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Frances Brooke's *History of Emily Montague* (1769)
Epistolarity at the Transatlantic Intersection of Public and Private

*Marijn S. Kaplan*
University of North Texas

**Abstract**
Frances Brooke, the British author and playwright, lived in Quebec from 1763 to 1768. This stay earned her the distinction of being the first novelist in North America and of having written the first Canadian novel, *The History of Emily Montague* (1769), an epistolary narrative. I will analyze *The History of Emily Montague* as a hybrid novel, based on Brooke's construction of the body in and through epistolarity. Elizabeth Heckendorn Cook has argued that "The epistolary genre was central to the construction and definition of the categories of public and private that we have inherited from Enlightenment social and political traditions, and to the construction and definition of the bodies held properly to inhabit those categories" (Epistolary Bodies, pp. 7-8). The public and the private co-exist and intersect in the first Canadian novel along several thematic axes. First, the novel's transatlantic nature and travel narrative — Brooke lived in Quebec and in England, where she published *The History of Emily Montague*, which is set on both sides of the Atlantic — provide the theme of nationalism. The second axis, related to the first, is that of colonialism, based on the British conquest of Quebec recently ratified in the 1763 Treaty of Paris. Along the third axis, gender operates to create male and female identities within the novel's sentimental romance genre. I will argue that *The History of Emily Montague*, located at the intersection of the public and the private, transports across the Atlantic, via its construction of the body in and through epistolarity, some Enlightenment conventions in the areas of nationalism, colonialism, and gender, while also creating innovations.
Frances Brooke, the English author and playwright (1724-1789), lived in Quebec from 1763 to 1768 (a one-year stay in England excepted) because her husband, the Reverend John Brooke, was a Church of England chaplain to the British forces stationed in Quebec City. This stay earned her the distinction of being the first novelist in North America and of having written the first Canadian novel, *The History of Emily Montague*, an epistolary narrative published back in London in 1769. Analyzing it as a hybrid novel, I argue that *The History of Emily Montague*, located at the intersection of the public and the private, transports across the Atlantic, via Brooke's construction of the body in and through epistolarity, Enlightenment observations on nationalism, colonialism, and gender.

*The History of Emily Montague* brings the epistolary novel from Enlightenment Europe to Canada. Formally, it is composed of 228 letters of varying lengths. Of these, 123 are written by four women and the remaining 105 are written by six men, during the period between April 10, 1766, and late November 1767, when the author herself was present in Quebec. Although all correspondents are English, approximately two thirds of the letters are sent from Canada and the other one third from England, with the exception of one letter written in between, during a transatlantic voyage. Thematically, as Jodi Wyett says, the novel “marks a moment in literary history when a sentimental novel met a travel narrative” (Wyett, 2003, p. 33). Frances Brooke had experience writing sentimental novels, having successfully published *The History of Lady Juliana Mandeville* in 1763 as well as an English translation of Marie Jeanne Riccoboni’s bestseller *Lettres de Juliette Catesby* in 1760. The travel narrative genre was new to her, but was evidently inspired by her own transatlantic journeys to Canada and her observations of Canadian society at a time when the British conquest of Quebec had recently been ratified in the 1763 Treaty of Paris. The sentimental plot in the novel centers on the love stories of three couples made up of three friends named Arabella Fermor, Emily Montague, and Lucy Rivers, and the men they eventually marry, Captain Fitzgerald, Ed Rivers (Lucy’s brother) and his friend, John Temple, respectively. The last couple, Lucy and John, meets in, and never leaves, England, but the other two, though all English, meet in Quebec. Arabella and Fitzgerald marry there while Ed and Emily marry back in England. In the end, the “little circle of friends” *(Emily Montague*, p. 332) reunites and settles in England. The travel plot with its related observations of Quebec society is particularly evident in the male protagonist’s (Ed’s) letters back to England as well as in the letters by Arabella’s father, William Fermor, to the Earl of — in England, in which he provides political and economic comments. Arabella’s own letters also contain some observations on Quebec society and nature.

The epistolary nature of *The History of Emily Montague* is central to my argument. As Elizabeth Heckendorn Cook claims, “The epistolary genre was central to the construction and definition of the categories of public and private that we have

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1. In 1770, Jean Baptiste René Robinet translated it into French as *Histoire d’Emilie Montague*.
2. As a letter addressee, the Earl is not identified any further, but in the one letter he writes, letter 184, he signs off as “H—.”
inherited from Enlightenment social and political traditions, and to the construction and definition of the bodies held properly to inhabit those categories” (Cook, 1996, pp. 7-8). The public and the private co-exist and intersect in the first Canadian novel. Many eighteenth-century epistolary novels — such as Françoise de Graffigny’s *Lettres d’une Péruvienne* (1747), an earlier French blend of sentimental novel and travel narrative by a woman writer — include what Cook calls their “self-inscribed textual history” (Cook, 1996, p. 171), outlining the fictitious transition from private letters, from the private sphere to the public sphere, via the medium of print. *The History of Emily Montague*, however, contains no apparent textual framing device. An allusion to it exists, though. In letter 2, dated June 27, 1766, and written by Ed Rivers in Quebec to his sister Lucy in London, he says in response to a letter from her (not reproduced in the novel): “you really, Lucy, ask me such a million of questions, ‘tis impossible to know which to answer first; the country, the convents, the balls, the ladies, the beaux — ‘tis a history, not a letter, you demand, and it will take me a twelve-month to satisfy your curiosity” (*Emily Montague*, p. 9). Evidently, what the reader is holding is a history, not a letter (*The History of Emily Montague*), and it is almost thirteen months after this letter was written that Ed sets foot on British soil again and is reunited with Lucy, since letter 163 by Ed is dated Dover, July 24, 1767. Especially when one subtracts the six weeks required for the letter’s transatlantic passage before Lucy could read it, one is so close to the “twelve-month” period predicted by Ed, one might wonder if this is not a tongue-in-cheek reference to the novel’s “self-inscribed textual history”. Lorraine McMullen, the Canadian scholar most eminently associated with Frances Brooke and her work, has shown that the author modeled her correspondents after some of her family members and acquaintances — *The History of Emily Montague*, pp. 408-411; *An Odd Attempt in a Woman*, pp. 106-110 (McMullen, 1983). Whereas the letters pertaining to the sentimental plot clearly hail from the private sphere, Brooke immediately anchored the novel as a whole firmly in the public sphere by means of a metatextual device, namely its dedication.

The novel is dedicated to Guy Carleton, the English Governor of Quebec at the time. The author praises him as someone to whose “probity and enlightened attention the colony owes its happiness, and individuals that tranquility of mind, without which there can be no exertion of the powers of either the understanding or the imagination” (*Emily Montague*, p. 7). Brooke herself exerted both these powers, understanding and imagination, in writing her novel: imagination for the fictitious sentimental plot and understanding for the travel narrative. The travel narrative required understanding on her part because of its connection to a political issue playing itself out in the British public sphere at the time — her use of the word “enlightened” here reminds us that we are in the eighteenth century, the Age of Enlightenment — namely the colonial expansion of the British Empire. The author’s use of the term “colony” and, in the next paragraph, “province”, to refer to Canada, as well as her signing and dating of the dedication (London, March 22, 1769), place the novel squarely in this context of colonialism. Within it, Brooke aligns herself with the colonizer, being English, positioning herself in London at a time when the 1763 Treaty of Paris had ceded Quebec to England, and calling her king, George III, “excellent”. Opposed to this colonizer, Canada becomes what Mary Louise Pratt calls the “contact zone”:
in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict" (Pratt, 1992, p. 6). It is interesting to note, however, that since, as Cook says, "in epistolary narratives, the letter serves as a metonym of the body of the writing subject" (Cook, 1996, p. 32), the contact zone is not "physically" represented in the novel: although it is described at great length by British citizens, no French Canadians or Canadian "savages" write any letters. Their voices remain unheard, although Madame Des Roches, a young widow of French origin who nearly seduces Ed Rivers, appears in 29 letters (more than 12%), but always as an object of discussion, never as a letter writing subject.

Who do appear as letter writing subjects or, in other words, whose bodies does Brooke include metonymically in her novel? Although scholars have employed the novel's epistolary structure in diametrically opposed arguments concerning whose opinions it favors, including dialogism (Howells, 1993) and those held by William Fermor (Cuder-Domínguez, 1998), it has not been used to analyze the opinions presented by Brooke's construction of the body in and through epistolarity. What such an analysis reveals, among other things, is that absent bodies, i.e., letter writers, may matter as much as those present. While Howells calls William Fermor's correspondent, the Earl of —, "the patriarch" (Howells, 1993, p. 448) and Cuder-Domínguez has Fermor internalize "both patriarchal and imperial" codes (Cuder-Domínguez, 1998, pp. 121-122), it is the implied absence of another patriarch that, significantly, sets in motion the entire novel, namely Ed's father.

In the novel's opening letter, dated from England right before he boards a ship for the New World, and addressed to his friend John Temple in Paris at the time, Ed lists the reasons why he is going to Canada, other than it being wilder and having handsomer women than New York. He also says that as a newly reduced officer on half pay, he does not like its lazy lifestyle, does not want to "narrow [his] circle of life" or "break in on the little estate which is scarce sufficient to support [his] mother and sister in the manner to which they have been accustomed" (Emily Montague, p. 7). Thus, his father's death and the limited assets he leaves his family play a significant role in Ed's decision to go to Canada and "become lord of a principality which will put our large-axed men in England out of countenance" (Emily Montague, p. 8), terms reverberating the discourse of colonialism. The importance of this theme is underscored by its prominent reappearance in the novel's final letter, also written by Ed, who has been back in England for several months, and addressed to Arabella, returned to England as well. Ed not only mentions the return of the father figure here ("My father (with what delight do I call the father of Emily by that name?) hinted at my taking a larger house..." (Emily Montague, p. 402)), but even refers to himself becoming the next patriarch: "love, friendship, and, if you will allow me to anticipate, paternal tenderness, all the domestic attachments, are sweet beyond words" (Emily Montague, p. 403). In this context, it is significant that Emily's father is also absent from her

life until the end of the novel. In fact, after her mother’s death, he leaves her with an uncle who takes her to Canada and dies, passing her on to a guardian. Importantly, Colonel Willmott, Emily’s father, is inscribed within the British colonial discourse: he is a nabob who made a fortune in the East Indies. In another twist of fate related to the absent yet implied father, it turns out that Emily’s father was supposed to become Ed’s second father, his father-in-law, all along, because he had intended Emily for Ed before they ever even met each other in Canada. The narrative, particularly surrounding its primary couple, Ed and Emily, is thus doubly premised on the absent father indirectly instigating colonialism, and comes full circle back in the fatherland (the father’s land). There, the colonialist father figure, who is frequently said to be a letter writer but has none of his letters reproduced, is restored to the daughter and to the son (in-law), who projects himself as the new patriarch.

In an article on convents in Canada at the time, Anne Little makes the insightful observation that “Brooke (through Rivers) [...] betrays a more interesting implicit theme that runs through the novel: Canada is good when it is open to English male penetration, and it is bad when it is closed and impenetrable” (Little, 2006, p. 192). Her argument centers on language and the role of convents in the novel; I posit that its epistolary structure supports this theme and that Brooke’s epistolary bodies metonymically both participate in a discourse on British nationalism and comment on gender. As stated, two thirds of the novel’s letters originate in Canada (155 out of 228, or 67.98%), one third in England (72 out of 228, or 31.58%), and one letter in between (1 out of 228, or 0.43%). From the 155 letters originating in Canada, 97 are written by a woman (62.58%); from the 72 letters originating in England, 47 come from a man (65.27%). Metonymically speaking then, Canada is embodied as female and England as male. To paraphrase Little’s argument, Canada, the female contact zone, is to be penetrated and conquered by England, the male colonizer. No less than 91 of the 97 letters (93.8%) originating in Canada are not only written by a woman, but also addressed to a woman. In them, the most frequent topic of discussion is the women’s courting and relationships with potential husbands. Thus, the two main female letter writers in Canada, Arabella (66 letters) and Emily (21 letters), metonymically form a female contact zone, to be conquered and penetrated by the English male colonizer (in a mise-en-abyme of the theme). Fatherless Emily returns to the British fatherland (father’s land) before marrying Ed; Arabella, with a strong father present throughout the narrative who negotiates her marriage behind the scenes, returns to England within a month after her wedding. In the end, the metonymic female Canadian contact zone is conquered, appropriated (married), and literally penetrated by the British men (see Ed’s final comment on paternity, quoted above).

The real, non-metonymic Canadian contact zone, however, presents a different picture for as I said earlier, it is not “physically” represented in the novel: no French Canadians or Canadian “savages” write any letters. Their voices remain unheard, although Madame Des Roches, a young widow of French origin with an estate for sale

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4. For the immediate name changes following marriage, see letter 158 for Arabella («voilà Madame Fitzgerald!» (281)) and letter 198 for Emily.
and in love with Ed, appears in 29 letters. She is described as “very amiable; a widow about thirty, with an agreeable person, great vivacity, an excellent understanding” (Emily Montague, p. 79), but Ed turns down both her and her estate in favor of Emily. When Arabella, the last protagonist to return to England, leaves Canada, she suggests she might take Madame Des Roches with her to England: “it is pity such a woman should be hid all her life in the woods of Canada” (Emily Montague, p. 302). Realizing Madame Des Roches’ appeal to the British colonizer, however, she adds: “I have but one objection; if Fitzgerald [Arabella’s husband] should take a fancy to prefer the tender to the lively, I should be in some danger: there is something very seducing in her eyes, I assure you” (Emily Montague, p. 302). The final parallelism in Arabella’s farewell indicates how Madame Des Roches does indeed personify Canada:

Adieu! ma chère [sic] Madame Des Roches. I embrace her; I feel the force of its being for the last time. I am afraid she feels it yet more strongly than I do: in parting with the last of his friends, she seems to part with her Rivers for ever [sic]. One look more at the wild graces of nature I leave behind. Adieu! Canada! adieu! Sweet abode of the wood-nymphs (Emily Montague, p. 304).

Thus, the British abandon Madame Des Roches, also known as a wood nymph, who failed to seduce them successfully and is left unconquered, unpenetrated, and, I reiterate, without a voice.

Three months later, Arabella tells Emily in the novel’s penultimate letter that she heard from an old admirer in Quebec that “Madame Des Roches has just refused one of the best matches in the country, and vows she will live and die a bachelore [sic]” (Emily Montague, p. 400). Canada will not be subjugated and Arabella’s reaction to this news is revealing: “Tis a mighty foolish resolution, and yet I cannot help liking her the better for making it” (Emily Montague, p. 400). In the end, with the British retreated to the fatherland, Canada may be better off self-sufficient and autonomous. Perhaps Brooke foreshadows Britain’s failure to make Quebec truly British, evident already in the 1770s, because of its strong French legacy. In this context, one of Ed’s final comments in French, « Cela est bien dit, mon cher Rivers; mais il faut cultiver notre jardin » (Emily Montague, p. 403), (Well said, my dear Rivers, but we need to cultivate our garden), famous words from Voltaire’s Candide he puts in Arabella’s mouth, takes on new meaning. It could be interpreted as Brooke encouraging England to cultivate its own backyard, its own soil, rather than that of Canadian wood nymphs. One of Arabella’s final comments can be tied to this as well: “Our romantic adventures being at an end, my dear [Emily]; and we being all degenerated into sober people, who marry and settle…” (Emily Montague, p. 400). The term “settle” is frequently used in the novel to refer to the British occupying Canadian lands, but in the end, the British protagonists settle quite happily in their fatherland with nothing left to wish for except “a continuance of [their] present happiness” (Emily Montague, p. 403).

Feminist interpretations of this novel exist, particularly of Arabella, who is quite outspoken. Jodi Wyett, for instance, argues that “whereas many eighteenth-century women complained that marriage meant certain death for female friendships,
marriage safely enables Arabella, Emily, and even Lucy, to strengthen the bonds among them" (Wyett, 2003, p. 49). Brooke's construction of epistolary bodies does not necessarily present the same rosy picture, though. Indeed, marriage has a negative, silencing effect on the female voice: once married, Emily writes only 5 letters (13.5%) and Arabella merely 13 (16.9%). This is not due to their proximity in England, for they write each other in Canada when they are close. Rather, it is directly related to their gender. While Ed writes the same overall number of letters as Arabella, 77, he writes 50% more of them after marriage than she does, 19. Even more strikingly, Fitzgerald, Arabella's husband, only comes to writing after his marriage, with 6 letters total, all written in England. Marriage thus appears to be a factor in silencing the female voice, while promoting (and even generating) the male voice in the fatherland.

In conclusion, Frances Brooke creates a multifaceted hybrid with The History of Emily Montague, transporting the Enlightenment epistolary novel to a New World context and including numerous dichotomies such as Canada and England, contact zone and colonizer, absent father and present father, female voice and male voice, married and single, private sphere and public sphere, sentimental novel and travel narrative, imagination and understanding. Within these dichotomies, her construction of the body in and through epistolarity offers readers observations on nationalism, colonialism, and gender. Brooke aligns herself with the British colonizer, indicating that Canada is voiceless (unembodied) in the colonization process. She hints, however, that Canada may benefit from being self-sufficient and autonomous, foreshadowing the imminent British colonization failure. Despite the failure in colonial subjugation in the public sphere, Brooke shows that with the return of the father, and to the British fatherland (father's land), come male supremacy, female appropriation, and a lesser role for women in the private sphere. This situation, in turn, will perpetuate the status quo, with the son (in-law) projecting himself as the next patriarch.

References

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6. Marie Jeanne Riccoboni made a similar claim for the relationship between marriage and the female voice. See articles by Lauser and Kaplan.


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