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### Writing Others' Stories: Autoethnographic Reflections on Historical Research, Representation, and Bakhtin

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Writing Others' Stories: Autoethnographic Reflections on  
Historical Research, Representation, and Bakhtin

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*As I write this letter I can see the full moon which so fascinated you. Its full face seems to be grinning at me and I think if it had the power of speech it would say – “You darn fool, you are just writing nonsense.” Probably that heavenly body doesn't know that when one is so deeply in love with the most wonderful girl in the world one is apt to write or say anything. -Harold Kurtin, June 30, 1931*

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I read these words out-loud as I project them onto a screen for students in my First Year Seminar on Private Communication in the late fall of 2015. The words are written on art deco letterhead in a cursive script the students barely recognize as English. Together, we have read the diaries of Anne Frank, the young girl whose story the world cannot stop reading because of its horrible end. We have read the letters of men who, knowing they would die in battle, bid final farewell to their loves. We have discussed how words carry with them traces of the people whose writings, composed only for themselves or intimate others, find their way to unexpected audiences like us.<sup>1</sup> Yet, until now, my eighteen-year-old audience engaged in distant, theoretical ways. Now, several are crying.

“Do you understand?” I implore them. It’s the phrase I use too much in this classroom precisely because I want them to recognize in themselves what Bakhtin calls the “excess of

seeing” that we have as interlocutors in dialogue with others.<sup>2</sup> I want them to understand the communicative *responsibility* that we have to others in our responses to them.

The first student to respond, Elizabeth, ignores my question. “People need to read these letters, you have to publish them,” she says wiping tears from her eyes. “None of us will ever get anything like this now. Boys don’t write like that anymore.”

These students are not the first to suggest that I pursue publication for the set of personal love letters that I found in the attic of a house I rented in 1998 and that were the subject of my dissertation in 2002. In fact, nearly everyone that I have told about the letters suggests that they would make a great book or movie, and I agree. Unfortunately, I long believed the writers, who later married but are now deceased, had no descendants. That meant that no one could truly give me permission to use the letters in their entirety. Given this, I adhered to the fair-use copyright doctrine for critical use of the letters as research for my dissertation, and then I packed them away, never pursuing any additional publication. Because they are charming and academically valuable, however, I occasionally presented them to select audiences like this class.

“But don’t you think they would WANT other people to read their letters?” Elizabeth pushes back. “I think you should try.”

I agreed and this is the tale of what happened when I went looking for copyright permission and found myself facing questions about love, ethics, and responsibility. To recreate my academic wrangling about the ethical choices inherent in my project for this essay, I layer autoethnography with theory to explore dialogic challenges related to my qualitative research about individuals from the past. Guided by my readings of Russian literary philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin, I explore issues that have emerged for me as a researcher over the past twenty years as I work with a particular set of found love letters between Lillian (Lil) Friedman and Harold

(Harry) Kurtin that they wrote in the 1930s. In doing so, I hope elucidate the challenges of representation faced by scholars like me who research the lived experience of everyday people from the past. In order to explore how I resolved my own feelings of insecurity about representing others who have passed, I reveal how I resolved my own uncertainties by applying Bakhtin's literary concepts, including authorial responsibility, heteroglossia, polyphony, and the chronotope, to my reflection process. Knowing that choices of representation are commonly faced by autoethnographers motivated me to write this one myself, to share how I used a favorite writer to reflect on ethical choices in narrative representation. The result is this autoethnographic depiction of ethical reasoning and writing that I hope demonstrates Bakhtin's relevance to the larger project of autoethnography by providing a roadmap for others interested using Bakhtin's literary concepts to reflect on lived experience. This autoethnography blends theory and personal experience to reflect upon the gravity and caution required when conducting personal research about others from the past, especially the deceased. This is a story about how I found a way forward, after many years of insecurities, by writing this autoethnography.

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In August 2018, I sent a letter to a woman named Barbara Kurtin, who I found through internet searches. The letter tells the background of our story:

*Dear Barbara,*

*I hope that my letter finds you well. I am writing to you because I believe that Lillian (Friedman) and Harold Kurtin were your parents. I have spent years trying to find and contact their descendants, and my research suggests that you might be their daughter ... In 1999 when I was a graduate student, I moved into a historic house that had been converted into smaller apartments. The landlord was a new*

*owner of the building, and he had failed to remove the cast-offs from previous tenants in the attic as he had promised when I signed the lease. In order to clear space for camping gear I wanted to store, I asked to remove the contents of the attic myself. Along with years of old magazines and damaged furniture, I found a shipping crate that I could not resist opening. Inside, I found more than 100 envelopes addressed to a woman in the home in which I was living and other letters addressed to a man in New York ...I began searching for the letter writers. Although the internet was not as sophisticated with record-searches as it is today, I was able to discover that they had been married, and I also found the date of their deaths in New York. In all the records I had access to, the next of kin information was empty and I had hit a dead-end. Still, I didn't feel that I could throw them away ... I began to study letter-writing as a form of communication, and I proposed to study the historic development of relationships through personal letter writing using Lillian and Harold's letters for my dissertation, which I completed in 2002. As the years have passed and I attained tenure and promotion, I began to think more and more about these letters. Technology has improved significantly over these years, and on a whim one afternoon I decided to enter their names into ancestor.com and discovered that Harold and Lillian may have had a child – a person I believe might be you .... If I have reached the right person, I would like to speak with you more about returning the original copies of the letters to you...*

In March 2018, I traveled to Merrill's Inlet, South Carolina to meet Barbara, to give her the letters written by her parents eighty years before, and to acquire her permission to begin publishing from the letters. While exciting, that moment brought with it a flood of challenges

about representing the past, both in academic writing and at all. Many of these challenges emerged from my own past and many of them have been with me since I began working with the letters as a graduate student. Some emerged from my own relationship with the pasts of Lil and Harry, and some developed as I became acquainted with their daughter, Barbara.

#### Discovering the Past: Apparitions on the Page

*“I slept beneath the stars” with the moon, that you saw 1200 miles away, watching over me. Tonight, it will be a full one & again I shall look to it & hope you too see it. Does the moon have any effect on you? I can’t say that it alone affects me, yet when it is lovely & the stars are twinkling in a dark sky & all is quiet, I love it. In fact, I can’t see how anyone could help being favorable to such a beautiful sight. Lillian Friedman, June 27, 1931*

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Barbara Kurtin and I sat in her living room on the couch, sorting through the binders of letters, photos, and other ephemera that I brought with me to give to her. The early spring day was sunny and warm, and light flooded into the many windows of Barbara’s home near the shore. Barbara’s husband, Ronnie, died of cancer about sixth months earlier and she shared with me that she received my correspondence about her parents’ letters within a day of his passing. I heard from her a few months after his death, once she felt ready for the emotional impact that reading these letters might have on her. “I feel like I have my parents back at a time when I need them most,” she said, as we sat together in March 2018.

My husband Chad joined me on the trip, and soon Barbara’s brother-in-law Steven joined us as well, and we spent most of two days together, sharing meals and stories about Lillian and Harold Kurtin and ourselves. Whereas Barbara provided me with answers to questions I longed

to know about Lil and Harry's life after the letters ceased, I shared with her details of her parents' young lives that were unknown to her. Our conversations continued for hours at a time until we both would lean back, and say to each other, "I can't believe you are real."

I learned about their lives after college, about how Harry had never used the pharmacy degree he earned at Purdue, but instead ran a very successful wool rag business in the Bronx that had eventually financed their lives in Great Neck, New York. Barbara described how theirs was the first family to install an in-ground swimming pool in their affluent neighborhood, and I showed Barbara essays written by Lillian for her Home Economics classes at Purdue about home innovation and development. We laughed at how she hadn't changed. We cried a little too, especially when she told me about the deaths of her parents. Lillian had been bedridden for weeks, and when she became worse the family called for an ambulance. In his car, Harry and Barbara followed the paramedics. Barbara described Harry repeating over and over, "I cannot live without her." Lillian died that afternoon, and Harry died six months later in his sleep. Barbara confirmed what I imagined years earlier when I first found their names in the Social Security Death Index: Harry died of a broken heart.

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How can I fairly and authentically represent these others?<sup>3</sup> I know them as vibrant young people only beginning their lives together, but while their letters sat in that trunk over the decades, warehousing representations of their youth, Lil and Harry married, adopted children, lived full and by all accounts fulfilling lives, and died. Furthermore, what right do I have to make public words that were written in absolute privacy between two utter strangers forty years before my existence?<sup>4</sup> And yet, now that I have found and read them, how could I do nothing and return them to darkness?

Whenever I feel lost, I often turn to writers who most influenced me. When I was in graduate school, my mentor encouraged my affinity for the literary critic M.M. Bakhtin, and although Bakhtin is not unique in his claims about dialogue and literature, he is a theorist who changed the way I lived my life and engaged my work. So, to reflect upon these questions for myself, I turned to Bakhtin's essay, "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity," a treatise on the aesthetic and ethical work of authoring characters in a novel that is interpreted by contemporary scholars as both literary theory and social or communicative anthropology.<sup>5</sup>

Bakhtin's lifelong project was to develop a theory of dialogism, and as a literary critic, he identified the novel as the ideal form of representation in a dialogical world throughout his many essays. In "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity," Bakhtin explores the relationship between authors and the people they construct, explicating the dialogic means through which selves are "consummated" by others. Novels are written by authors who populate them with protagonists, or in Bakhtin's terms, "heroes," who interact in unlimited ways with other characters in various times and locations. According to Bakhtin, heroes appear in novels as people driven by personal goals and directives in their own lives that bring them into contact with others in limitless possible worlds. A hero does not encounter these others as fully articulated human beings but as objects with which she or he interacts. Heroes have no ability to reflect upon why they make the choices they do, but instead experience motivation only from the "imminent necessity of the hero's own object-directed life."<sup>6</sup> Heroes rely upon authors to create a sense of purpose or wholeness for them, which authors can do because they can see the hero from an outside perspective, giving them a "surplus of seeing" into hero's lives.

Communication scholar William K. Rawlins applies these concepts to real life, arguing that we can interpret Bakhtin as writing about our real lived experience, considering selves and

our relations with others as “heroes of our own lives.”<sup>7</sup> In Rawlins’ reading, others are akin to authors, who we all need to help us give meaning to our experiences. As Rawlins explains, meaning “arises with others who gift us fullness, completion, and integration within a world. We require others to realize the value of our own embodied existence as human beings.”<sup>8</sup> From this view, we require others to experience our world with us and to give meaning to those experiences. Rawlins spotlights Bakhtin’s idea that “Only others have the capacity to observe and consummate from outside our internally generated directedness to meaning and our doings in the world.”<sup>9</sup> Read in this way, others (authors) have a dialogical responsibility to heroes (selves). We are all authors and we are all heroes.

As a researcher investigating the lived experience of real historical others, applying Bakhtin’s concepts of author and hero became useful in helping me answer *how* I should represent Lil and Harry in my writings about them. It also made me reflect upon what ethical *right* I have to write about them. To that, Bakhtin reminds me that people are always reliant upon others to know the story of their lives as a whole:

The whole of my life has no validity within the axiological context of my own lived life. My birth, my axiological abiding in the world, and, finally, my death are events that occur neither in me nor for me. The emotional weight of my own life taken as a whole does not exist for me myself.<sup>10</sup>

To *not* write about what I have learned about the unique and once-occurring lives of Lillian Friedman and Harold Kurtin by reading their letters denies them the “sympathetic understanding” that Bakhtin suggests is what we owe others simply *because it is what we hope for ourselves*. By sympathetic understanding, Bakhtin means to “lovingly contemplate” the other

as “a particular realization of meaning in being, an individual realization and embodiment of meaning.”<sup>11</sup>

We are reliant on others for our own aesthetic consummation. Bakhtin explains, “I am not capable of experiencing the emotionally consolidated time that encompasses me, just as I am not capable of experiences in the space that encompasses me.”<sup>12</sup> Only the other can do this. The Lil and Harry of the letters have an inner life and I exist only along its periphery. I am able to interpret their lives as a completed whole in a way that is different from their own and that was in fact never possible for them. Through this lens, I began to see writing about Lil and Harry as an ethical responsibility I have been called to answer. I know that my representations of them reveals only my own specific and unique dialogue with them, grounded in my own unique and limited perspective in space and time. I came to believe there is no absolutely authentic way to represent others, but instead the goal should be to do so only with sincere sympathetic understanding for others.

This is not to say that I stopped worrying about how to represent Lil and Harry in my writing. Instead, I began writing this autoethnographic “confessional tale” that reveals the “backstage research endeavors” of my reflective, theoretical work with their letters.<sup>13</sup> I also read the work of others who had done the same because, as Plummer argues, “we need stories and narratives of research ethics to help fashion our own research lives.”<sup>14</sup> I learned that Christopher Poulos struggled with representing family secrets and memories in his work, but guardedly resolved those concerns by identifying “relational research ethics” as central to choices he makes when writing about others, such that “[authorial choices are], in part, conscience-driven responses born of my dynamic, caring relations with the particular humans in these stories. I do not wish to hurt them.”<sup>15</sup> I also learned how Carolyn Ellis endeavored to represent her southern,

rural neighbors well in her writing and worked through that challenge through “dialogic conversations” she had with herself and shared through publication with other writers to “reveal the vulnerable process [she] went through” rather than to resolve the challenges entirely.<sup>16</sup> Like these others, I merely offer my story as one way of negotiating the representation of historic others in this autoethnography using Bakhtinian theory.

#### Being in the Present: Shadows of Voices

*As I write this letter I keep glancing up at your pictures. It seems as though I am writing to you just you. Lil my letters are merely the thoughts which come into my head placed on paper. I never stop to re-read what I write. This method may have its faults, but you may be sure that I mean every word I write. Yes honey, there are no detours – everything is straight from the heart. Harold Kurtin, June 22, 1931*

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Another challenge of representing the other that I have discovered in working with the letters of Lil and Harry focuses specifically on how I can fairly and authentically represent their voice(s). As a researcher of historical lived experience, how do I narrate the voice of the other(s)? What stylistic choices will I make as an author in presenting the voices of others, and what significance do these choices have for how they are interpreted by readers?<sup>17</sup> My work deals with a completed dialogue in letters between two individuals at a specific point in their lives. Furthermore, these letters are romantic and intensely personal, meaning that they never intended for another person to read, much less interrupt their chronological flow or theorize about particular passages. I fear that by offering academic analysis of the letters, I alter their narrative integrity because I was a never-intended voyeur of these letters. Yet, the writers of the

letters preserved them so carefully, tucking the pages back into postmarked envelopes and collecting them together for posterity. Did that suggest that they wanted their letters to be read by others? The fact that the letters are eloquent and historically interesting only adds to their appeal as objects of academic study. How can I share their words as a complete, holistic story with a modern audience while still contributing to communication research? How does my voice “fit” with theirs? To address these challenges, I turn to another essay by Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel” to introduce his concepts of heteroglossia and polyphony.

To explain dialogue as an intense and radical human encounter in the lives of others, Bakhtin contrasts novels as a literary form with traditional poetry or epic storytelling, arguing that novels feature no singular, authoritative voice as the other forms do. Instead, novels feature heteroglossia, which for Bakhtin means “languages of various periods of socio-ideological life [that] cohabit with one another.”<sup>18</sup> Novels, like life, feature multiple voices and multiple languages that swirl together through time. By “multiple languages,” Bakhtin means not only different spoken tongues but also the “languages and inherent ideologies of our profession, the language and the inherent ideologies of our age group, of the decade, of our social class, geographical region, family, circle of friends, etc.”<sup>19</sup>

As Bakhtin writes,

At any given moment of its historical existence, language is heteroglot from top to bottom: it represents the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past, between differing epochs of the past, between different socio-ideological groups in the present, between tendencies, schools, circles and so forth, all given a bodily form.<sup>20</sup>

Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia radicalizes dialogue because it infuses every aspect of human experience. Using language is itself a dialogic act even as individual persons all retain their unique perspective of the world because all words are dialogic, carrying connotations of others' use. Words, and languages, are drenched with the social factors of their situatedness while simultaneously in dialogue with all that came before.

The concept of heteroglossia can be useful in reflecting on my concern of how I represent the words of others in historic research. If we quote primary documents, historical researchers become narrators of others' voices, who as decedents lack the agency to communicate for themselves. The speech of a narrator, Bakhtin reminds us, "is always another's speech . . . in another's language."<sup>21</sup> Because words are dialogic, they are never our own such that "[e]ach word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life; all words and forms are populated by intentions."<sup>22</sup> Bakhtin helps us recognize that researchers, as narrators, are writing for others when they mediate the voices of others. A complete unification of others' voices with mine is never even possible even if I quote from my research data, which is an academic necessity in research reporting. Once I quote others, their socio-ideologically stratified words join my own in a heteroglot literary form similar to the novel.

Using the specific words and language of historical others in research writing by quoting or paraphrasing their once-occurring utterances directly is also illustrative of what Bakhtin calls polyphony, a concept related to heteroglossia but that entomologically spotlights voice. Polyphony is literally multiple voicedness in discourse, "the capacity of my utterance to embody someone else's' utterance even while it is mine, which there by creates a dialogic relationship between two voice."<sup>23</sup> In an essay called "The Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics," Bakhtin analyzes s novels as the illustrative example of polyphony, and argues that, "What unfolds in

{Dostoevsky's] works is not a multitude of characters and fates in a single objective world, illuminated by a single authorial consciousness; rather a plurality of consciousnesses, with equal rights and each with its own world, combine but are not merged in the unity of the event."<sup>24</sup> This means the author exists alongside the characters in the novel, and the characters are "not only objects of authorial discourse but also subjects of their own directly signifying discourse."<sup>25</sup> In the polyphonic novel, Bakhtin argues, characters are "free people, capable of standing alongside their creator, capable of not agreeing with him and even of rebelling against him."<sup>26</sup> If Bakhtin suggests that within the context of the novel, authors and characters are equals dependent upon each other, I wondered if that could also be true in research writing about historical others.

How can historical researchers achieve this dialogic equality with the historical actors they study? Perhaps by representing historic others as Dostoevsky stylistic represents his characters. As Bakhtin explains,

In [Dostoevsky's] works a hero appears whose voice is constructed exactly like the voice of the author himself ... A character's word about himself and his world is just as fully weighted as the author's word usually is; it is not subordinate to the character's objectified image as merely one of his characteristics, nor does it serve as a mouthpiece for the author's voice. It possesses extraordinary independence in the structure of the work; it sounds, as it were, alongside the author's word and in a special way combines both with it and with the full and equally valid voices of other characters.<sup>27</sup>

Achieving this in academic writing about decedent actors necessarily requires a rejection of the objectivity and authority that is often expected in academic writing. The dialogic turn is

necessary to fully integrate historic others in our moment, allowing them to speak *with* us despite our own radically unique position over and against them in time and space.

There is a growing body of autoethnographers who use the conventions of narrative, fiction, and poetry to write their own real stories,<sup>28</sup> and these scholars provided me with a roadmap for writing a book about Lil and Harry's letters. My favorite example of this trend in autoethnography is Carolyn Ellis's book, *The Ethnographic I: A Methodological Novel About Autoethnography*.<sup>29</sup> In this ambitious text, Ellis provides readers with a methodological guide for doing autoethnography written in the form of an engaging story, complete with fictional characters. After reading it, I was intrigued to find a review by Mary McGuire who uses Bakhtin to theorize Ellis's work in a way Ellis does not explicitly do herself, suggesting that autoethnographies are fundamentally dialogic, and that "A dialogic view of authoring entails being responsive to the voices of others and a necessary double-voicing in re-authoring the self and others. Double-voicing refers to utterances that may be attributable to two speakers at once."<sup>30</sup> This explicit connection between Bakhtin's ideas and autoethnographies I admired reinforced the ideological connections between the two and remind me of my own role in the construction of the other, always.

#### Imaging a Future: Chonotopic Encounters

*Harry, dear, do you know what I want to do sometimes? Please don't be shocked, but I'd like to be in my P'J's sometime with you while you are in yours, have the lights turned low & listen to some orchestra that we both liked. Perhaps unexpectedly, you would kiss me. How nice that would be? Tell me what you think of it? . . . I can just picture ourselves. You would be in a large chair, smoking a pipe while I should sit at your knees resting my head on your knee, you would*

*stroke my hair, all would be in silence, except for the throbbing of some saxophone or violin. Maybe someone would sing to us. Oh, how I should love it.*

-Lillian Friedman, July 9, 1931

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Those of us who research historic others regularly find ourselves exploring times and places that are not our own. Time as a linear construction moves from the past into the future, with different epochs marked by significant events or the passing of human generations. The history of humankind is generally told and understood as a constant march of progress as people understand more and more about their environs and devise technologies for coping with life's challenges. We believe that people today have more knowledge and understanding about everything than people had in the past, and so we necessarily view the past through a lens of superiority that distorts the actions and words of historic others. This provides a challenge for historic researchers who take a dialogic turn in their writing. How can I represent the past fairly and with respect? This challenge is clearly represented by the passage from Lillian's letter that I excerpted at the beginning of this section. Since the time when Harry and Lil have fallen in love, the cultural values guiding love and courting rituals among college students has changed significantly. Sexuality can be expressed in the United States in ways it simply could not in the 1930s, and while we might debate the resultant consequences, we must agree that cultural value will necessarily impact my interpretation of this passage. I'm encouraged to see the way that Lil and Harry expressed their growing love as charming and even naïve, which may not be the way their letters felt to them.

Since the 1930s, other cultural values have changed as well as the topics discussed by Lil and Harry become the past. The impact of the Great Depression faded, the role of women in

professional life changed, and same sex marriage and abortion became recognized as Constitutional rights in the United States. Lil and Harry were writing from their own unique positions as young, middle class, white Jewish college students in the 1930s, and sometimes they voice opinions that are ideologically problematic to me from my own unique position as a white cis-female middle-aged liberal arts college professor in the early decades of the twenty-first century. Because I have read all their letters, I have an impression of Lil and Harry as socially progressive. After all, Lil was an early female graduate from Purdue University in a class dominated by men and she pursued employment as a teacher with her credentials. Harry both accepted and admired Lil's ambitions. Conversations with their daughter Barbara confirmed for me that Lil and Harry were forward thinkers. Yet, when their letters are read today, certain passages and topics may offend. Knowing this risk to their character, how do I present the whole of the letters, which is necessary for heteroglossia and polyphony? To help me work through this challenge, I turn yet another Bakhtin essay titled "Forms of Time and the Chronotope in the Novel," an explanation of the unlimited settings possible within novels, and in human life.

Most basically, the chronotope refers to the connectedness of time and space as it is artistically expressed in the novel.<sup>31</sup> As representations of time and space, chronotopes provide a living backdrop for the people and events in a novel. In novels, Bakhtin explains, "Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes charged and responsive to the visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot, and history."<sup>32</sup> Readers feel that time when reading

Chronotopes also exist outside of novels in the "real" worlds of the writer, the performer, and the reader/listener. Chronotopes are "mutually exclusive, they co-exist, they may be interwoven with, replace, or oppose one another, contradict one another or find themselves in

ever more complex interrelationships.”<sup>33</sup> Interactions between chronotopes create a complex dialogue between texts and life. The real person who wrote the novel and real person(s) who reads the text may be separated by geographical distances or centuries, exist in a “real, unity and as yet incomplete historical world set off by a sharp and categorical boundary from the represented world in the text.”<sup>34</sup> Quite simply, without real, actual time in the present, represented time in novels or history books could not exist. Neither could a deep exploration of Lil and Harry’s letters.

Bakhtin argues that as readers, we do not encounter represented chronotopes as inanimate. Rather, he writes,

This material of the work is not dead, it is speaking, signifying (it involves signs); we not only see and perceive it but in it we can always hear voices (even while reading silently to ourselves) ... The text as such never appears as a dead thing; beginning with any text – and sometimes passing through a lengthy series of mediating links – we always arrive, in the final analysis, at the human voice, which is to say we come up against the human being.<sup>35</sup>

Precisely because these representational chronotopes are alive in this way, dialogue between the current and the represented chronotopes is possible. “[T]he work and the world represented in it enter the real world and enrich it, and the real world enters the work and its world as part of the process of its creation.”<sup>36</sup> There is a reciprocal exchange in the collision of chronotopes.

Chronotopes help me understand the mediated relationships between art and life *and* between past and present. Bakhtin himself noted that chronotopic analysis can be “a means for studying the relation between any text and its times, and thus as a fundamental tool for a broader social and historical analysis.”<sup>37</sup> The actual words of Lil and Harry are drenched in social factors

that are revealed through what is said (the verbal), what is unsaid (intonation and emphasis), and the context (the extra-verbal). Bakhtin's chronotope encourages a comprehensive understanding of the historical and social situatedness of such narratives. But even more importantly, he reminds us that a contemporary reading of a historical document is, at the same time, both historical and present, as it is re-encountered by contemporary others. This suggests to me that researchers and readers both require self-reflexivity in terms of the role that they play in [re]creating any historical context. As the author of this story, my own rhetorical skill in representing and framing Lil and Harry's words will impact how they are read. Each moment of the past, present and future is flavored by the axiological tastes of the people inhabiting their own time and space, and different moments exhibit different values and ideologies that Bakhtin would remind us are still present in words. Reading and analyzing Lil and Harry's letters over twenty years ago is an experience I have had with these documents, but presenting them today to readers is yet another. Talking about the letters with Barbara, Lil and Harry's daughter, is still another. All are complex dialogues with the past that are happening right now and that are not completed.

I try to remember that when I become melancholy and wish Barbara could have lived to read the letters of her parents in print.

#### Answerability and the Ephemeral: Dialogical Spirits

I took a sabbatical year during 2018-2019 and I spent that year scanning and rereading Lil and Harry's letters for a book proposal I hoped to submit. Each day I sat with a mug of Earl Grey, scanning through letters to narrow them down to perhaps 30,000 words. I wrote in my journal about my feelings as I annotated their experiences from the 1930s. In the background, I

played the music Lil or Harry mention so I could better connect to them. Although I didn't speak often to Barbara, we each stayed in contact through occasional letters.

In April, as I stepped off a plane delivering me from my first visit to Paris the day after I watched Notre Dame burn. I checked my messages. A man's voice with a New York accent said, "Jen. This is Steven, Barbara's brother-in-law. I wanted to call. Barbara isn't well." My husband ran to catch our luggage as it spilled onto the conveyor, and I called Steven. He told me that Barbara had cancer, and she had not responded to treatment. "Steve, I'm so sorry. Should I come?" He replied, "Barbara would love it if you could ... soon."

Within a month, I once again traveled to the shores of South Carolina. This time, we were greeted as old friends by Barbara's family and caretakers. Barbara was staying with Steven's sister-in-law and her husband, who graciously and lovingly opened their home to her during hospice. Upon arriving at the airport, Steven texted that Chad and I should come straight to their house, and so we did. We arrived to hugs and warm greetings, and when I saw Barbara sitting on a large lounge, I leaned in to kiss her cheek and she in return kissed mine. She didn't stand, but I could see that she had lost considerable weight. A bruise blemished her right cheek bone, an injury from a fall that she described as the reason she was now unable to stay in her own home.

Steven's family provided us with a large dinner and wonderful companionship. We talked about our hope for my letter project, and about my plans to pursue publication outside of my normal academic audiences. The next afternoon, Steven, Barbara, and I went through boxes of old photographs, identifying people and sometimes I could provide details I remembered from letters when names matched. We also completed her lengthy family tree, tracing lineage back Lillian and Harold's great grandparents, both of whom were rabbis. Leaving after a few days was bittersweet, but I went home with a mission requested by Barbara. She wanted to confirm a

memory of her mother telling her that her parents, Lil and Harry, had eloped before Harry finished school. I, too, wanted to know.

Using the archives easily available through Ancestry.com for the price of a subscription, I located Lillian and Harold's marriage certificate from a New York state depository dated June 1934. I immediately called Barbara to confirm her memories. After classes ended in 1934, but not before Harold's senior year final exams were completed, he secretly drove Lillian to New York. They didn't travel to his home, but instead stopped at the first town in the southwestern edge of the state with a rabbi. They were married, and immediately returned to Purdue with their secret. When Harry crossed the stage to receive his diploma, no one in his family knew he was a married man. Barbara and I laughed about that, wondering how and when they finally shared that with Harry's parents, who disapproved of Lillian's midwestern roots. Then we grew quiet, acknowledging those details were ultimately the province of the dead. No one alive knows.

I never spoke to Barbara again, but was apprised of her condition frequently by Steven. In early September, I received an urgent email asking me to send whatever I had written of the introductory pages for my book and the transcripts of letters I was annotating. I did, despite my embarrassment over the many mistakes and breaks in the writing. Steven read those pages out loud to Barbara as she died, so some the last words she heard on earth were those of her parents expressing their deepest love to each other.

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*I am thinking of you. I just can't get you out of my mind. If only we could be together to talk over things. I'm continuously wondering what you are doing, how you are doing it, if you are enjoying yourself – and oh – a host of other things. It is so disconcerting to always be wondering. Right now there are tears in my eyes.*

*Yes, darling, real honest to goodness tears. I'm as blue as hell & so lonely. Did you ever feel all alone – as if you were on the outside, “looking in?”* – Lillian Freeman, July 10, 1931

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How can I fairly and authentically represent these others? What right do I have to make public words that were written in absolutely privacy? How do I narrate the voice of the other(s)? What stylistic choices will I make as an author in presenting the voices of others, and what significance do these choices have for how they are interpreted by readers? How can I represent the past fairly and with respect? These questions swirled in my mind for the six months that followed my visits to Barbara. We spent several days together, talking about the letters as we sat in her bright, welcoming living room and over lunches and dinners that we shared at her favorite restaurants. When I left her, I felt strongly that the nagging in my consciousness about Lil and Harry's letters would stop, and I imagined that writing about them would be easy. Instead, I found myself haunted by the responsibility that I felt to many others, both living and deceased, who are touched by these letters. Indeed, on the topic of responsibility to the other, Bakhtin reminds me that there is no alibi for our answerability to the other. Autoethnographers have come to this conclusion in myriad other ways and there is symmetry here.

For Bakhtin, the concept of answerability is an intense responsibility that each of us, as unique persons in our specific time and space, owe to others. One of Bakhtin's dialogic goals was to unify art and life, which he called his “unity of responsibility.”<sup>38</sup> Bakhtin is precise in his meaning for dialogic answerability:

I have to answer with my own life for what I have experienced and understood in art, so that everything I have experienced and understood would not remain

ineffectual in my life. But answerability entails guilt, or liability to blame. It is not only mutual answerability that art and life must assume, but also mutual liability to blame.<sup>39</sup>

This liability is a risk that we *must* encounter, simply because we are each unique individuals who occupy a place that no one else can. Occupying that space comes with ethical responsibility, or answerability, as Bakhtin explains: “My unique ought arises from my unique place in Being. I, the one and only I, can at no moment be indifferent (stop participating) in my inescapably, compellingly once-occurrent life; I must have my ought.”<sup>40</sup> We are always answerable to others because of the need that we each have to consummate the other, which Bakhtin calls a “non-alibi in Being.”<sup>41</sup> Nothing can fulfill our need for others in our lives, nor can we be neutral in our lives.

The concept of answerability in this act of writing an autoethnography allowed me to process the many challenges that this project raised for me over these past twenty years. Only through my process of writing my thoughts into this layered autoethnography was I able to understand and feel the truth of this revelation for myself and this project. While I know there are countless theorists who could provide equally valid roadmaps to understanding a writer’s relationship to the past, my own affinity for Bakhtin makes his work best suited for me as I narrate my own academic story about Lil and Harry’s letters. In working through and writing this record of my own thinking and acting, I hope that others who research people from the past might find resonance and perhaps even guidance from my story.

My answerability to others centers me within my unique place in time. It is ongoing, and unending, woven in and through all the experiences of my life. *I* found Lil and Harry’s letters. *I* made the choice to organize and read them. I made these choices, and I must answer for them.

Once I entered into the chronotope created by their words, I met the letter-writers themselves and was thus offered the responsibility of addressing them. Lil and Harry could not know how their story ended, nor can they know the meanings that I have given their self-narrated love story in letters. Like each one of us will someday be, they are reliant upon others still alive to bring their lives into our present. Lil and Harry are reliant upon *me*, the only person who is positioned uniquely as a communication scholar of dialogue and historic discourse, to become the medium for the polyphony and heteroglossia that will allow them to join with me, in our time-bound dialogue, using timeless words.

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<sup>1</sup> Jennifer Adams, "Recovering a Trashed Communication Genre: Letters as Memory, Art, and Collectible," in *Residual Media*, ed. Charles R. Acland (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2007), 185-199.

<sup>2</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity," in *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist and Vadim Liapunov (Austin: University of Austin Press, 1990), 84.

<sup>3</sup> I am not the first to ask this question, which is in fact central to the concerns of many writers of autoethnographic, ethnographic and other sociological research. See for example Johannes Fabian, "Presence and Representation: The Other and Anthropological Writing" *Critical Inquiry* 16, no. 4 (1990):753-772, <http://DOI: 10.1086/448558>; William K. Rawlins, "From ethnographic Occupations to Ethnographic Stances," in *Communication: Views from the Helm for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, ed. J..S. Trent, (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1998), H.L. Goodall, "Voice, Reflexivity, and Character: The Construction of Identities in Texts," in *Writing the New Ethnography* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2000), 131-152; Ameena Ghaffar-Kucher, "Writing culture; inscribing

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lives: a reflective treatise on the burden of representation in native research,” *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 28, no. 10 (2014): 1186-1202, [http://doi:](http://doi:10.1080/09518398.2014.974720)

10.1080/09518398.2014.974720;

<sup>4</sup> Others have also asked this question. See for example Maurice Punch, “Politics and Ethics in Qualitative Research,” in *The Handbook of qualitative research*, 1<sup>st</sup> edition, eds. Norman Denzin and Yvonne S. Lincoln, (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1994); Ken Plummer, *Documents of Life 2* (London: Sage Publications, 2001); Liz Stanley, “The Epistolarium: On Theorizing Letters and Correspondences,” *Auto/Biography* 12, no. 1 (2004); & Erla Huldla Holldorsdottir, “Fragments of Lives – The Use of Private Letters in Historical Research,” *Nordic Journal of Feminist & Gender Research*, 15, no. 1 (2007).

<sup>5</sup> Bakhtin himself frequently discusses lived experience as well as the novel. For scholars who have used Bakhtin’s theories to write about lived experience rather than the novel, see William K. Rawlins, “*Stranger Than Fiction*, Answerability, and Co-Authoring a Life,” *Departures in Critical Qualitative Research* 4, no. 2 (2015): 12, [http://DOI: 10.1525/dcqr.2015.4.2.8](http://DOI:10.1525/dcqr.2015.4.2.8), 12; Rob Anderson, Leslie A. Baxter, and Kim N. Cissna, *Dialogue: Theorizing Difference in Communication Studies* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2004).; & Kevin J. Barge and Martin Little, “Dialogical Wisdom, Communicative Practice and Organizational life,” *Communication Theory* 12, no.4 (2002), 375–397.

<sup>6</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, “Author and Hero,” 84.

<sup>7</sup> Rawlins, “*Stranger Than Fiction*,” 12.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 12.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, 12.

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<sup>10</sup> M..M. Bakhtin, "Author and Hero," 105.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 102.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 106.

<sup>13</sup> Carolyn Ellis, Tony E. Adams, and Arthur P. Bochner, "Autoethnography: An Overview," *Historical Social Research* 36, no. 4 (2011), p. 278.

<sup>14</sup> Ken Pummer. *Documents of Life 2* (London: Sage, 2001).

<sup>15</sup> Christopher Poulos, "Narrative conscience and the autoethnographic adventure: Probing memories, secrets, shadows, and possibilities," *Qualitative Inquiry*, 14 (2008), 46–66.

<sup>16</sup> Carolyn Ellis, "Telling Tales on Neighbors: Ethics in Two Voices," *International Review of Qualitative Research*, 2, no. 1 (Spring 2009), 3-27.

<sup>17</sup> See for example Liz Stanley, "The Reader, The Text, and The Editor: On the Making of Olive Schreiner's Letters Online and The World's Great Question," *English in Africa* 42, no. 1 (2015), 59-76; Jane Ribbons and Rosalind Edwards, *Feminist Dilemmas in Feminist Research: Public Knowledge and Private Lives* (London: Sage, 1998); & The Personal Narratives Group, *Interpreting Women's Lives: Feminist Theory and Personal Narrative*, (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1989).

<sup>18</sup> M.M. Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas), 291.

<sup>19</sup> Linda M. Park-Fuller, "Voices: Bakhtin's Heteroglossia and Polyphony, and the Performance of Narrative Literature," *Literature in Performance* 7, no. 1 (1987), 2, <http://doi.org/10.1080/10462938609391621>.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 291

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<sup>21</sup> Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," 131.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 293.

<sup>23</sup> Park-Fuller, "Voices," 2.

<sup>24</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1984), 6

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 7.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 7.

<sup>28</sup> See Tony E. Adams, Stacy Holman Jones, Stacy Linn Holman Jones, Carolyn Ellis. (2014).

*Autoethnography* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>29</sup> Ellis, Carolyn. *The Ethnographic I: A Methodological Novel About Autoethnography*, (New York: AltMira Press, 2004).

<sup>30</sup> Mary H. McGuire, "Autoethnography: Answerability/Responsibility in Authoring Self and Others in the Social Sciences/Humanities," (Review Essay), *FQS*, 7, no 2 (2006), DOI:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/fqs-7.2.106>

<sup>31</sup> M.M. Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas).

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 84.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 250.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 253.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 252-253.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 254.

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<sup>37</sup> Michael Holquist, *Dialogism: Bakhtin and His World* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 113.

<sup>38</sup> M.. M. Bakhtin, "Art and Answerability," in *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist and Vadim Liapunov (Austin: University of Austin Press, 1990), 2.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 1.

<sup>40</sup> M.M. Bakhtin, *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* , trans. ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Vadim Liapunov, eds. Vadim Liapunov and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas, 1993), 40.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 40.