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Confessions and Confidences

Academic and Cultural History Revisited in Letters and Other Documents of Life

Edited by Leila Virtanen, Tiina Seppä and Jyrki Pöysä

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To the memory of
Academician Anna-Leena Siikala

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Acknowledgements

The initial impetus for this anthology can be traced to the project 'Russia as a Field and an Archive – Constructing Finnishness among Ethnographers of 19th- and 20th-Century Finland' (funded by the Research Council of Finland 2017–2022(3)). This book is the result of a process beginning with two traditional academic meetings: first, the two-day seminar 'Researchers / Letters / Emotions' hosted at the University of Eastern Finland in April 2019 and then a follow-up workshop held in Helsinki that autumn. All the contributors to this anthology were motivated by an interest in the intersections between private and public lives and how history, especially academic history, could be looked at in new ways through consideration of correspondences and other documents of life.

Admittedly, this book has been long in the making. When the Covid-19 restrictions were put in place in 2020, fears of infection, the reality of closed borders, the need for masks and the mantra of social distancing curtailed our travels and meetings. So, we did what everyone else was doing, we stayed home and gathered remotely for discussions via Zoom from our respective locations in Joensuu, Helsinki, Tartu, London and Springfield, VA. As we tinkered with translations, deliberated over terminological questions, emailed back and forth over matters of meaning while also attending to various other tasks and commitments, life – in all its messiness – kept on unfolding. For those of us with personal and scholarly interests in the Baltic region, the ongoing conflict in Ukraine has undeniably cast a shadow over us and our own personal joys, sorrows and transitions.

We would like to thank everyone involved for their patience and support. In addition to the contributors, we are also grateful to those who presented their work in the original seminar (Teo Kurki, Johanna Laakso, Päivi Laine, Karina Lukin) and those, especially Pertti Anttonen, who kindly offered helpful commentary in the seminar and beyond. We would like to extend our gratitude to Leena Käosaar for generously sharing her knowledge on all matters epistolary. Lisa Svanfeldt-Winter's work on the concept of *scholarly persona* in the context of the history of Finnish folklore scholarship proved inspiring. Special thanks are due to Editor Anne Heimo for her gracious support, attentive reading and keen interest in making this manuscript into a book. We are also indebted to the anonymous peer reviewers for their penetrating and helpful commentary. Senni Timonen and Hilary Thompson deserve thanks for their kind words and encouragement along the way. And, last but not least, Sergio Ocampo merits much appreciation for allowing us to take advantage of his technical savvy and for providing Leila with a steady supply of strong coffee.

Joensuu and Helsinki, February 2026
Leila Virtanen, Tiina Seppä and Jyrki Pöysä

Introduction

Deconstructing Histories in Folkloristics, Linguistics and Literature

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In the 1960s Jacques Derrida, a young French philosopher, challenged the very foundations of structuralist thought, that is, the study of binary oppositions (man/woman, culture/nature, day/night, etc.) to unlock the mysteries of seemingly opaque cultural practices and narratives and thereby offer interpretations of culture. By critiquing the theory formulated by Claude Lévi-Strauss, the leading thinker in structural anthropology, Derrida began a culture war in France. The allusion in our introduction's title to deconstructionism – a conceptually frightening and revisionist '-ism' in the philosophy of science – is justified by our deconstructive endeavour to re-evaluate established truths in science, which in our case means the historical interpretations of the ethnographic sciences and the characteristic qualities, goals and products of the actors in the national culture close to them.[1]

As the work of earlier researchers recedes further into the past and new actors join the field, previous studies must be subjected to constant re-evaluation. In this project the deconstructive approach has been used to unpack the narrative dimension of scholarly history through the examination of personal documents, especially letters. The aim of this anthology has been to probe the experiential realities and emotions often ignored or left out of scholarly historiographies to reveal the realm of feeling obscured or wholly invisible in the standard image of rational science and scholarly publications. In other words, we also have sought to acknowledge the 'situated' nature of the knowledge produced by our letter-writers (see Haraway 1988). Important examples of materials that enable such re-evaluation include Bronisław Malinowski's field diary (1967/1989) and the published correspondence between Hannah Arendt and Martin Heidegger (1998/2004). While the former undermined the idealized and heroic image of the European anthropologist in the field, the latter offered readers a chance to reconsider and deepen their comprehension of Heidegger's political agency during the Nazi era and later. One of the goals of this anthology has been to re-evaluate the history of Finnish ethnography, a field that has included the study of folk poetry and belief, linguistics and ethnology. Viewed within a wider scholarly context, Finnish ethnography, for example, has a remarkable history, not only because of the pioneering

contributions it has brought to linguistic fieldwork (Hovdhaugen 2000: 170–174) but also how it has impacted both the perception and study of culture on a broader scale.

One explanation for the narrative character of disciplinary histories is that historical surveys of this area of research have tended to be repetitive, that is, constructed around previous interpretations of prominent actors or scholarly figures. Even up to our present day, historiographies have also been inclined to highlight the nationalistic roles of ethnographers rather than exploring their individual life worlds – realities fraught with conflicting forces, contingencies and sheer luck. This, in part, is due to the way in which histories of scholarly research tend to narrow in on disciplines and all-encompassing frameworks such as evolutionism or romanticism (e.g., Hautala 1969; Honko 1980; Harvilahti 2012). Moreover, earlier histories of the field have often produced narratives highlighting the excellence of a leading scholar and his (or her) disciples and their outstanding contributions to scientific knowledge. Academic backstories remain largely untold in the national histories of academic disciplines (see Karlsson 2006; Lahtinen 2006; Pöysä 2006; Pöysä & Seppä 2021).

Historians of academic fields, perhaps inhibited by a concern that their work would lose its gravitas if drawn too deeply into personal lives and 'gossipy' rumours, may have gone too far in the opposite direction, thus missing out on the chance to discover individuals, creatures of flesh and blood as the sources of paradigms and ideological movements. Only the more recently published works in the history of science demonstrate a renewed and holistic interest in the possibly flawed human beings behind the academic and theoretical works (see, e.g., Svanfeldt-Winter 2019; Niskanen & Barany 2021; Lee 2022).[2] The subject of study also matters. As Väinö Salminen states in his letters to his future bride, folklorists are no strangers to gossip (Pöysä & Seppä, in this anthology).

The Personal and Emotional Space of Letters – Magnifying the Image of the Researcher and the Academic Field

As research material, letters have always been viewed with ambivalence. On the one hand, the letters of prominent scientists and politicians have been preserved and published for at least the last 200 to 300 years. For example, the correspondence of Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) continues to be published in carefully edited and translated volumes (Kant 2007). For those interested in the history of Western philosophy, these documents are enduring and crucial keys to understanding Kant's thought. Furthermore, many of the earliest testaments to written communication originally served the same purpose as letters: messages etched into clay tablets from person A to person B (e.g., Mesopotamia 3000 BCE). On the other hand, letters have often been dismissed as secondary research material. For example, in sociological studies, letters for a long time were perceived to represent one of the least interesting classes of 'documents of life' (Plummer 1985; Stanley 2004: 202). Stanley pinpoints the lack of 'useful facts' as one of the greatest flaws of letters for Plummer and other researchers (Stanley 2004: 202). Often dismissed for being excessively personal, letters were generally either used to offer additional background information or to serve as mere illustration within a methodologically more rigorous examination of the history of one or more actors.

The early 20th century saw the publication of a pioneering work in cross-Atlantic correspondences by Florian Znaniecki and William Thomas (*The Polish Peasant in*

Europe and America 1918–1920). However effectively this magisterial work of qualitative sociological research on Polish immigrants in America and their loved ones in the old country set the precedent for similar research, only in recent decades have researchers in the social sciences and humanities begun to see the potential of letters and correspondences as research objects (especially Stanley 2004; in Finland, Leskelä-Kärki et al. 2011; Pehkonen 2013; Hagelstam 2014). These and other recent endeavours have retrieved letters and correspondences from the margins and given them increased validity as research materials.

For letters to be taken seriously as data in the history of academic disciplines and research has also required a sea change in the perception of what makes knowledge scientific. In the objectivist comprehension of knowledge, the subjectivity of letters as research data has posed a problem for two reasons: expressions of emotions and discontinuities in communication (correspondences, depending on the life circumstances of the letter-writers, may include both long stretches of silence as well as periods of frequent and intense communication).[3]

However important a role letters and other documents of life, for example, diaries, assume in our research, the goal of this anthology has not been to make new contributions to the study of these kinds of personal documents. Significant progress has already been made, for example, in the study of wartime letters (e.g., Tikka et al. 2015; Taskinen 2024). Rather, our use of letters and other personal documents has been made with a particular objective: to study the human dimension of knowledge making (see, e.g. Shapin). The inclusion of emotions in the sociology of science, for example, is a relatively new approach. Letters and diaries offer an alternative to capturing human beings in narrativized assumptions (i.e., X and Y were rivals, envied each other, etc.). While two of the chapters are thematically related to research on wartime correspondences (see Seppä's chapter on Paulaharju & Niiranen's chapter on Virtaranta), the correspondences between couples in our collection (Chapters 2, 4 & 7) have more in common with relational biographies (see Eiranen 2015, 2021; Leskelä-Kärki 2020:29). The field of academic correspondences ranges from private letters to semi-public letters written with a view to publication, for example, travelogues written for the sake of family, friends and colleagues by Sjögren (Pöysä 2023) and Castrén (Lukin 2025; for more on travelogues, see Piela 2023).

Approaches to Interpreting Letters and Correspondences

The framework for our publication and research project can be best understood via a brief review of three examples of different approaches to studying correspondences, two of which have been pursued by other research projects and the third practiced in our own project. First, by tracing epistolary exchanges and connections, it is possible to sketch an entire social field, for example, the upper-class communities of Helsinki in the 1890s and the reciprocal social relations that sustained them. With the help of vast collections of letters, researchers can study wider networks of social interaction or focus on one individual's field of relations. In Constellations of Correspondence: Relational Study of Large and Small Networks of Epistolary Exchange in the Grand Duchy of Finland (CoCo),[4] a joint project of the Finnish Literature Society and Aalto University, artificial intelligence is being used in the analysis of voluminous corpora

of letters. Another project working with extensive collections of correspondence worth mentioning is The Olive Shreiner Letters Online, a British virtual archive dedicated to the correspondence of the famous South-African writer, feminist and socialist Olive Shreiner.[5] The archive contains all the known letters, written by and to Olive Schreiner, in other words, all the letters that have been saved in various archives. The creation of a virtual archive made possible by the digitization of the archival materials together with the global information networks offers an unprecedented opportunity to study the life and relationships of this significant writer (e.g., Stanley 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018; Stanley et al. 2012).

While the first two approaches to correspondences are predicated on abundance and quantity, that is, extensive bodies of texts covering all attainable correspondences either of a community or an individual, our treatment of our letter-writers and their correspondences is distinguished by a qualitative approach, especially close reading (more about this method later in this introduction). Though the researchers and cultural personages cover a time period spanning some 200 years, the articles in this anthology discuss relatively short passages in the lives of these individuals. Listed chronologically according to year of birth, the most vocal of the epistolary voices gathered in this anthology are as follows: Danish linguist Rasmus Rask (1787–1832), Finnish ethnographer, teacher and writer Samuli Paulaharju (1875–1944), Estonian poet Marie Under (1883–1980), Finnish folklorist Väinö Salminen (1880–1947), Finnish folklorist and poet Martti Haavio (1899–1973) and folklorist Elsa Enäjärvi-Haavio (1901–1951), Finnish linguist Pertti Virtaranta (1918–1997) and Finnish-born folklorist Elli Köngäs Maranda (1932–1982).

Although the time span in the history of letters is not exceptional (cf. Kenyon 2009), in the history of an area of research such a stretch could be considered excessive. Readers familiar with Finnish ethnography may be dismayed about the numerous lacunae in this collection, not to mention, the absence of numerous researchers known as prolific letter-writers and diarists. Moreover, since 'letters do things' (Stanley et al. 2012: 266), to offer alternative examples of the range of epistolary efficacy, our collection has included letter-writers who were not firmly situated in university life, but who were nonetheless deeply embedded in the zeitgeist of their times and distilled it in their correspondence.

Instead of providing a comprehensive overview, this anthology, through close readings of letters and other personal documents, offers rich and detailed perusals of the inner lives of each historical actor at pivotal moments in their professional and personal lives. Combined with other source materials, personal letters offer a perspective on the thought world of a historical individual, the expectations, hopes and fears that he or she occasionally felt compelled to share with trusted individuals. Even a single letter – especially the stand-alone letter without any other correspondence – can prove rewarding to analyse. Indeed, we only need to look to the past to see how a single letter can set the course of history in motion, or as private individuals, we may recall a single letter or postcard (sent or received) that marked the beginning or end of a relationship. Even missing letters can carry weight when considered within the larger context of a correspondence or when they suddenly surface to determine the fates of careers or lives (Jolly 2008; Pöysä & Seppä 2021).

Even though the basic set-up of letters sets preconditions on their interpretation as text, it is also important to retain a sense of their 'letterness' or epistolary quality

(Stanley et al. 2012). To give our readers more interpretive space to draw their own conclusions, we have chosen also to incorporate longer passages from the letters – and other documents – into our chapters rather than simply offering summaries of their contents.[6] Like a diary, a letter communicates the fleeting emotions of its writer, acting as a snapshot of the sentient presence of the individual being-there (Heidegger's *Dasein*) in the time and place of writing. At least in this way, letters and diaries resemble each other, standing apart from other documents of life (Stanley 2013), namely, autobiographies and memoirs that tend to look back and construct a plot, a retrospective narrative, making 'sense' of a life. The impression of the writer's 'being here', which from the point of view of linguistics can also be interpreted as the writer's temporal and spatial deixis (Levinson 1983) or perspective (Foucault et al. 1998; Stanley 2004), confirms the dialogical nature of letter writing (Bakhtin 1989). Letters 'are not one person writing or speaking about their life, but a communication between one person and another or others' (Stanley 2004: 202). And it is by writing that the letter-writer reaches out to the other. Moreover, as Maria Tamboukou insists, it is from this 'entanglement' that the individual or self emerges (2011: 2). In this way, the writer's idea of the recipient's status and the latter's ability and desire to understand the writer's messages is also reflected in the text. Correspondences underscore relationality, the state of being in between (Ceder 2019).[7] The fundamental positionality of letters also offers the researcher an opportunity to pursue a more in-depth positioning analysis of the situational identities of letter-writers and recipients (Pöysä 2009; McVee et al. 2024).

As a research strategy, close reading can typically be initiated early in the research process, when one is forming hypotheses about the material by searching for themes and categories, whose relationships and relevance can later be assessed by comparative or quantitative analysis. It is often the case that a meticulous close reading of a few samples from the material can suffice for forming a theoretical perspective relevant for the research. This is also the case when the sample turns out to be one of a kind, a narrative or passage with no other available 'variant' that stands out from the rest of the material.[8]

As a methodology, close reading (see Bal 2002; Pöysä 2010, 2015) appears as a form of Husserlian phenomenological reduction, whereby the reader or interpreter suspends or brackets all previous notions or judgements in order to apprehend the text as it is.[9] The aim of close reading here is nonetheless bound by the interpretative situation itself, in which the researcher, while reading the texts (letters) immediately begins to form interpretive hypotheses of the texts and the historical actors (author, addressee, and groups and individuals described in the text) and the wider contexts of the letters' interpretations (e.g., see Geertz 1973; Seppä 2015). After these initial interpretations, it is a good idea to take a break (sleep on it) and return to the texts later to reflect on and question once again interpretations made during the first reading. In this way, close reading turns into a process containing ingredients for self-correction, but also those leading to new readings of the texts. It may well be that such a process of close reading offers no closure whatsoever, since, for example, the researcher of letters (as seemingly straightforward as they appear as textual forms) or other cultural phenomena can keep finding ever-new meanings while continuing the interpretive process and then returning to their earlier interpretive hypotheses once again enriched with new insights (e.g., see especially Seppä 2015; but also Geertz 1973; Glassie 1982; Honko 1985; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998; Anttonen 2000; Knuuttila & Timonen 2002; Järvinen 2004; Timonen 2004).[10]

If we consider the grander narratives of disciplinary history, private letters with their personal contents have the greatest potential to disrupt or undermine established truths about the field and academic life. After all, the realm of the personal, so often associated with gossip or rumour, has traditionally been left on the margins of narratives of scholarly history. But just how does the personal or private life impact and shape academic life and knowledge production? We have sought to show how our understandings of the history of research and the individuals involved in its making can be altered by the opening of researchers' personal archives, the digitization of such materials and new readings of personal documents.

Scholars, Cultural Figures and Historical Moments: An Expanding Gendered Space

For the first hundred years of its existence, Finnish ethnography constituted a masculine endeavour practiced by lone explorers, fieldworkers and collectors of folk poetry. Academic roles for women were limited at best. The most fitting role for a woman in academe was at her scholar husband's side; as an 'ideal academic wife', she could support her husband's career in multiple ways (see, e.g., Gottlieb 1995; Creamer 2001; Eiranen 2015, 2021; Meens & Sintobin 2018; Svanfeldt-Winter 2019). Anders Johan Sjögren (1794–1855) Elias Lönnrot (1802–1884), Mattias Alexander Castrén (1813–1852), D.E.D. Europaeus (1820–1884), August Ahlqvist (1826–1889), Otto Donner (1835–1909), Kustaa F. Karjalainen (1871–1919) and Uuno T. Sirelius (1872–1929) all contributed to the field of ethnography primarily as solitary and heroic figures who travelled in the Finnish hinterlands, borderlands and further into Russia on expeditions to obtain linguistic, poetic and ethnographic data to learn about the prehistory of the Finns. Both worlds – the academy and the sites of fieldwork – were largely off-limits to women until the early 20th century. Elsa Enäjärvi-Haavio was the first female folklorist to conduct fieldwork and complete a doctoral dissertation in 1932. Even so, it took another fifty years or so for women to enter the field as full-fledged members. While the study of gender, women and femininity has raised awareness of the exclusion and marginalization of women in academic life, another objective, which is equally important, requires the critical study of men and masculinity in the academy. This is especially crucial because of the way in which the scientific world had presented itself as objective, neutral and ungendered (Keller 1985).

Attention to gender in scholarly life also requires investigating men and women in context as social beings in relation to one another. Yet gender, which today is no longer understood as simply binary (male/female), is only one way of categorising human beings (Crenshaw 1989). Lisa Svanfeldt-Winter, for example, in her study of the academically formative years of Martti Haavio and Elsa Enäjärvi, identifies the significance of 'the scholarly household' (2019). The domestic sphere and the vital importance of companionship also feature in Väinö Salminen's letters, from the point of view of the husband. The dialogical nature of letters – a letter is usually written with a particular recipient or audience in mind – makes their study especially fruitful in consideration not of isolated individuals but of social creatures constructing identities in relation to others: an 'I' writing to a 'you' (e.g., see Hagelstam 2011; see footnote 8).[11] As noted earlier, in seeking to understand how relationality manifests in the interpretation of

textual identities, we have drawn also upon theories of positionality (Davies & Harre 1989; Bamberg 1997; Pöysä 2009; Hyvärinen et al. 2021; McVee et al. 2024). Positioning theory draws attention to how identities are formed locally in discursive situations, or conversations. Instead of fixed identities, it is more useful for us to consider the roles of participants, which – in our case – are produced in letters. Besides the writer and the recipient, letters also textually define third parties or readers, relevant acquaintances or unknown strangers, factual or fictional figures. Each letter contains these three participant roles; in traditional literary theory, those in the third category are often referred to as implied readers.

On the face of it, the epistolary voices we hear most loudly in this anthology constitute a masculine majority. Yet the reader will find, on closer consideration, that many of these male voices were also in conversation with female counterparts – daughters, sweethearts, wives. These female voices remain largely silent, partly due to the tendency of letters to get lost, thrown away, burned or simply be held back from the inquisitive gaze of researchers. No matter how 'silent' these female interlocutors happen to be in the correspondences discussed in this anthology, they still play a striking role in the shaping of the biographies of their male interlocutors. For example, the linguist Pertti Virtaranta's wartime sweetheart Aune Katara opts out of marriage with the ambitious linguist but saves his letters for decades before donating them to the Tape Archive of the Finnish Language at the Institute for the Languages of Finland. Her letters to Virtaranta, presumably lost or destroyed, possibly by Virtaranta himself, are not available to us. Yet in the face of his insistent demands on her with regard to the future that they never had, her silence leaves the researcher with plenty of room for interpretation, something which Leskelä-Kärki refers to as an ethical challenge with regard to 'our position as interpreters' (2020: 30). The correspondence between Väinö Salminen and his fiancée and later wife, Kaarina Salminen, represents a similar case. While her side of the correspondence is inaccessible (except one letter, see Pöysä & Seppä, this anthology), she emerges as the curator of his scholarly image. Even though the letters primarily convey the voice of the male, their final composition is shaped by the female who salvaged, preserved and donated the correspondence. These biographical sources contain many gendered configurations that emerge across different time periods and socio-economic contexts.

Letters and Academic Cultures

Letters and correspondences have played a crucial role in academic culture for at least 200 years. Historian Päivi Laine's study of Academician A.J. Sjögren's correspondence presents a distinct view onto the intricacies of early 19th-century social life in the circles of the St. Petersburg Academy of Sciences (Laine 2020). Letters served as a means of complementing the formal visits (courtesy calls) on which Russian société was built; social success in that world required a command of numerous European languages. Knowledge of any language meant both the ability to read and a facility with written expression. Born in Finland into humble circumstances, Sjögren's way into the scientific community in St. Petersburg was no doubt smoothed by his facility with languages and flair for writing. For example, when the eminent linguist Rasmus Rask was staying in St. Petersburg, Sjögren approached him via letter, asking for concrete advice about