspeth's "Letter for Missing and Disappeared Archives," addressed to Apfütša (grandfather). Where Dolly's letter speaks to the remains of kin removed from home and displayed in Europe, Elspeth's is a reply of sorts to letters her grandfather wrote, which may be now in the Smithsonian Institution Archives in Washington, DC—the largest museum and archive in the world, begun in the 19th century from James Smithson's personal collection. The letter is full of losses: a Naga home taken as collateral, which also results in the loss of an archive of the Naga sovereignty movement. In between these letters and archives that do and do not appear, there is a thread of loss and erasure in the ways that Naga sovereignty fleetingly exists in letters and papers that may or may not have been burned in a backyard, that existed in a possessed house, that may or may not be in the Smithsonian. Whose history is made and told under what circumstances? For what audiences and at what cost? This question is being asked across these letters, and which intervenes in the archives upon archives of extant colonial letters that tell these histories on European terms.

Alana's and Ahmi Aghedo's letters are in the shape of poems. Alana receives a letter she herself has composed—a poem of her grandmother's letters to her own mother—"Questions and phrases for an American granddaughter." In writing the poem, she invites us into a world that transcends space and time – by creating a conversation that is at once the words of her grandmother, and also a conversation that never happened. The poem layers the yearning of the grandmother for a different world, for her distant daughter, and now transformed, creating an anticolonial epistemology that connects kin severed through colonial practices, borders, and family history.

Ahmi's letter, to her former high school-self leaving Charlotte, North Carolina, is full of nostalgia, connecting it to other letters from Anisa, Orlando and León, Elspeth, Dolly, and Danielle. They yearn for places and people and times that do and do not exist, cannot and can exist. Ahmi's poetry connects the violence encountered in high school history classes and the shared experience between classmates' encounters of antiblack violence with love for young people making livingness in a segregated city of "busted sidewalks and gunshots and long ass bus rides," that they also long to be taken back to.

Where Ahmi writes in between time, to and about her childhood home of Charlotte and its new residents, Anisa writes to her hometown of Kalimpong, in the Indian Himalaya, expressing longing and loss and questioning her relationship to a place when both she and

the town are transforming. Anisa's letter not only describes but tells the story of Kalimpong: through her grandmother's arrival from Tibet, through the story of plates of food mixing religious traditions and flavors, through a longing for a different Kalimpong, and asking questions to the future and unknowable Kalimpong. All of these events and experiences are also Anisa's own story, in which as a child she realizes she is Muslim when someone curses at her. Through her asking and telling, we also come closer to this place.

Danielle writes a letter to abolition, evoking a not-yet time and place through remembering how her uncle communicated with family outside the prison in which he was incarcerated. Danielle's letter bridges political desire and deeply intimate and familial yearning as she writes of her uncle's memorial. Though her uncle passed away in prison, his own missives from inside had created a world in which he was outside: at a Reba McEntire concert, at a family gathering—far from walls and far from confinement. His practice helps Danielle to understand abolition as a speculative fiction "for now," but also offers testimony for the places in which they have witnessed it.

Sandeep and Pallavi's letter, "To the Unknown Indian Kisan," layers history onto the present of farmer's movements in India—beginning with wishing the farmer a happy Gandhi Jayanti on the 151st anniversary of his birth and tracing the ways that farming has become a symbolic object of national reverence even as farmers have been marginalized. This letter expresses respect for the historically groundbreaking farmers' movement in 2022, but tempers this with the complications of religion and caste. As with Mia and Danielle's letters, Sandeep and Pallavi reflect and layer past upon present to provide a map for future-making. These letters, and the ones below, also make publics of those who read them.

This impulse to experiment with future-making also flows through the letters from Deondre and Christian. Deondre writes to the Anishinaabeg of the future, speaking of his reverence for not only elders but also for young Anishinaabeg, advising them on ways to care for a desirable future. Moving back and forth across time, Deondre evokes Leanne Simpson's (2017) call to do "as we have always done," to, "remember what we've been taught—much as the animals and Nanabozho had to remember when they were creating Turtle Island."

Christian's letter is a reflexive meditation that wrestles with whiteness as a loss or severance of relationality. While directly addressing the spirit of his late father, Christian implicitly writes for his future ancestors as well. His questions reveal the vulnerability and ambivalence of having to face one's ancestors and inherited privileges. Taking tentative steps towards repair and futurity, Anderson's letter provokes us to consider what difficult truths we must face, in reimagining and rebuilding relations to place as settlers (white and nonwhite) who are steeped in the inheritance of settler colonialism and racism.

Dewitt's letter makes kin, as he writes movingly of how he wishes to be both seen and to see through a series of wishes that he could connect with Dr. Donald Deskin, Jr. Although they have never met, Dewitt relates his experiences of geography as a Black man with a love for sports and wills a connection to Deskin as a Black geographer across time and space. Dewitt's letter is full of longing for connection and places himself and Deskin in relation to one another: "You are my ancestor; I am your descendent. We are still able to be in community through a Black geography of the spirit."

Kinship is also a theme taken up by both Pavithra and Caitilin who write to their children. Theirs are letters of worldmaking otherwise, an attempt to grapple with violence and injustice in the present with their desire to cultivate spaces which would nurture life in all its forms. For our authors, the birth of their children brings clarity and urgency to their need to beckon in and imagine alternative ways of sharing space and nurturing worlds that are not constricted by our current moment or lines of thinking. Caitilin ends her letter with a simple invitation to her son to co-create the otherwise, asking: "Now, little one, how shall we go from here?" while Pavithra, in the wake of the Orlando gay nightclub shooting, desires for her child, "To know the great freedom that comes from shedding the rules that are supposed to define how you move through this world, who you love and how you express intimacy or pleasure."

With children, the future comes crashing into the present through their very presence, a cause for many to reevaluate how they prioritize their time and what it is in service of. Caitilin experiences a changed sense of time in the early months of her son's life. She notes that: "Time moves slowly with you—we lose our days to simply waking, feeding, playing and in this unfolding, I notice the world in new ways." In her letter, she imagines a conversation with her newborn, reflected in her plainspoken tone, about the present and future in which she draws on conversations with her mother about illness, dying and the ways in which they both might prepare for and nurture generations to come. As her mother battles cancer and environmental chemical sensitivities, she has set out on a journey to plant black walnut trees across their home province of Ontario. By the time Caitilin gives birth, her mother has planted over 1,000 trees, which Caitilin sees as a desire for life in a time of ecological and personal precarity. Her letter subtly connects to the land through references to oysters, black walnut trees, and her mother's deteriorating health. Like in other letters, there is a bending of space and time, in this case, between imagined futures with her newborn and fragments of past conversations, events and memories.

Likewise, Pavithra writes to her child offering us intimate glimpses of her world, her desires, her fears and hopes at different moments in time that stretch from before her child's birth to the present day. Becoming a parent, Pavithra reflects, requires "equal parts courage, resourcefulness and vulnerability." Equally we note, the same could be said for creating more just worlds, and so, for Pavithra, worldmaking and motherhood are intimately entwined. Through a series of four short poetic letters, Pavithra nurtures the otherwise through passing to her child her learnings about living, about being attentive to and appreciating the "magic" of everyday life and about celebrating "the great beauty of your body and all bodies." Pavithra reminds us that "a queer world is a more beautiful and joyous place for us all."

Opening letters, unfolding worlds: lessons from the collection

These letter writers create a constellation that speaks to temporal resistance, time travel, situated knowledge production, and collective worldmaking. They reach inward, outward, and multi-directionally to span time and space, connecting with places and people in the present, or those who are not yet or not anymore (Tuck 2009). They speak of and to letters from the past that haunt the present, prefiguring our futures or creating a means to navigate time as layered and folded into embodied life. Authors make worlds, place, and space through their letters, creating connections through time, and engaging in ancestor work – often as would-be ancestors speaking to the future. Here we highlight four of the

lessons we learned from these letters: letters as time travel, letters as anticolonial epistemology, letters as feminist method, and letters as worldmaking praxis.

Letters as time travel

Letters take us to places and spaces we have never visited. The journey is not about linear time. It stretches, pulls, and bends time for us to understand the past and the present differently. The multiple temporalities in this collection of Desirable Futures letters showcases the ephemeral relationships in our lives, and those that are lasting, or those that we want to keep revisiting. One such relationship is with our ancestors, our people, those we couldn't hold on to in a physical sense, but for whom we might yearn. The relationships with our elders, our grandparents, our parents, our children, our idea of home, land, sovereignty, and belonging are embedded in different times. Letters allow us to travel, to find ourselves in those places and to have a conversation.

Letters as anticolonial epistemology

Informed by experiences of our kin and kith or the multiple violences of colonialism, these letters return to conversations, memories, and yearnings that are crucial for our engagement with the present. As anticolonial epistemology, these letters reconnect ties to people, places, land, and kin that have been erased. The letter form is a personal archive, an inventory against the colonial form. Our letter writers share their intimate story, to make visible what has been absent from the archive, or create an archive of the present lest we forget; they speak to the erasures, what has been misplaced, or they return to the archive or to an incomplete narrative. In doing so, letters allow for storytelling, an intimate conversation with elders, missing kin, to land and life, to highlight the unevenness of the colonial system.

Letters as feminist geographic method

Letters are a turn from the evidentiary model, away from the gaze from nowhere to the voice that locates itself physically, materially, politically, somewhere, in embodied experience. In the feminist understanding that knowledge is produced relationally, the act of writing for another becomes a way of processing, learning, and making knowledge. As Dolly writes, letters can comprise, "a very deep political and feminist conversation" (Kikon and Gergan 2021). In letters, people process the unknowable, the unacceptable, the unrepairable. While letters can make worlds and express yearning, they can also be a more ambiguous space for grieving— an acknowledgment that there are some losses that cannot be reversed, even as care and memory can be a response to this unrepairability (see also Vargas, Marambio and Lykke 2020 on decolonial mourning).

Letters can be a kind of praxis that is not about solutions, but about holding space, grief, and making an archive of the remnants of that which is broken, which cannot be addressed. Dolly's ancestors, Elspeth's grandfather, Danielle's uncle—they cannot be returned to life, and time cannot be reversed, but they can be written into being at the same time. The letter form creates a place of care that transcends time, as the possibility of renewal carries forward even after death. In these letters, Danielle extends her uncle's life beyond prison walls into other times and spaces, by recollecting how he imagined himself on the outside, a caring that extends backward and forward in time, to her uncle but also to an abolitionist future.

Letters as worldmaking praxis

Is there a world without freedom, a world without kin and kith, without farmers, and without belonging to land? In *Rehearsals for Living*, Robyn Maynard and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2022, 33) exchange letters written from the “end of this world” built by white supremacy to envision and create a new one. They draw on the Black radical feminist tradition “scaffolding the intimate and personal within the global.” Their writing to one another is a type of creation, a generation of new relationality between Black and Indigenous people and movements. This kind of worldmaking begins between two people on the page, but seeps beyond this into practices to nurture a different world. When Mia writes to their younger self, when Orlando and León give us a glimpse of their intimate world, when Ahmi writes to a prior version of herself, we are changed in the reading—this intimate and ephemeral space between one or two people makes us nostalgic for what we haven’t experienced in a way that is also changing our relationship to this world that we exist within. These glimpses and breaches allow us to make a different relationship with ourselves, each other, and the world.

Conclusion: what can a letter do?

What is it that we crave in a letter? Is it an intimate space made between us? As academics, we are always writing, writing, writing. What is it about these missives, even in digital form, that transformed us? Is it that letters both make space but also reveal it? Is it that in writing or sharing a letter, we ask ourselves to be different with one another? What can letters do to make a new world?

A principal method of colonial violence is that of severing relations. That is, severing deep connections to land, life, and kin. This cleaving is also temporal in that colonial power structures seek to rewrite time: to force a break from past relations and ancestors, to write these structures into the future (Whyte 2021; Curley 2021; Belcourt 2016), and to recenter Europe, whiteness, and cis-heteropatriarchy in temporal and spatial history. Reclaiming the epistolary form, as missives, as transmissions, can rewrite our understandings of how we know and make our relationships, and can refuse this severing by insisting on a capacious sense of temporal connection across time, and on connection to kin and to land that is independent of and a refusal of the colonial severance.

Part of this work is in creating a subaltern archive in which the letters write back to history itself: Elspeth and Dolly write their own relatives’ stories against the ways that these stories have been both erased and violently appropriated through the theft of bones and words into museums and archives. There is an element of ambiguity in letters that allows for nonlinear storytelling, for avoidance of the provisions of evidence and the trappings of academic truth telling, and for a deeper epistemological storytelling of relational truth. Letter exchange is readymade for refusal (A. Simpson 2007), as the unspoken also connects letter writers, who can reveal what they choose and redact that which is not for the consumption of others.

To write a letter is to make a world to enter together, a world made up of sensations, emotions, and longing, a world that is vulnerable and full of potential. The letter makes a world—sometimes a fictional one—exist between the writer and its receiver, until you share that

letter, or it is published in a book, or it finds itself in the wrong (or right) hands. When we read these letters that we are now sharing with you, we read yearning and desire that remakes us and the world. Written to children, written to ancestors, written to friends, to places, to an earlier version of the author themselves, these letters express desire for a different relationship, a different plane of existence, a world in which relations between us are somehow remade. The authors of these letters are making worlds and pulling us into their creations.

Letters make publics, as Sneha reminds us. Collectively, we find these letters open up new ways for geographers to engage with time, space, and the limits of communication: in their coalescing and the community they make through this experimentation, they also ask us to make a different kind of world within our discipline.

In the spirit of letters, we hope this piece offers threads and beginnings for dialogues on this Special Issue's themes: time travel, worldmaking, anti-colonial and feminist praxis. We have ordered them beginning with Dolly's which signals the embodied and anticolonial nature of the letter, then move into a set of poetic reflections on place and intimacy from Orlando and León, Ahmi, and Anisa, before turning to two familial reflections looking back and forward, Pavithra and Alana's letters. Then we turn to Mia's and Cristina's personal reflective letters that also open into their political worlds and spill into Sandeep and Pallavi's letter to the Indian farmer. Caitilin, Michelle, and Deondre speak to our relations to place in different ways, before we turn to Dewitt, Christian, and Elspeth's relations to kin made and born. We end with Danielle's letter to abolition itself, as it carries us into a desired future together. We invite readers into our community, to comment on and respond to letters, and to be in relation with us as you imagine (and work to bring into being) desirable futures. As our collective work in the present continues in service of these futures, we look forward to your company.

Sincerely,

Caitilin, Lara, Mabel, Pallavi, Pavithra and Sara

As an enclosure, we include here our initial letter, a call for letters—asking for replies, not to us but to the wide array of publics, selves, and ancestors included in this issue. We include this call for letters to also include you, our reader into our affective geographies not only as publics but as letter writers, as worldbuilders. If you are inspired to write a letter, write it to us or to one of our contributors at:

Desirable Futures
c/o Sara Smith
220 Hurston Hall
Campus Box 3220
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
Chapel Hill, NC 27599

Dear reader,

Pick up a pen and begin writing a letter. Who do you write to? Where is your letter going? Or is this a letter that will only exist in the process of writing, to be hidden in a crevice, shredded, and dispersed to the ocean winds, or redacted from public view?

The letter is a time capsule and a vehicle for time travel. When we write a letter, we mean to engage with someone in a different place and time, to express some aspect of the distant past or of our present selves and worlds into the future. The letter is a temporal bridge that transcends borders and captivity.

Letters may explain or express longing, love, anger, hopefulness, or disillusionment. Letters may be intimate or formal. Letters may be monologues or diatribes, seductions or testimonies, poems or paeans. Letters can say no or yes, or maybe... you have to write a letter back to learn more. Letters deliver news and decisions. They may allow you to express something you are unable or unwilling to say face-to-face. Letters are an invitation into/out of relationships.

At the 2021 AAG Desirable Futures Sessions, we found ourselves sharing an unexpectedly collaborative space in which we heard a longing for different ways of forging community and being in relation to one another now and in the future. In thinking of what could come after, we landed on the letter as a way to not only think about and theorize time, but to evoke the relations between different times, peoples, and places, a form that is intimate but may be disembodied, a communication that is at once formal and familiar.

We invite you to write a letter—to a place or an object, to an ancestor or an icon, to or from an imagined past or possible future, to an enemy or your diary. Construct a time capsule describing your reality, or an imagined one; respond to a letter that changed you or altered the course of your world; pay obeisance to what you love or to that which you want to destroy.

A list of possibilities [or invent your own]:

A letter to your younger or older self

A letter to an elder or (unborn) child

A letter about an event or object

A letter to a place

A correspondence with comrades

A postcard from a time or place

Letters to or from an imagined future

A letter to an icon or someone who inspires your abolitionist visions

Respond to a letter that wasn't to you

Repurpose a letter

Letter to an enemy or villain

A poem as letter (epistolary form)

Dear diary,

The letter you would/wish you had burned

The letter you can't send

A reply to a letter from the past, to a letter that changed you

Letter to a stranger you didn't interact with

A list of objects for a time capsule to space/the future

Peer reviews as love/hate letters/invitations

Redactions/annotations/reading between the lines of letters

A chain letter

Letters as archives of remembering and forgetting, of memories and time

Taken together, how might our modest archive of letters speak to the futures desired by those who came before, or the futures we desire to build?

Respectfully yours, with humility and wonder,

Pavithra Vasudevan, Sara Smith, Carlos Serrano, Cait McMillan, Lara Lookabaugh, Pallavi Gupta, and Mabel Gergan

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