

Social Distance in the Eighteenth Century

Katie Lanning
Wichita State University

In this time of social distancing, the form and technology of epistolarity afford us a framework through which to assess not only our make-do modes of togetherness but also their frustrations and limits. Letter-writing, like currently ubiquitous televisual communications such as Zoom, is what Esther Milne calls a “technology of presence.”¹ It collapses distance and absence into a pseudo-cybernetic nearness. Yet epistolarity is a volatile form that, like other technologies, can sometimes fail. Such failures of course can be mechanical: the lost internet connection, the undelivered letter. I’m interested, however, in the limits of virtual presence in epistolary communication and how they might help us to better theorize our own moment of isolation despite a myriad of communication technologies at our fingertips. I turn, then, to eighteenth-century epistolarity enacted without mechanical failure in order to explore depictions of its *virtual* failure: the disintegration of fantasy when, despite sending and receiving letters (likewise, despite frequent Skype calls or FaceTime happy hours), the illusion of presence falters or falls away. Our frustrations with being “alone together” find resonance in eighteenth-century epistolarity, which – for all Richardson’s talk of “writing to the moment” – often reveal anxieties and annoyances with a technology of presence pushed past its limit.

What can these failures tell us about feelings of isolation and frustration that occur while one is engaged in a technology of presence? To answer this requires a shift in focus. Many scholars have studied the eighteenth-century epistle’s public-networking and empire-building

significance, or its capacity for personal expression and intimacy. Yet across its many literary forms in the eighteenth century, epistolarity most insists on its status as technology not in its grand gestures of empire or connection but rather in its slippages: complaints, doubts, asides, meta-narratives of letter-writing in all its tedium or angst. These slippages point to epistolarity as a technology at precisely the same moment they point to that technology's failure. To recognize the mediation is also necessarily to dissolve the illusion of presence. When Alexander Pope describes his letter-writing with the oft-quoted phrase "talking upon paper," he reveals the material mediation that generates the fantasy of presence.² But this is not the full quote, as Pope cannot separate recognizing the technology from contemplating its failure: "talking upon paper may indeed prove me a fool."³ We can find these same slippages in our own technologies of presence. For instance, in a Zoom session for one of my classes late last spring, several students raised their hands to speak, and out of habit I attempted to call on one by pointing to their face on my screen. We had collectively forgotten the mediation of technology (a sign the class was going well) until that moment, when the illusion of presence was broken. I was pointing, foolishly, to a grid of video feeds – not to a person. In the space of that little slip, I was simultaneously reminded of the technology and felt acutely its failure. These slips, in which technology is both revealed and fails, occur frequently in epistolary works produced in various states of isolation.

For example, Ignatius Sancho writes his letters from the socially and racially isolated position of a former slave displaced in London, seeing himself in England as "only a lodger – and hardly that."⁴ Sancho, suffering from severe gout, identifies dual categories of difference that restrict his social mobility in London: race and disability. In a 1779 letter to Daniel Braithwaite, Sancho asks permission to open a post office in his store, "as it would emancipate me from the fear of serving the parish offices – for which I am utterly unqualified through infirmities – as

well as complexion.”⁵ In petitioning for the indoor role of a post master, Sancho identifies both his “infirmities” and his “complexion” as disqualifiers for the constabulary duties he imagines in “the parish offices.” He again positions race and disability as intersectional social constraints when he urges Braithwaite to picture him as a parish officer: “Figure to yourself, my dear Sir, a man of convexity of belly exceeding Falstaff – and a black face into the bargain – waddling in the van of poor thieves and penniless prostitutes.”⁶ The letter suggests a forced isolation in which Sancho feels unable to serve the public outdoors because he believes his body marks him as too Other. Sancho frequently reveals in his letters the bodily pains that he endures even to write: “my leg aches – my foot swells – I can only say, my love to the C[ollingwoo]ds”; “it must be esteemed a favour that I write at all – my head aches”; “pox on it –my hand aches so I can scrawl no Longer.”⁷ Sancho’s asides register the physical labor of writing, narrating the limits of epistolary technology. In a period where slaves were envisioned as mechanized bodies meant to produce labor, Sancho’s complaints suggest an expression of personhood through refusal. His body aches; he expresses frustration; he stops writing. His comments about the laboriousness of epistolarity reveal how exclusionary technologies can be, how epistolarity was often a form only accessible upon condition of able-bodiedness and whiteness. (The post-office system proved exclusionary too: Sancho’s request was denied.) We see parallel barriers in our televisual apps, where access to electronics and reliable wi-fi are often presumed and accessibility options like closed-captioning and automatic transcription often require third-party plug-ins, sometimes at a fee.

Sancho’s letters show another way bodies can reveal epistolary failure: the craving of sensory experience. Sancho often requests description from his correspondents as a way to receive news and learn about new places. Some descriptions, however, yield frustration rather

than satisfaction. In imagining his friend M. Rush's journey to meet Mrs. Cocksedge, for example, Sancho writes, "I see you meet in fancy – I wish I could see you in reality."⁸ Sancho's dichotomy of "fancy" and "reality" exposes the illusion of technologies of presence. An epistolary presence is only ever in the mind's eye, yet Sancho wishes for a real sensory experience of sight. The virtuality of "fancy" only prompts a more vociferous desire for actual presence. Here the technology fails, as once again recognizing the illusion necessarily breaks it. In another letter, Sancho recalls a description of the "puncheons of rum" at Mr. Kisbee's birthday party and remarks, "Oh! how I licked my lips, and wished the distance (400 miles) less between us."⁹ The description of rum prompts a bodily response as though the rum were actually present. Sancho licks his lips in anticipation, but there is no rum. His sensory experience denied, the illusion of presence is again broken. Sancho articulates this broken illusion through an expression of distance that is both precise – "400 miles" – and lamenting.

Often when we consider isolation in the eighteenth century, we imagine it compounding over distance in ways that coincide with the imperial globe, yet small distances produce similarly emphatic lamentations. Displacement is not always a required condition of epistolary failure. This is an important facet of the technology, as it helps us to understand our own anxieties about social distancing. When the distance is small, absence takes on a new tension: a correspondent tortuously both in reach and unreachable. When, despite the small distances that separate, travel and reunion are not possible, eighteenth-century epistolary texts must instead sit with this paradox. Here again, the illusion of presence is often shattered, epistolarity pushed past its limit. These texts lay bare the condition of absence as the foundational element of both epistolary technology and its failure. Two verse epistles nicely demonstrate this tipping point of epistolarity: "A Letter to My Love – All Alone, past 12, in the Dumps"¹⁰ and Anne Finch's "To a

Friend, in Praise of the Invention of Writing Letters.” The first poem’s speaker emphasizes her isolation from the title’s despondent “All Alone” onward, tracking her frustrations with a particular literary form of social distance: the Ovidian separation of lovers. The speaker feels this absence intensely, and turns to letter-writing in a desperate attempt to quell her heartbreak:

Or to the Pen and Ink I haste,
 And there a World of Paper waste.
 All I can write, tho’ Love is here,
 Does much unlike my Soul appear.
 Angry, the scrawling Side I turn,
 I write and blot, and write and burn.
 Then to the Bottle I repair,
 The Poets tell us Ease is there:
 But I thy absent Hand repine,
 Whose Sweetness us’d to *zest* the Wine;
 Wine in this sullen Moment fails;
 I burn my Pen, I bite my Nails,
 Rail at my Stars, nay, I accuse
 Even my Lover, and my Muse.¹¹

The speaker expresses frustration that her letter cannot adequately articulate her “Soul,” even “tho’ Love is here.” While love is here, lover is not, and his “absent Hand” reminds her of better times and therefore better wine. Her writing and her drinking are both attempts to dull the pain of absence that result only in her feeling that absence more. The lines are unapologetic in their anger at this double-cross: she “write[s] and burn[s]” and “Rail[s] at my Stars” and “Even my Lover.” She recognizes the technologies of epistolarity – “the Pen and Ink” and the “World of Paper” – at the same time that she understands their failure: “waste”. Searching for solution, the speaker concludes the poem with a litany of desires:

I want thy Bosom to repose
 My beating Heart, oppress’d with Woes;
 I want thy Voice my Soul to chear,
 Thy Voice is Musick to my Ear;
 I want thy dear lov’d Hand to press

My Neck, with silent Tenderness;
 I want thy Eyes to make me bright,
 And charm this sullen Hour of Night.
 This Hour, when pallid Ghosts appear,
 Oh! cou'd it bring thy Shadow here,
 I every Substance wou'd resign,
 To clasp thy Aerial Breast to mine;
 Or if, my Love, that could not be,
 I would turn Air to mix with thee.¹²

The speaker's desires of her lover's "Bosom," "Voice," "dear lov'd Hand," and "Eyes" rebuild his absent body in verse. Yet the poem doesn't stop there. The speaker also wishes to "resign" "every Substance" and embrace the virtual, the fantasy of presence in "thy Shadow" and "thy Aerial Breast." This culminates in her longing to "turn Air to mix with thee." The poem's ending thus imagines either total reality or total virtuality. If lovers cannot reunite physically, the speaker desires to erase the anxious body that burns and bites her nails in order to coexist with her lover in air, an imagined cyberspace where distance collapses and absence is defeated despite her epistolary failure. But the space is only imaginary, and the poem terminates in the conditional mood of "would" to emphasize a presence and a present tense that do not actually exist.

Finch's poem appears at first to be more optimistic, its sense of epistolary technology initially functioning smoothly. The title suggests as much, with its aim to "praise" not letters themselves but their "invention" as a technology. The opening lines do just this:

Blest be the Man! His Memory at least,
 Who found the Art, thus to unfold his Breast;
 And taught succeeding Times an easy way
 Their secret Thoughts by *Letters* to convey;
 To baffle Absence, and secure Delight,
 Which, till that Time, was limited to Sight.¹³

Here Finch describes letter-writing with the language of a technology of presence: an “Art” that can “baffle Absence” and create an illusion of presence that was once “limited to Sight.” She marvels at a pre-epistle era: “No Quill, thence pull’d, was shap’d into a Pen / To send in Paper-sheets, from Town to Town” (12-13). Yet Finch wrote the poem in isolation, exiled in Kent while her husband stood trial for Jacobitism in 1690. Though the poem serves as an expression of gratitude for a technology that sustains her relationships with her husband and friends while sequestered, its ending slips. In recognizing the technology of presence – even in order to praise it – the speaker also recognizes its limits:

Oh! Might I live to see an Art arise,
 As this to Thoughts, indulgent to the Eyes;
 That the dark Pow’rs of distance cou’d subdue,
 And make me *See*, as well as *Talk* to You;
 That tedious Miles, nor Tracts of Air might prove
 Bars to my Sight, and shadows to my Love!
 Yet were it granted, such unbounded Things
 Are wand’ring Wishes, born on Phancy’s Wings,
 They’d stretch themselves beyond this happy Case,
 And ask an Art, to help us to Embrace.¹⁴

Where sight was a limitation conquered by epistolarity in the poem’s opening, sight is now an unfulfilled desire. Yet the poem is not wishing for actual presence, understood still as an impossibility. Rather, it wishes for another “Art,” another technology of “Phancy” to conquer the “tedious Miles.” Finch’s speaker seems at first to have dreamed up a FaceTime or Zoom, where she can “*See*, as well as *Talk* to You”. Tellingly, however, even this remarkable prediction of technology is not enough: the poem concludes with a further imagining of “an Art, to help us to Embrace.” Finch’s yearning for a technology of embrace is a concept I see at work in a particular genre of human-interest stories and viral videos that have emerged during our COVID-19 shutdown. This genre depicts homemade inventions of embrace that are designed expressly to

overcome the unreachable-within-reach social distance of our own moment.¹⁵ In these videos, relatives reach their arms into walls of saran wrap with gloved openings, hugging each other through a thin layer of plastic to prevent potential contagion. The sight is rather absurd, but it demonstrates the persistent desire for a technology of presence that is more than virtual. These inventions, however, are the rare and sometimes clunky exception to the rule of technologies of presence: illusion. Finch will have to keep on hoping, and we will too.

In these epistolary moments of frustration, longing, and disappointment we find a kindred experience of isolation in and through communication technology. When we watch our friends and family on a screen and are reminded of their unreachable nearness, we may believe ourselves to be in unprecedented times. But in fact, we are echoing technologies that have long held users in the anxious double-bind of presence and absence. In recognizing this, we collapse a different kind of distance and understand that to bristle at paradox and frustrate at illusion is, after all, only human.

NOTES

¹ Esther Milne, *Letters, Postcards, E-mail: Technologies of Presence* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

² Alexander Pope, Letter to Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (August 18, 1716), in *The Correspondence of Alexander Pope, 1704-1718* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956): 353. Pope also uses the phrase in a letter to Henry Cromwell (November 25, 1710), *Correspondence of Alexander Pope*, 105.

³ *Ibid.*, 353. In his letter to Montagu, Pope wonders if expressing himself without seeing her reactions will cause him to share his feelings without “fear” or “shame” (354). He is enthralled by the idea, but he also understands it as a risk which may culminate in his absolute humiliation.

⁴ Ignatius Sancho, Letter XXXVIII, Vol. 2 in *Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho, an African*, ed. Vincent Carretta (Calgary: Broadview, 2015): 231.

⁵ *Ibid.*, Letter LI, Vol. 2, 249.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, 213, 197, and 326.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 127.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 83.

¹⁰ David Fairer and Christine Gerrard attribute this poem to Martha Fowke in their *Eighteenth-Century Poetry: An Annotated Anthology* (Blackwell 2015), but Fairer follows others like Jerome McGann in describing it as an anonymous work in *English Poetry of the Eighteenth Century, 1700-1789* (Routledge 2014: 66). As the poet’s identity is still contested, I treat the poem as an anonymous work.

¹¹ “A Letter to My Love – All Alone, past 12, in the Dumps.” In *Eighteenth-Century Poetry: An Annotated Anthology*, edited by David Fairer and Christine Gerrard, third edition. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2015): 242-44, lines 11-24.

¹² *Ibid*, lines 46-59.

¹³ Anne Finch, “To a Friend, in Praise of the Invention of Writing Letters.” *Miscellany poems, on several occasions* (London: J.B., 1713): 215, lines 1-6.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 217, lines 31-40.

¹⁵ These stories are numerous. The trendsetter appears to be Carly Marinaro’s “Hug Time” device, as reported in CNN’s “See mom’s wild contraption allowing grandma to hug kids” (May 14, 2020) and ABC News’ “‘Hug Time’: Woman’s clever invention allows family to give grandma safe hugs” (May 25, 2020), among others.