

## **The Circulation of Grief in English Women's WWII Correspondence\***

Stephanie E. Butler

School of English Literature, Language, and Linguistics  
Newcastle University, UK

### **Abstract**

Focusing on epistolary depictions of domestic dangers and children's deaths, this article examines how English women used letter-writing to request support in response to traumatic wartime experiences. A theoretical framework is offered for understanding how letters function as a method of peer support. This framework combines Nancy Fraser's theory of subaltern counterpublics, Lauren Berlant's concept of intimate publics and Aimée Morrison's work on digital affective communities to understand how letters were emotionally beneficial to women. Next, by appealing to Narrative Psychiatry (John P. Wilson and Jacob D. Lindy, and SuEllen Hamkins) the author explores how various images and symbols within women's correspondence demonstrate their efforts to process and articulate their experiences of trauma, anxiety, and grief, in response to wartime events. In closing, the author considers how witnessing as a collaborative activity between a speaker and a listener, as theorized by Dori Laub, is translated into women's wartime epistolary relationships.

### **Keywords**

war studies, women's writing, letters, trauma theories, second world war,  
auto/biography studies, life-writing studies, peer support

---

\* The author thanks John Patrick Tunstall OBE, and Kathleen Doyle, for permission to quote the letters of Mary Bloxham and Emily Morgan, respectively.

In contrast to the still-prevalent myth of the English stiff upper lip during wartime, Angus Calder has revealed that “people were panicking,” and experiencing “despair” exacerbated by “inadequate post-raid services” after being “bombed out” of their homes (120). The restrictions placed upon women’s expressions of grief under the cultural policies of stoicism, as revealed by Carol Acton (1-2, 4-7), resulted in these written disclosures being unpublished and suppressed even decades after the war had ended (Acton 57; Calder 120; Hartley 7). To counter this pervasive mythology of English wartime stoicism, I turn to women’s letters in which they disclose anxiety, terror, and grief. Women’s circulation, for instance, of expressions of concern and bereavement, requests for information, and obituaries, generated *subaltern counterpublic* (Fraser 123) epistolary relationships characterized by these negative emotions. Using letters, women created gendered support systems surrounding emotions that were discursively—and even forcibly—excluded from public discussion (Acton 10, 50, 57, 61, 72). Despite “limitations imposed on wartime letter-writing, letters were crucial in maintaining communities and bonds of intimacy” (9). “[P]ersonal letters of condolence to those at home provided an important means of sharing information and became dynamic sites of mourning” (10), whereby “communities of bereavement” were “formed” (13). This article evaluates letters as a means of forging affective communities enabling women to provide one another with peer support focused on war-trauma, anxiety, and grief.<sup>1</sup>

Much scholarly attention has been given to mothers and wives grieving dead husbands and sons who were soldiers (Acton 2, 13-14; Loraux 36-37). However, little research has been done on women civilians’ grief over the deaths of other women civilians or of children. This paucity of attention also holds true to research on gendered social support for women on the British Homefront in WWII. The validation of these women’s emotions, and the ways that letter-writing offered a means of gender-specific emotional support promoting wartime resilience, is the focus of this article. I offer a theoretical framework for understanding letters as peer support reducing feelings of isolation, and providing care for women grieving deaths and other losses.

I examine the following three archival collections as case studies: Ada and Rhoda McGuire’s letters to their sister and brother-in-law Eve and Ralph Grandison (USA), Emily Morgan’s letters to her sister Susan Evans (USA), and Mary

---

<sup>1</sup> Although women corresponded with people they knew prior to the war, these relationships were altered by the events discussed and emotions shared in response to wartime dangers.

Bloxham's (Morgan and Evans's sister) letters to Evans.<sup>2</sup> The McGuire sisters wrote throughout the war, though their experience of home loss in late March of 1941 was a critical point in their lives after which Rhoda's isolation as primary caregiver for their mother worsened. Morgan also wrote letters pertaining to the war from the Munich crisis in 1938 until July of 1946. Pivotal crises in Morgan's wartime life involved the bombing of her sister's and brother-in-law's (Mary and Jack Bloxham's) house in November of 1942, then again in November of 1944; the deaths of Morgan's former teaching colleague and her colleague's three sisters due to the bombing of their house in October of 1944; and the bombing of Morgan's street in February of 1945 which endangered her house. The six known war-concerned letters from Bloxham range from January 31, 1943 to December 5, 1948. The first describes the initial bombing of her house, and a school bombing. The other letters in 1943 reference the damage to her house and the cumulative impacts of wartime conditions on her wellbeing. There are no letters in the collection from 1944. The last wartime letter, written in August of 1945, mentions the Bloxham's move to Gravesend Kent to be near their daughter Phyllis and son-in-law Harold Tunstall. The two post-war letters provide information about the negative long-term effects of home loss, and Bloxham's resilience.

### Letters as Affective Communities

Nancy Fraser's reworking of Jürgen Habermas's concept of the public sphere, *subaltern counterpublics*, illuminates the relationship between these grief-permeated letters and the letters published in anthologies, newspapers, and radio broadcasts of the period. These officially published, widely distributed, public discourses had the financial support of businesses, and functioned for Allied governments as unofficial propaganda.<sup>3</sup> In contrast to the hegemonic model provided by these highly circulated letters, women's public disclosures of grief were characterized in the popular press as unpatriotic and divisive (Acton 50-57; Calder 120; Hartley 7). Many women letter-writers internalized pressure to present themselves as stoic, and, therefore, patriotic in accordance with a particular gendered model of expression (Acton 49-57). The image of women as more emotional than men was both invoked, and displaced (Acton 53; Kaplan 130-31; Ruddick 216-17). Women were then positioned as

---

<sup>2</sup> Permission has been granted for the use of the McGuire sisters' collection held at the Imperial War Museum, but its use has not been endorsed by the IWM nor by the executors.

<sup>3</sup> For information about epistolary correspondence in British propaganda see Nicholas Cull, and Margaretta Jolly ("Between," *Everyday*, and "Myths").

needing to adopt more stereotypically masculine emotional characteristics in order to prove their patriotism, loyalty, and ability to fulfill their roles as wives, mothers, and care providers for the nation. Women's intimate grief-stricken epistolary communities, therefore, constitute *subaltern counterpublics* because they were not strictly private, although they did not have the same economic support or distribution as hegemonic public discourses. However, women's personal correspondence is not private because it circulated outside of the home (which included being reviewed by government censors), and letters were sometimes forwarded by recipients to other correspondents.

Lauren Berlant's concept of intimate publics, developed in relation to late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century American women's sensational fiction, elucidates how women's personal correspondence functioned as a communal space between the private and public realms. Despite the differences between these two national contexts, sentimental fiction and these letters were associated with feminine over-emotionality which is the subject—and object—of derision within their respective hegemonic (masculinist) cultures. Berlant asserts that the autobiographical is not simply “personal,” but is “general,” and that what appear to be personal “narratives” can be “read as autobiographies of collective experience” (vii). She emphasizes that narratives of personal experience can have resonance for other people, which creates a type of public space that both generates and “presumes intimacy” (vii). Margaretta Jolly makes a similar claim specifically about the relationships fostered by women's correspondence when she states that in letters “the public and private, professional and personal are so happily confused” (Jolly and Stanley 91). As intimate publics, these epistolary exchanges reinforced bonds amongst women who perceived of themselves as circulating discourses “deemed expressive” of their “commonly lived history” (Berlant viii), and “shared emotions and world views” (Berlant and Prosser 180). Most generally, this shared history is the experience of being a woman in the UK during WWII; however, there were exceptions to this rule about who could belong.<sup>4</sup>

Since women in the UK wrote to friends and relatives in North America because of pre-existing relationships (and shared values), women in North America could be trusted confidantes despite their lack of direct experiences of air raids. Some of the

---

<sup>4</sup> Texts circulated within intimate publics can be authored by people outside of the identity category associated with the community (Berlant viii). I have made a similar argument using Berlant and Morrison about Second Life as a platform for peer support (Butler, “Virtual” 388-89), demonstrating the connections between letters and newer communication technologies (Jolly, “Lamenting” 154).

women in North America had emigrated from the UK prior to the war, so had a shared heritage. Others had evacuated early in the war out of fear for their own safety (Brown and Struther 62, 82). Still other British women had gone for a visit to North America, but found themselves stuck as a result of the war (32, 50). Even where a shared heritage, and familial bond, were not present, the content of these letters demonstrates that there were common wartime experiences for women predicated on gender roles and the responsibilities many women had at home. For instance, North American women, like their UK counterparts in reception areas, were responsible for taking in and caring for evacuated British children. Women in North America also faced rationing, though not as severely as in the UK.<sup>5</sup> Air raid precautions and drills were a frightening feature, too, of the war years in Canada and the USA.<sup>6</sup>

There are some important distinctions between Berlant's intimate publics and epistolary exchanges as affective communities. Aimée Morrison's work on mommy blogging demonstrates greater similarity to the reciprocal emotional bonds evidenced in British women's correspondence. Unlike the widely circulated published texts in Berlant's scholarship, mommy blogs involve "*network* rather than *broadcast*" modes "of transmission," meaning that people only find these blogs, and participate in these communities, because of pre-existing interpersonal connections (37; emphasis in original). Personal letters are similarly intimate—written for certain people rather than to be published (as opposed to fictional letters circulating at the time, the propaganda uses of pre-existing letters published in anthologies, or even political circular letters such as Vera Brittain's *War-Time Letters to Peace Lovers*). Although personal letters have specific intended recipients, they may not be written to only one person, or the writer may request that letters be forwarded on to another recipient to avoid having to write the same letter twice.<sup>7</sup> The original recipient might share a passage, or quote it, in a letter to someone else if they want another opinion, or if they think a story is particularly noteworthy.<sup>8</sup> Finally, letters may be shared in the case of

---

<sup>5</sup> In a letter dated October 14, 1942 Rhoda McGuire sent the Grandisons two of her best rationing-friendly recipes because she knew they were being rationed.

<sup>6</sup> In a Letter from Rhoda to Eve dated February 5, 1942 air raid drills in America were mentioned.

<sup>7</sup> In letters to her sister, Susan, Emily acknowledged that Susan's son Victor would also read her letters. Ada and Rhoda McGuire frequently wrote letters addressed to both their sister Eve Grandison and Eve's husband Ralph.

<sup>8</sup> In her letter dated November 12, 1940 to Eve, Ada McGuire enclosed a letter another woman had sent their sister Rhoda.

emergencies, which can include interventions when suicidal ideation is expressed.<sup>9</sup> In this last case, letter-writing, and the emotional bonds fostered thereby can effect life-saving interventions.

Personal correspondence, unlike publicly circulated texts, is relational—reciprocal—based (largely) on the maintenance of relationships (Jolly and Stanley 94-95). The “roles” of “writer and reader” are switched “between one exchange and another; they are relational and ‘conversation-like’” (94) and non-hierarchical (95). This “direct emotional reciprocity” is a central difference between intimate publics and letters, which situates the latter in closer proximity to the relationships between “personal mommy blog authors” in Morrison’s work (37). Speaking only of intimate correspondence, not business or fan mail, these reciprocal “*exchanges*” (Jolly and Stanley 94; emphasis in original) created “non-hierarchical, tightly woven webs of interconnection marked by serial, mutual, and intimate self-disclosure” (Morrison 37) that fostered “strong bonds of trust and support” which constituted “meaningful friendships within a community” (37). Like mommy bloggers who express frustrations or feelings of inadequacy, appealing to other mothers for advice, women letter writers received peer support in response to their expressions of grief and trauma despite discouragement from wartime propaganda and its influence on social interactions.

Although feminized complaints circulating within intimate publics are criticized for being apolitical, peer support afforded by such communities is inherently valuable.<sup>10</sup> While political action is important, we must not undervalue the

---

<sup>9</sup> Vera Brittain received two letters from a correspondent dated July 26 and July 30, 1943 in which the correspondent asserted a desire to end her own life and to leave her money to the cause of peace. Brittain responded to this woman on July 27, 1943 and forwarded the letter of July 30th to a correspondent whom she trusted. This trusted correspondent organized a system of social support to prevent the despondent woman’s suicide (described in a letter to Brittain dated August 2, 1943). At the very least this plan worked to postpone the despondent woman’s suicide for an additional two months in which this woman met many new friends whom she appreciated greatly. (On November 16, 1943 the despondent woman began expressing suicidal thoughts again, though she was immensely grateful for the kind people she had met. The letters to, from, and about, this woman seem to end after this date.). See the Vera Brittain fonds at Mills Library, McMaster University. The use of this material in my article has not been endorsed by the Brittain estate.

<sup>10</sup> In her analysis of the Chronic Fatigue and Immune Dysfunction Syndrome (CFIDS) community on PatientsLikeMe.com Oliva Banner argued that the community was a failure because it only allowed women to commiserate rather than take political action aimed at changing medical practitioners’ attitudes towards those with the condition (101, 208, 212). Women’s war-grief has

ways that social support helps people living in war zones, or with chronic illness, to cope—or even thrive. Women’s wartime letters enable us to evaluate the emotional and psychological impact of war on women civilians, which is an understudied area.<sup>11</sup> These letters reveal the effect of social support on women’s wartime resilience. Resilience, which is commonly misapprehended as a personality trait, is now understood as a process contingent on a combination of factors—the most important of which involve social support.<sup>12</sup> Public hostility towards open expressions of grief reshaped women’s relationships with one another within public spaces (Acton 52-53, 57). Pervasive social expectations of stoicism undermined the support women could expect to receive from other women in England during the war in response to their expressions of negative emotions. The larger social support networks made possible by letters provided a corrective to this atmosphere of emotional repression.

Some women also reported feelings of social isolation resulting from wartime separations from friends and family, higher demands on them for work and community service, and greater problems caring for their homes and families. Letters were, therefore, a means by which busy women who were geographically separated from their social support networks could reach out and preserve meaningful relationships. Rhoda McGuire maintained a correspondence with her sister, Eve Grandison (who lived in the USA). This correspondence was important because of Rhoda’s severe social isolation resulting from her caregiving responsibilities for her bed-ridden, chronically ill, and severely hearing-impaired mother. On September 11, 1940, Rhoda admitted to Eve: “I know how it feels to be lonely. Mother is so deaf one can’t converse!” These letters provided a social outlet for Rhoda who spent most of her day alone with her mother while her other sister, Ada, worked as a teacher. Ada also described herself and Rhoda as “real prisoners” in a letter to Eve on January 4, 1941, because either Rhoda or Ada had to be at home with their mother at all times. Rhoda’s isolation increased after the bombing of their home in March, 1941, because their mother’s health worsened due to emotional shock (Rhoda to Eve April 13, 1941). Rhoda even confided to Eve in a letter dated July 22, 1942 that she felt trapped at home caring for their mother and very much wanted to be able to go out—even

---

been politicized (Turpin 12; Kaplan 130-31; Ruddick 215-17), but I argue that peer support does not require political mobilization to be significant.

<sup>11</sup> For information about the psychological impacts of war on civilian women see Prabha S. Chandra et al; Stanley Krippner and Teresa M. McIntyre; and Miro Klarić et al.

<sup>12</sup> For personality trait resilience research see Wagnild and Young; for resiliency as a process, involving relationships between individuals and their environments, see Egeland, Carlson, and Sroufe.

just to run necessary errands. These letters, therefore, allowed Rhoda to maintain important social connections despite her entrapment within the home.

### **Letter-writing and Narrative Therapy**

Women's wartime letters also offer insight into the therapeutic benefits of letter-writing, and the role of narrativization in the psychological processing of difficult thoughts and feelings which emerge in response to war-exposure. The therapeutic benefits of letter-writing are embedded in the process of writing not just in their relationality. Given the importance of social support in resiliency, the healing aspect of the writing process must not be reduced to a solipsistic endeavor. Unlike "scriptotherapy," (Jolly, "What" 54) where people write letters addressed to people with whom they have unresolved relationship issues—letters which are sent instead to therapists or support group members to read (53)—the wartime letters addressed in this article were written to be sent to their intended recipients, were sent, and did receive responses. Women's epistolary correspondence, therefore, combines the benefits of narrative therapy which privileges agency in the telling—and meaning-making—of our lives as stories (Hamkins 5) with the potential for interpersonal support resulting from the relationality of letters as a medium (Jolly and Stanley 94-95). The stories women wrote about their wartime experiences in their letters helped them to undergo a process of meaning-making that similarly altered their perceived identities (Hamkins 5). Identities are not *a priori*, but are constructed by us in our processes of self-reflection and self-articulation (Butler, *Giving* 22-23, 39-40). Consequently, women could take control over their narratives, albeit within the confines of external pressures such as censorship and the internalization of social expectations of stoicism, and then receive reassurance or validation from their correspondents.

Although there were discourses advocating the repression of women's negative emotions about the war, the letters examined in this article demonstrate that women did not entirely curtail their expressions of grief in response to social pressure. In their correspondence with women in the USA it appears English women did not always perform a stoic social identity, but instead confided feelings of fear and shame about not being as brave as they were told they should be.<sup>13</sup> One woman writing from London on October 19, 1940 to a friend who evacuated to the USA, offered insight

---

<sup>13</sup> For information about identity as a performance see Judith Butler's *Giving, Excitable, and Bodies*.



into women's internalization of pressures on them to remain stoic even though they suffered emotionally. In her letter she reflected on her experiences of air raids near her home, musing that "it is extraordinary how a building can almost literally reel and totter, and, like the inmates, be unharmed and unscratched the next morning" (Brown and Struther 119). By unharmed and unscratched, she meant physically, as she admitted that despite the image she presented of herself as "heroic and stiff-lipped," she was "terrified most of the time" (119). She despised feeling that way, "wish[ed]" the bombing "would stop," and that she "could get away from it and get everybody else away from it." Arguably, this woman, renamed in the collection, the "Business Man's Wife," felt she could confide her terror to a friend who had already evacuated to the USA. The "Business Man's Wife's" confidante, the "Soldier's Wife," had left at her husband's insistence (82), to be with her mother who had become stuck in the USA during a visit when the war broke out (32, 50). The "Business Man's Wife," therefore, did not have to worry about losing face socially by admitting that she, too, wanted to flee.

Framing letters as autobiographical stories, rather than as merely factual or communicative historical documents, opens up possibilities for viewing the rhetorical figurations women deployed in their storytelling as a means of conveying, and working through, their war-provoked emotions—including trauma.<sup>14</sup> I agree with Jolly's "belief that there is no simple opposition between communication and expression, information and creativity" (Jolly and Stanley 98). Building on this idea, I assert that the ways in which women chose to tell their stories—which includes diction, symbolism, metaphors, and imagery—to their correspondents are reflective of their processes of working through their psychological reactions to the war. As is evident in the aforementioned letter, women's descriptions of the impacts of war on their houses symbolize their own resultant mental stabilities. This woman directly connected the physical effects of air raids on houses to the well-beings of the residents. Although she insisted that neither the house nor the people within it were harmed, she was referring to physical damage. We can discern this because she admitted that the continued threat to her home, herself, and her family made her so fearful that she wanted to evacuate. Descriptions of the home are a pervasive gauge of women's mental and emotional stability in many of the letters they wrote from within high-risk areas during the war.

---

<sup>14</sup> In "Letters," Jolly argues that letters are a mode of writing involving tensions not between "history or fiction" so much as "between the utilitarian and the aesthetic aspects of writing" (92). Yet, English women's WWII letters are overwhelmingly concerned with external events traceable to a truth outside of the correspondence.

Based on their experiences of treating people—largely war veterans—who have Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, John P. Wilson and Jacob D. Lindy explain that metaphors or symbols, such as these confluences of the home and the mind, are “creation[s] of the survivor’s unconscious,” which signify “progress” towards healing (159). Drawing on case studies, they demonstrate that people with PTSD (who are unable to communicate directly about central aspects of the instigating traumatic incidents) express their trauma contiguously, and sometimes performatively, via these metaphors (5, 146). They contend that the therapeutic process depends on the therapist’s ability to recognize these individualized metaphors, and to gently encourage their patients to elaborate on the origins of these unusual, and emotionally charged, phrases (146). Wilson and Lindy characterize trauma-specific metaphors as a central component of PTSD, however, the psychological significance of symbols within women’s letters can extend affectively beyond the specificity of trauma. Nonetheless, women did experience acute trauma, or shaken nerves, even if they managed to recuperate and adjust over the course of the war years.

Throughout Emily Morgan’s letters to her sister, Susan Evans, she described housing damage and destruction, and threatened home loss. Her consistent focus on housing dangers, and her representation of negative emotional reactions (both her own and those of other women) to these losses and threatened losses demonstrate how houses and homes can become symbols of women’s emotional equilibrium in response to the war. We first get a sense of how important houses are to Emily in her writings about her sister Mary’s home loss. On November 15, 1944 Emily wrote to Susan:

I know you’ll be grieved to hear that Mary and Jack have lost their home. A bomb fell on the house next to theirs, killing the lady and her husband, and also demolishing Mary’s house containing all of their cherished possessions. Fortunately, they were not there at the time, as it had been blasted earlier, and made unfit for habitation. (n. pag.)

Understandably, this news had a very negative impact on Emily’s feelings about the war. The loss of her sister Mary’s house, and the deaths of her sister’s neighbors exacerbated Emily’s desire that “this murderous war would cease” for German “rockets” created a terrible psychological “burden” for her. In this same letter she recounted that she “was very upset recently,” because one of her former teaching colleagues was killed. A rocket “fell at the back of Miss Everett’s house on Oct 30<sup>th</sup>

killing her and her 3 sisters with whom she lived.” Miss Everett’s death was “a great shock to [Emily]” as Miss Everett “was a fine character” and they “spent many happy vacations together.” In this and the following paragraphs, I show that as a result of the bombings of people’s houses resulting in their deaths, for Emily the house also symbolized the impossibility of safety and comfort evident in her expressions of fear for her safety, and her detailing of the deaths of people within their homes.

Loss of life is not the only cause of anguish for Emily. The destruction of Mary’s house is similarly upsetting to her as she returns to hers and Mary’s grief over it repeatedly. Immediately after informing Susan of Mary’s home loss, Emily admits that she “feel[s] so sorry for them,” because theirs was “a lovely home, always in perfect order,” with a “perfect dream” of a “garden.” Emily admits that Mary’s, and Mary’s husband Jack’s, “future” is uncertain. This uncertainty points to a very real concern amongst the war-displaced about housing shortages and financial issues. Even if people were not killed, their entire lives could be negatively, and irreparably, damaged by the destruction of their houses. In Emily’s letters the loss of a house was not just associated with the deaths of occupants, though mostly so, but with the destabilization of a person’s entire life. She returns to Mary’s home loss on several more occasions, but most notably in her letters of February 4, 1945 and March 31, 1945. In the former she let Susan know that Susan’s old house in Essex was damaged, though not severely so, by a bomb that fell on the street. After writing about how much she wished the war would end, she exclaimed: “Poor Mary! It does seem hard she should have lost her home.” In both this letter, and the latter, Emily admitted to her fears for her own home, and physical safety.

Emily pervasively and discursively connected the states of the houses around her, and her own fears of home loss, to her psychological stability in response to the war. She repeated a specific, striking phrase in her letters dated November 15, 1944 and March 17, 1945 in which she described the destruction of Mary’s house, and an incident involving her own street, respectively. In the former she described Mary’s house as “a heap of rubble,” and in the latter she recounted, after a story about a terrifying experience, that “[s]ubstantial and well built houses around [are] just a heap of rubble—too awful for words.” The destruction of these previously solid (appearing) houses, along with the air raids which posed a threat to her safety, placed “a great strain on [her] nerves.” She admitted: “I feel I can’t stand up to many more shocks such as we have experienced.” One such shock was the bombing of her street, which she also recounted in this later letter.

Although Emily admitted she was afraid to leave her house in a previous letter (February 4, 1945), this fear was later both confirmed and exacerbated by the following incident:

I had a shock the day I met Mary and Jack, for when returning home, and within 3 or 4 mins. from the house, I saw what had happened by the broken glass and debris all along. One [bomb] had fallen about 1/2 an hour before my bus passed and I dreaded to turn into this Rd., but was thankful to find nothing serious had happened to the house—only plenty of dust and particles of ceilings which Miss Watkins [her housemate] was sweeping up when I entered—but oh! the havoc I'd seen!! (n. pag.)

Until Emily reached her house she was not even sure she still had one. The destroyed houses, and school, she saw along her route contributed to her anxiety. Her fears intensified at the moment in which she reached her road. She still chose to continue along that path knowing that it might lead to “a heap of rubble” which used to be her house. Thankfully, her house was relatively unharmed, but this incident indicates how fragile houses were and how easily someone could join the ranks of the displaced. This letter also illustrates the anxiety, fear, and dread, which accompanied a journey home after a raid. Your entire life could change instantaneously, and although you were left alive, if you were not wealthy the quality of your life post-displacement was suspect.

Emily's letters are fascinating for their presumable emotional honesty, and preoccupation with destroyed houses and civilian dead rather than with war news or soldiers. She demonstrates Wilson and Lindy's contention about how trauma can be distilled into symbolism. Although she did not have PTSD, she was deeply unnerved by the war and repeatedly expressed a desire to be with her sister, Susan, in America (February 4, 1945; March 17, 1945). She openly admitted she was “shock[ed]” and that her “nerves” were “strain[ed].” Housing damage was her gravest concern, thus she repeatedly focused on houses in her letters. Houses were thereby transformed into emblems of her fears, and psychological preoccupations because of the very real dangers she, and others like her, faced within their homes. Her letters to Susan were a safe space in which Emily could express her concerns. Given her expressed concern for Mary's well-being, perhaps Emily did not want to burden her other sister who had suffered far worse. She was also less likely to be judged negatively, or to make her correspondent uncomfortable, because as an Anglo-American Susan was not inundated by the same calls for stoicism.

## Death, Trauma, and Letter-writing as Testimony

Although most edited collections, and scholarly outputs, focus on the loss of soldiers' lives (Acton 2, 13-14; Jolly, *Everyday* 101-09; Loraux 36-37), the deaths of civilians were also written about and grieved. Dori Laub's elaboration on the role of the "hearer" ("Bearing" 57) in co-creating an account of trauma provides a valuable foundation for understanding the dynamic between the writer, the narrative persona, and the original addressee of these types of letters (57-58; "An Event" 85). He emphasizes that "[m]assive trauma" cannot be "register[ed]" until it is conveyed to another person (57, 85); the "hearer" of the witness's testimony thereby becomes "the blank screen on which the event comes to be inscribed for the first time" (57). In the case of letters, the blank page works as an extension, and representative, of the body and voice of the witness, and is the mode of transmission to the reader (57). The writer of such a letter forges an internal witness who is then transmitted onto the page as a witnessing narrative persona, and presupposes a reader who is appealed to as a validator—or co-creator—of this written account.<sup>15</sup> The bonds of trust women developed, which were enhanced via these exchanges, encouraged them to reveal the impact of war on their psychic and social identities. Consequently, these letters offer insight into the value and efficacy of peer support.

On January 31, 1943 Mary Bloxham wrote to her sister, Susan Evans, disclosing information about the initial damage to her house and the bombing of Sandhurst Road School in Catford (Southeast London) on January 20<sup>th</sup> of that year. Thirty-eight children and six teachers were killed, and another sixty people were injured (Brayley 42). Mary wrote:

How different everything is now, so much sorrow and grief in the world.  
Of course you hear most of the things that happen over here. The  
bombing of that school was too dreadful, poor kiddies and their parents,

---

<sup>15</sup> Life writers create narrative personas (Lejeune 5-6; Smith 11-21; Stanley 3, 92; Jolly and Stanley 92-93) which cohere with Laub's account of the process of witnessing wherein the person giving testimony can create an internal witness to act in lieu of an external one. The relationship between letter writers, explicated by Jolly and Stanley (94-95), also meshes with Laub's description of the requirement of a bond of trust between the testifier and the listener in the co-creation of the account (57, 69-71, 85-88). The testimony contained within a letter is made possible by the relationship between correspondents, not unlike the boy's internalized image of his mother as witness via her photograph in Laub's account (88); the letter writer/witness holds within herself an image of who her correspondent is to her which encourages the sharing of the trauma narrative.

I couldn't get them out of my mind and we knew the school, were quite near to it the other Sunday. They deliberately bombed it knowing it was a school because many of the children were playing in the garden and they machine gunned them. (n. pag.)

Mary conveyed her empathy for the more acute suffering of victims, survivors, and the bereaved. She, too, suffered emotionally as a fellow Englishwoman, mother, grandmother, sister of a school teacher (Emily), and someone familiar with the school—who had been quite close to it a mere four days after the attack.

Mary's position demonstrates the complexity of trauma because someone can simultaneously be an external witness to another person's trauma, and be traumatized enough by that other person's suffering to need support themselves. In his reflection on the role of a witness, Laub acknowledges that there are "hazards of listening" ("Bearing" 72) to survivors' testimonies (72-74). These dangers are compounded for those who have experienced the same—or a similar—devastating event, such as the impact of listening to Holocaust survivors' testimonies as a fellow survivor ("An Event" 75-76). While his focus on hearers aligns him more with Susan as recipient of the letter which functions to transmit Mary's grief and potential trauma, Mary was in this emotional state because of what she had been exposed to through hearing, and reading, about the school bombing which happened to other people. Secondary traumatization is recognized in professions such as social work and a broad range of mental health care fields as a cause of compassion fatigue, burnout, or even the development of PTSD (Adams, et al. 103-08; Boscarino, et al. 24-26). It is also acknowledged in psychoanalytic trauma theory research on the intergenerational transmission of trauma (Hirsch 1-2). The DSM V diagnostic criteria for PTSD similarly allows that the precipitating event need not be a direct threat to the person who develops the condition, but can instead involve witnessing another person's endangerment (APA 271). Although Mary had no loved ones involved, the incident impacted her emotionally and contributed to her experience of the war as terrifying, devastating, and demoralizing.

Recognition of secondary trauma is important because repeated air raids, multiple deaths, home losses, injuries, and tragic wartime news wore women down emotionally. This school bombing exacerbated Mary's already fragile nerves following the repeated raids where she lived in Kent, and the bombing of her house which left it uninhabitable (prior to its complete destruction in 1944). In the same letter in which she conveyed her grief over the dead children, she admitted that she "pray[ed]" she and her husband would "never have to go through" severe damage to

their house “again,” because she “really [did] not think [she] could” handle it as her “reserves [were] not the same” as they were before the war, and she got “neuritis at times in [her] head.” By November 14, 1943 she admitted to Susan: “I sometimes wish we could fly over [to be with Susan in America], especially when we get raids which we have had lately again,” because they strained her “nerves.” She was later so deeply impacted by the destruction of her home that even after the war she continued to write to Susan about how angry and sad she was about that loss.<sup>16</sup>

## Conclusion

These transatlantic correspondences demonstrate that receiving letters from English women compelled their American women family members to respond supportively in emotional and practical ways. Women like Susan Evans and Eve Grandison wrote to their English sisters to provide emotional and social support; they also sent care packages with food, tea, and magazines to ease the strain of rationing.<sup>17</sup> Emotional support is particularly evident in the correspondence between Mary and Susan. Mary could confide in Susan because of their bonds of trust as sisters, the geographic distance which separated Susan from Mary’s English social circles, and different (more generous) American cultural expectations for wartime expressions of grief. Susan continued a correspondence with her sister throughout, and after, the war which enabled Mary to write through her grief, to share her burden with a trusted companion, and to receive valuable social and emotional validation. Women’s wartime letter-writing offers insights into the ways that peer support can promote resiliency.

## Works Cited

- Acton, Carol. *Grief in Wartime: Private Pain, Public Discourse*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.
- Adams, Richard E., Joseph A. Boscarino, and Charles R. Figley. “Compassion Fatigue and Psychological Distress among Social Workers: A Validation Study.” *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 76.1 (2006): 103-08.

---

<sup>16</sup> See letters to Susan dated May 31, 1946 and December 5, 1948. By 1948 Mary had adjusted to her new situation.

<sup>17</sup> See letter from Emily to Susan dated March 29, 1946 about the contents of a care package. For more examples of care packages see Ada McGuire’s letter to the Grandisons, 14 September, 1941; and a letter from Rhoda to Eve, January 20, 1942.

- American Psychological Association. "Trauma- and Stressor-Related Disorders." *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders V*. Arlington: APA, 2013. 265-90.
- Banner, Olivia. "'Treat Us Right!': Digital Publics, Emerging Biosocialities, and the Female Complaint." *Identity Technologies: Constructing the Self Online*. Ed. Anna Poletti and Julie Rak. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 2014. 198-216.
- Berlant, Lauren. *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture*. Durham: Duke UP, 2008.
- , and Jay Prosser. "Life Writing and Intimate Publics: A Conversation with Lauren Berlant." *Life Writing as Intimate Publics*. Ed. Margaretta Jolly. Spec. issue of *Biography* 34.1 (2011): 180-87.
- Boscarino, Joseph A., Richard E. Adams, and Charles R. Figley. "Secondary Trauma Issues for Psychiatrists." *Psychiatric Times* 27.11 (2010): 24-26.
- Brayley, Martin. *The British Home Front 1939-45*. Illus. Malcolm McGregor. Oxford: Osprey, 2005.
- Brittain, Vera. *Collected Letters. 1939-1945*. Hamilton: McMaster U, n.d. Mills Library Vera Brittain fonds. Ser. K, Box 212.
- . *Collected Letters. 1939-1945*. Hamilton: McMaster U, n.d. Mills Library Vera Brittain fonds. Ser. J, Box 180.
- . *War-Time Letters to Peace Lovers*. London: Peace Book, 1940.
- Brown, Beatrice Curtis, and Jan Struther, comps. and eds. *Women of Britain: Letters from England*. New York: Harcourt, 1941.
- Butler, Judith. *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*. New York: Routledge, 1993.
- . *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*. New York: Routledge, 1997.
- . *Giving an Account of Oneself*. New York: Fordham UP, 2005.
- Butler, Stephanie. "Virtual Selves, Virtual Communities: Self-Narration and Social Relations in Multi-User Virtual Environments." *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* 31.2 (2016): 373-98.
- Calder, Angus. *The Myth of the Blitz*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1991.
- Chandra, Prabha S., Helen Herman, Jane E. Fisher, Marianne Kastrup, Unaiza Niaz, Marta Rondon, and Ahmed Oksha. *Contemporary Topics in Women's Mental Health: Global Perspectives in a Changing Society*. New Jersey: Wiley, 2009.
- Cull, Nicholas. *Selling War: The British Propaganda Campaign against American "Neutrality" in World War II*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999.
- Egeland, B., E. Carlson, and L. A. Sroufe. "Resilience as Process." *Development and Psychopathology* 5.4 (1993): 517-28.



- Felman, Shoshana, and Dori Laub. *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*. New York: Routledge, 1992.
- Fraser, Nancy. "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy." *Habermas and the Public Sphere*. Ed. Craig Calhoun. Cambridge: MIT P, 1991. 109-42.
- Habermas, Jürgen. *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Trans. Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence. Cambridge: MIT P, 1991.
- Hamkins, SuEllen. *The Art of Narrative Psychiatry*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2014.
- Hartley, Jenny, ed. *Hearts Undefeated: Women's Writing of the Second World War*. London: Virago, 1995.
- Hirsch, Marianne. *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust*. New York: Columbia UP, 2012.
- Jolly, Margaretta. "Between Ourselves: Letters as Propaganda in the Second World War." *Propaganda: Political Rhetoric and Systems of Beliefs*. Ed. Tim Thornton and B. O. Taithe. Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 1999. 239-61.
- . *Everyday Letters and Literary Form: Correspondence from the Second World War*. Diss. U of Sussex, 1997.
- . "Lamenting the Letter and the Truth about Email." *Life Writing* 8.2 (2011): 153-67.
- . "Myths of Unity: Remembering the Second World War Through Letters and Their Editing." *Arms and the Self: War, the Military, and Autobiographical Writing*. Ed. Alex Vernon. Kent: Kent State UP, 2005. 144-70.
- . "What I Never Wanted to Tell You: Therapeutic Letter Writing and the Cultivation of Vulnerability in an Uncertain Age." *Journal of Medical Humanities* 32.1 (2011): 47-59.
- , and Liz Stanley. "Letters as/not a Genre." *Life Writing* 2.2 (2005): 91-118.
- Kaplan, Laura Duhan. "Woman as Caretaker: An Archetype That Supports Patriarchal Militarism." *Hypatia* 9.2 (1994): 123-34.
- Klarić, Miro, Branka Klarić, Aleksandra Stevanović, Jasna Grković, and Suzana Jonovska. "Psychological Consequences of War Trauma and Postwar Social Stressors in Women in Bosnia and Herzegovina." *Croatian Medical Journal* 48.2 (2007): 167-76.
- Krippner, Stanley, and Teresa M. McIntyre, eds. *The Psychological Impact of War on Civilians: An International Perspective*. London: Praeger, 2003.
- Laub, Dori. "Bearing Witness, or the Vicissitudes of Listening." Felman and Laub 57-74.

- . “An Event without a Witness: Truth, Testimony and Survival.” Felman and Laub 75-92.
- Lejeune, Philippe. *On Autobiography*. Ed. Paul John Eakin. Trans. Katherine M. Leary. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1989. Trans. of *Le Pacte Autobiographique*. 1975.
- Loraux, Nicole. *Mothers in Mourning*. Trans. Corinne Pache. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1998. Trans. of *Les Mères en Deuil*. 1990.
- Lorentzen, Lois Ann, and Jennifer Turpin, eds. *The Women and War Reader*. New York: NYU P, 1998.
- McGuire, Misses A. and R. *Personal Correspondence 1940-1944*. IWM Documents.5593, © The Executors of Ada and Rhoda McGuire.
- Morrison, Aimée. “‘Suffused by Feeling and Affect’: The Intimate Public of Personal Mommy Blogging.” *Life Writing as Intimate Publics*. Ed. Margaretta Jolly. Spec. Issue of *Biography* 34.1 (2011): 37-55.
- Ruddick, Sara. “‘Woman of Peace’: A Feminist Construction.” Lorentzen and Turpin 213-26.
- Smith, Sidonie. “Self, Subject, and Resistance: Marginalities and Twentieth-Century Autobiographical Practice.” *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature* 9.1 (1990): 11-24.
- Stanley, Liz. *The Auto/Biographical I: The Theory and Practice of Feminist Auto/Biography*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1992.
- Turpin, Jennifer. “Many Faces: Women Confronting War.” Lorentzen and Turpin 3-18.
- Wagnild, G. M., and H. M. Young. “Development and Psychometric Evaluation of the Resilience Scale.” *Journal of Nursing Measurement* 1 (1993): 165-78.
- Wilson, John P., and Jacob D. Lindy. *Trauma, Culture, and Metaphor: Pathways of Transformation and Integration*. New York: Routledge, 2013.

### **About the Author**

Stephanie E. Butler is an English Literature PhD candidate at Newcastle University, UK researching letter-writing and resilience among English women during WWII. Her past research on virtual world illness-based peer support groups has been published in the following journals: *a/b: Autobiography Studies*; *Space and Culture*; *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies*; *Disability Studies Quarterly*; and *Information, Communication and Society*. In 2015 she was a visiting doctoral student with the English faculty at the University of Oxford. She was also a Research Fellow for The Saratoga Foundation for Women Worldwide (a United Nations-accredited Non-Governmental Organization) in 2015.

[Received 20 December 2015; accepted 12 April 2016]