In the spring of 2010, Professor Helena Michie arranged for a set of materials from the Woodson Research Center to be made available to the members of her graduate seminar on Victorian fiction and historicism. From these items, I and my fellow students were to choose subjects for our final paper, which was to comprise three main components: a preliminary analysis of our chosen archival materials, a meta-reflection on the research experience, and a proposal for a future research project based on our findings. As I perused the various journals, letters, maps, and diaries, I found myself lingering over one particular dusty box that contained the correspondence of Kezia Payne DePelchin and E. Kate Heckle, two nurses (and friends) who served in the 1878 Mississippi Valley Yellow Fever epidemic. I have encountered many personal accounts of illness while pursuing my graduate studies in literature and medicine, but the DePelchin/Heckle letters stood out for their heart-wrenching detail, sophisticated style, and provocative assertions. And though I had always been dubious of the “romance of the archive,” I nevertheless spent the remainder of my class’s visit completely captivated by these women’s recollections and left the Woodson Center committed to reading more of them as soon as possible.

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Selecting the DePelchin/Heckle materials as the subject of my final seminar paper was easy; unpacking the multiple valences and subtler implications of the nurses’ writing proved far more challenging. I began my research by simply reading through the materials, actually photocopies of the original papers (themselves too delicate to be
handled) in the Woodson Center. Labeled “Kezia Payne DePelchin Letters, 1878–1879,” the collection actually holds roughly 26 letters from Kezia DePelchin to her sister Sallie Payne in addition to the former’s travel journal, and four letters from E. Kate Heckle to DePelchin.

When I entered the second stage of my research, close-readings and historical contextual analysis of the letters, I transitioned to reading computer printouts of the photocopies outside the Center. I initially tried reading transcribed copies of the letters (available online through the Americas Archive), but I soon abandoned this format after finding several inconsistencies between the transcriptions and the letters. Although studying the photocopies was certainly more time-consuming and occasionally tedious (though fortunately both women had very good hand-writing), doing so meant I could add my own notes or underline certain passages. By annotating the DePelchin/Heckle letters, I was in a way creating my own hybrid archival object for future generations should they be interested in my personal effects. I was also in a way ‘writing back’ to DePelchin and Heckle, transforming what was singular communication between DePelchin and Payne, and Heckle and DePelchin, respectively, to group discussions. This description is, perhaps, overly optimistic given the unilateral nature of the correspondence: there are letters from Heckle to DePelchin, DePelchin to Payne, and notes from me to them, but no replies between us. What emerged then from this ‘writing back’ exercise was a sort of epistolary round robin that left me speculating even further as to the ‘missing’ responses of Heckle, Payne, and DePelchin.

Thus, in the course of my research I came to categorize the DePelchin/Heckle materials by a multiplicity of silences as well as voices. Scholar Carolyn Steedman
accordingly notes that one’s experience in the archive in some ways comes to be defined by what isn’t there, that the lacunae within archives ultimately arouse as much scholarly curiosity as what is present.¹ I experienced this phenomenon when reading the DePelchin/Heckle letters because the collection is simultaneously full (of detailed accounts) and empty (of epistolary responses). Although I was fascinated with (and very grateful for) DePelchin and Heckle’s extensive descriptions of the Epidemic, I was also suspicious and curious as to what might have escaped their fastidious record.

These conflicting impulses thus inspired the two archival projects outlined in my enclosed final seminar paper. The first project, “Narrativizing Disease,” and the second project, “The Legacy of Infection” are respectively based on those stories offered by and omitted from the DePelchin/Heckle letters. “Narrativizing Disease” explores how DePelchin in particular sought to establish herself as an authorial figure via her use of elaborate literary motifs. This project also investigates the possibility that both women used war metaphors in their descriptions as a means of positing the Epidemic as a new sort of battle that specifically required female “soldiers” (i.e., caregivers). “The Legacy of Infection” in turn examines how yellow fever may have permanently “infected” a household, that is to say, changed its gender and economic hierarchies, altered power dynamics, and/or transformed the space of the home. Because DePelchin and Heckle provided detailed accounts as to how patients and families operated during the Epidemic, the task of this second project is to extend and/or resolve those narratives begun by DePelchin and Heckle by engaging in a scholarly scavenger hunt of sorts through various historical sites and archives throughout the country.

These proposed projects based on the DePelchin/Heckle letters have since blossomed into two immensely satisfying on-going academic and artistic ventures. In July 2011, I will present a paper based on the arguments of my first archival project at “The Language of Illness and Pain,” an international, multidisciplinary conference to be held at the University of London. As some of the proceedings of this conference will be assembled in a collection, I am hopeful that “Narrativizing Disease” will engender published scholarship. My second project, “The Legacy of Disease,” may also lead to a published work, though as I predicted in my original paper, not necessarily a critical article. I am currently outlining a historical fiction novel based on Payne’s descriptions of several Memphis families affected by the Epidemic. Even if this piece of writing never reaches the bookstore shelves, the exercise of imagining and writing about the effects of infectious illness on various kinship structures has been very helpful to my dissertation research on representations of contagion in nineteenth-century fiction. DePelchin and Heckle may have distinguished themselves during their time for their heroic acts as nurses, but their admirable legacy of service extends to contemporary times through their indirect enhancement of my own graduate education.