

CSWS Research Matters

The Life of Paper, a Poetics: Letters and Mass Incarceration in Global California

This book aims not only to denaturalize the geographic borders, political-economic laws, and civic norms that expose people to state-sanctioned violence but, more critically, to privilege a sense of the activities and worldviews of disenfranchised populations who struggle to transform existing conditions.

BY SHARON LUK, Assistant Professor, University of Oregon, Department of English



Sharon Luk

ascesis

involved in writing
my history
i've been waking in
night sweats &
it's not the sheets,
those things in-
side are
burning out
of love

17 june 2009

Writing and rewriting my book has been a slow burn—as the case may be, too, for those who will kindly read it. On the one hand, to myself and to those who have shared their stories with me (and probably also to others still holding their stories close to themselves), the central argument of my research is obvious, almost too obvious to necessitate book-length explanation: this is, simply, that letters can mean the world to the people attached to them, and distinctively so for communities ripped apart by incarceration. In the first and final instance, this is a formulation of “the life of paper” that you must accept at face value in its plenitude, a plenitude that is all but better represented by understatement rather than long-winded analysis. If one does not accept, chances are that no amount of research could effect otherwise because the problem would not have been a matter of fact, even if it becomes so profoundly one of logic.

Yet, on the other hand, I have nevertheless felt compelled to corroborate the existence of such a phenomenon, plain as it may be. And once I committed to doing so by giving it name, the self-evidence of all meaning seemed to vanish. And so, each and every time I come to the page, my own creativity always begins at a loss.

Part of the problem I experience with narrating this life of paper is, indeed, an effect of my object of study, the letter itself; in turn, my issues become productive of the very means through which I problematize the letter for the sake of study, too. Assumptions of both the transparency and the significance of the letter have long captured civic imagination. Conveyed, for example, by H. T. Loomis’ introduction to his textbook, *Practical Letter Writing* (1897), the ultimate function of an education in the “neatness, correct forms, and established customs in writing letters” seems to reside less in the use-value or objectivity of the letter as commodity than in the object the letter itself produces: Western civilization as such—its embodiment in and through “correct and incorrect positions” (Figure 1), acquisition of proper habits, abilities, intelligence, and business tact, achievement of general mastery over the affairs of life.

If, indeed, the epistolary thus mediates man’s becoming at this most essential scale of economy, then my own questions become: what is a letter, what does it do and how does it work, on the other side of human mastery—thought and learned, written and read, sent and received from an other side of history? What vitalizes human relationships to the letter when the human embodies the crisis rather than cultivation of man and the mortal stakes of the problem of representation? In three parts, *The Life of Paper* hence deals with these questions at the interstices of aesthetic, racial, geographic, and ontological form: exploring

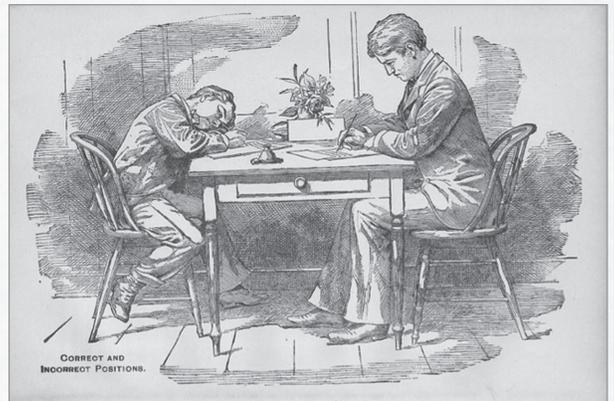


Fig. 1: H.T. Loomis, *Practical Letter Writing* (Cleveland, OH: The Practical Textbook Co., 1897), 6. Original caption reads: “Correct and Incorrect positions.”



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the life-worlds maintained through letter correspondence within particular contexts of racism and mass incarceration in California history. Tracing the contradictions of modernity that inhere in as well as mobilize around the letter itself, its mediation of social struggles to define “Western civilization” as well as its reinvention of ways of life that the latter cannot subsume, this investigation unfolds in three cycles to uncover how letters facilitate a form of communal life for groups targeted for racialized confinement in different phases of development in the U.S. West.

This perspective afforded by the investigation of the letter contours the central contribution of my research to contemporary discourse on mass incarceration: namely, the analytic it offers to understand the “prison industrial complex” as foremost a problem of civilization rather than punishment and, as such, a priority of social reproduction—or, the practices through which things (including people) stay alive—which cannot be fully rationalized through logics of capitalist production alone. In perhaps unexpected ways, then, and given its regional scope that is inextricable yet distinguishable from historiographies drawn from the U.S. Southern and Atlantic regions, *The Life of Paper* addresses conflicting characterizations of mass incarceration as either a slave labor regime or as a new caste system, both frames imbued with tremendous rhetorical and affective force and yet ultimately inconsistent or limited in their explanatory potential.

Specific to the U.S. West, and beginning with the domination of planetary “white only” settler colonial and Free Soil movements at the moment of California statehood, Part I, “Detained,” examines movements of regional migration and localized containment, moreso than criminal justice policy or early construction of jails, as critical to the history of racism and mass incarceration in the region. “Detained” thus focuses on migrants from Southern China during peak years of U.S. Chinese Exclusion (1890s-1920s) and elaborates the distinct pathways that detained communities forged—in and through letters—to rearticulate emergent infrastructures defining an epoch of global imperialist expansion, capitalist industrialization, and nation-state formation predicated on exclusions understood in terms of “racial” distinction.

Part II, “Interned” focuses on families of Japanese ancestry during the WWII period (1930s-1940s) and examines interned communities’ processes of aesthetic production through letters, in dialectic with the development of a modern security state and its systems of censorship and surveillance.

Part III, “Imprisoned” focuses on socialities of Blackness in the post-Civil Rights era (1960s-present): interrogating how the Black radical tradition has vitalized practices of re-embodiment the human as imprisoned communities of different ethno-racial heritage engage letter correspondence to survive collectively through dramatic restructurings of global capitalism, U.S. apartheid, and racial order that all bond societies in California and beyond to prisons as anchoring institution of civic life.

Framing letters within the political violence that conditions them, my work ultimately explores how the mundane activities of communities to sustain themselves, as manifest in letter correspondence, emerge discernibly as constitutive of social life rather than seemingly adjunct to it. Invested with the urgency of communities’ struggles to survive, I argue that the production and circulation of letters open real and imaginative possibilities, both engrained in the letter and in excess of it. Thus, in “the life of paper,” I interrogate the processes that connect paper objects to historical human identity and being. I also analyze how these forms of connection—structural, physical, ideological, and affective labor internalized in the letter—create alternative conditions that both ground and animate endeavors to reinvent people’s own means of living. As such, these acts of self-making provide a glimpse into how communities under such constraint can reproduce themselves at every scale of existence, from bodily integrity to subjectivity to collective and spiritual being. I hence call the life of paper a “poetics”: an art of becoming, mediated in and through the letter and the interaction of literature with history, that prioritizes the dynamics of creative essence to generate an other kind of social power bound to the unfathomable. ■

— Sharon Luk received a CSWS research grant in 2015-16 to support this research. Her book manuscript is under review and scheduled for publication in 2018. Dr. Luk is currently an assistant professor in English and participating faculty in Ethnic Studies, Women and Gender Studies, and Clark Honors College.