Archival (Yellow) Fever

The Letters of
Kezia Payne DePelchin
and
E. Kate Heckle

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Abstract

I originally submitted “Archival (Yellow) Fever” as my final paper for Dr. Helena Michie’s graduate seminar on Victorian fiction and historicism. This paper includes my analysis of the DePelchin/Heckle materials, a collection of writings by two female nurses serving in the 1878 Mississippi Valley Yellow Fever Epidemic; a meta-reflection on my experience in the archive; and proposals for two future research projects based my preliminary research. My first project, “Narrativizing Disease,” explores how DePelchin in particular sought to establish herself as an authorial figure via elaborate literary motifs and highly stylized language. 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,” the second project, 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.
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Introduction

When Kezia Payne DePelchin left Houston in late summer of 1878 to work as a volunteer nurse, she brought a breastpin with a lock of her mother’s hair. “That is my talisman,” she wrote to her sister Sallie in a letter describing her decision to journey into the heart of the Mississippi Valley Yellow Fever Epidemic. Although DePelchin believed herself to be at “less risk” of infection having already contracted the illness as well as having lived through several other epidemics, she still felt she was endangering her life in pursuing this vocation.¹ Indeed, yellow fever was, and continues to be, a formidable disease that today kills an average of 30,000 people per year in sub-Saharan Africa and South America. Populations living in these warmer climates are most at risk because the virus is transmitted through the bite of infected tropical mosquitoes.² Symptoms of yellow fever are usually grouped in two stages, the first of which involves high fever, chills, headache, and nausea. Patients who then progress to the second, more dangerous phase of the illness experience delirium and jaundice (the “yellow” aspect of yellow fever); bleed from the eyes, mouth, and ears; and expel copious quantities of “black” (bloody) vomit. The onset of these secondary symptoms often indicates the disease has reached its terminal stage. There is no cure for yellow fever, and treatment consists usually of intravenous fluids, blood transfusions, and dialysis in the case of kidney failure.³

¹ “I can go with less risk than many, as I have had it [the yellow fever] and been through several epidemics, therefore, think of me, not with anxiety, but hope; pray for me” (DePelchin, 8.28.1878, Houston, TX). Hereafter letters will be cited in footnotes by the name of the writer as well as by the date and location assigned to the correspondence. DePelchin was correct in assuming she was less susceptible to yellow fever. Surviving infection confers life-long immunity to most patients.
² The Aedes aegypti, which thrives in hot, dry weather, is the most common insect carrier of yellow fever.
None of those treatments were available during the Mississippi Valley Yellow Fever Epidemic, which began roughly in June of 1878 when the first cases arose in New Orleans. A high incidence of yellow fever in the Caribbean earlier that year had prompted President Rutherford B. Hayes on April 29th, 1878 to sign the Quarantine Act, which authorized the surgeon general of the marine hospital service to impose quarantine restrictions on incoming vessels. This measure was largely ineffective, and by August 431 cases of yellow fever (resulting in 120 deaths) were reported in New Orleans.4 Despite additional railroad quarantines, the disease spread quickly to Memphis, and then to the rest of Tennessee, Alabama, and Mississippi. By January the number of reported cases had severely declined (due to the deleterious effect of winter frost on the infectious mosquito population) and the Epidemic was officially considered over by March 1879. By that point, an estimated 120,000 people had been sickened with yellow fever and around 20,000 had lost their lives.5

It was therefore unsurprising to me that the letters of Kezia DePelchin and those of her friend and fellow nurse E. Kate Heckle were depressing, even frightening, to read. The innumerable patients mentioned in their letters illustrates the rampant spread of the disease and the corresponding high mortality rate makes it seem as if the Mississippi River Valley was verging on the apocalypse. Both women spared no detail in portraying the horrific physical and mental effects of yellow fever, and DePelchin in particular appeared to harbor a morbid fascination with the somatic manifestations of the disease.

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4 The mode of transmission for yellow fever was still under dispute in 1878 and many medical professionals as well as lay people believed the illness was contagious, that is to say, carried from person to person. For that reason, quarantines and travel restrictions were the measures most often instituted at the first sign of an outbreak.
While working, for example, at an Episcopal orphanage, she recorded numerous descriptions of dying children:

[The child Lena] looked awful. her mouth was black. her limbs purple and trembling. she was muttering all the time; they said she was German, her parents had just died two weeks before. I put my arm round her, and had her cot moved behind a door away from the other children. I spoke to her in German. She then laid her head in my lap. she lasted a few hours, then her sufferings were over...6

A few days later, DePelchin recounted the effects of yellow fever on another victim:

Sweet Jennie Morrow her lovely features were distorted, her fair skin was changed to a brazen tone, I laid her down, and in that strange look this disease gives its victims no one would have recognized the lovely girl.7

Although DePelchin may have been intrigued by such physical transformations, any perverse pleasure she and Heckle derived from viewing the disease’s progression was dwarfed by their sincere desire to see patients recover and their severe disappointment when they failed to do so.

Indeed, the relative inefficacy of contemporaneous treatment methods and the subsequent mounting fatalities at times severely taxed the women’s faith and spirit.

DePelchin’s October 31st, 1878 epistle relates one such emotional nadir:

I often wondered if I had sinned that my patients did not recover. I have prayed more than in all my life put together: I sometimes when out in the yard look up and think will God not hear me? The stars look down upon me with their diamond eyes. Are they smiling on me, or are they mocking me in my despair? I feel like Cassandra who [prophesied] to Troy, had her prophecies laughed at.8

DePelchin, a self-identified devout Christian, was usually content to put her trust in God, but the carnage of yellow fever eventually challenged her religious convictions.9 Both she and Heckle were especially affected by the disease’s ability to kill many members of

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6 (DePelchin, 9.14.1878, Memphis, TX.) From this passage, one might infer DePelchin was bi- or even multilingual. Born in the Madeira Islands, DePelchin presumably also spoke some Portuguese.
7 DePelchin, 10.6.1878, Memphis, TX.
8 DePelchin, 10.31.20, Senatobia, MS.
9 In her opening letter, DePelchin confidently wrote, “I shall be where the ‘pestilence walketh in darkness: and destruction at noonday,’ but God has told us who trust in him, not to be afraid.—May He keep you and yours” (DePelchin, 8.28.10, Houston, TX.)
a single household in a short period of time. In her letter dated October 9th, 1878, DePelchin recalled how a streetcar ride through an abandoned neighborhood reminded her of entire families wiped out by yellow fever:

One family of six named Kerr all died; if they left at all they should have remained absent. On the cars two young ladies were talking, one pointed out a house to the other, ‘See those two little boys looking out of the window. They are the only ones left of a large family.’ And so it is of many. Little Sallie Blew is the only one left of parents and five children. She is seven years of age. Mr. Blew was assistant editor of the Western Advocate. I remember reading some of his stories to children. His signature Uncle Robert was always looked for by me in Texas. I did not meet with any of the family. Some families died out entirely, for instance the Flack family. Mother and six children, all were gathered in by the great Reaper but this is better than one being left.

DePelchin bemoaned the fact that some families like the Kerrs, who might otherwise have escaped yellow fever, may have “returned too soon” after initially fleeing town. As she held the most pity for “one being left” in cases of large families infected by the disease, her letters are accordingly peppered with heart-wrenching accounts of orphaned children, bereaved single parents, and widowed spouses.

So while I did not find it unusual that the letters should contain such a surfeit of sorrowful stories, I was surprised by the way in which Heckle, and, especially, DePelchin, seemed purposely and self-consciously to construct themselves as authorial figures. Although unadorned, purely informational reports of the yellow fever epidemic would have been sufficiently dramatic given its inherent horrors, both women nevertheless often employed more complex language to convey the gravity of the disease. In the essay that follows I will elaborate on how my observations regarding the authorial strategies of DePelchin and Heckle laid the groundwork for an archival project on narrativizing illness. I will also outline how my curiosity regarding the fate of those families decimated by yellow fever prompted a second project on life after illness.
Feverish Epistles: The DePelchin/Heckle Archive

The DePelchin/Heckle letters are stored in two boxes in a climate-controlled section of Rice University’s Woodson Research Center. Misleadingly titled “Kezia Payne DePelchin Letters, 1878–1879,” the collection holds roughly 26 letters from Kezia DePelchin to her sister Sallie Payne, the former’s travel journal, and four letters from E. Kate Heckle to DePelchin. Unlike other epistolary collections in the Woodson, the DePelchin/Heckle letters appeared to have been packaged and organized by their author.

The correspondence is bound in chocolate brown leather casing and the words “The Epidemic of 1878 by Mrs. K DePelchin” are stamped in gold on the cover. A prefatory note written by DePelchin follows on the first page:

The Epidemic of 1878
By Mrs. K dePelchin

A Volunteer Nurse from Houston, Texas containing an account of her Experience. From August 27 until Nov. 18 her Journey through States Miss. Tenn., Ala. Also the Experience of Mrs. E. K. heckle, A Volunteer Nurse from the same place. In a series of letters from Ms. DeP. to a Sister in the Island of Madeira and from Mrs. Heckle to Ms. De Pelchin. They contain truthful pen pictures, a word painting of those awful times. In which a nation felt to the utmost limits the sorrow and affliction of a state.

10 Sallie Payne’s epistolary voice is notably absent from the archive, which contains none of her responses to DePelchin. There is scant information about DePelchin’s personal life and even less is known about Payne, who appeared to have never married given her sister addressed her by her maiden name. Both Payne and DePelchin were raised in part by their governess, Hannah Bainton, whom their father, Abraham Payne, married following the death of their mother Catherine Armstrong Payne. After Abraham Payne and two other of his children died in the 1839 Galveston Yellow Fever Epidemic (during which an eleven-year-old DePelchin was infected and gained immunity), Bainton took DePelchin, Payne, and any other surviving siblings to live in Houston. (Biographical sources on DePelchin fail to mention the total number of her [original and step] siblings; therefore, it is impossible to tell whether she and Sallie were the only surviving Payne children following the 1839 epidemic.) Payne’s movements after that point are unclear. (Handbook of Texas Online, ed. Diana J. Kleiner, s.v, “Kezia Payne DePelchin,” http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/DD/fdekt.html [accessed April 25, 2010].)

11 I am still in the process of confirming this assumption, which is based on the fact that DePelchin wrote the Preface and table of contents. As will be discussed in a later section, the inclusion of these and other paratextual elements lead me to believe DePelchin sought to establish herself as an authorial figure.

12 Although the prefatory note refers to DePelchin in the third person, I believe she herself wrote it given the handwriting matches that of her letters. Note also that I distinguish DePelchin’s “prefatory note” from the actual Preface written by Mollie E. Moore Davis.

13 DePelchin traveled through Alabama by train but only worked as a nurse in Tennessee and Mississippi.
The second page contains only a Dedication, also by DePelchin:

To the Memory of those
who lost their lives
in discharge of their duty
as Howards, Doctors or Nurses
in the Epidemic of 1878
This book is inscribed.

Kezia DePelchin

After the Dedication is a Preface by prominent Houston resident Mollie E. Moore Davis, who evidently took great pride in introducing the DePelchin/Heckle letters: “It is a sincere pleasure to the writer of this preface, together with the thousand warm hearts which went out to [DePelchin] in prayers and loving wishes in her heroic work, to bear testimony to her unswerving truth, her Christian fidelity, her modest and always unassuming worth.” Born in Talladega, Alabama in 1844, Davis worked as a poet and newspaper editor in Texas until 1879 (the date of the Preface), at which point she moved to New Orleans.\(^\text{14}\) Her connection to DePelchin, Heckle, and/or Payne is unclear; however, as I will discuss in a proceeding section, uncovering the relationship(s) between the four women might shed further light on how and why the letters came to exist as a coherent collection.

Following Davis’s preface is a section labeled the “Contents” in which DePelchin provides a chronological list of the letters as well as brief summaries:


Letter 3. Sept. 8. Memphis. Another patient. go to a back alley to a third. I rent a room…

With its 26 letter entries for DePelchin and two letter entries for Heckle, this table of contents quantitatively confirms that which the Preface suggests: the collection primarily features correspondence from DePelchin. The disproportionate number of DePelchin letters can in part be attributed to the former’s longer tenure as a volunteer nurse in the yellow fever epidemic. While Heckle served as a nurse just in Tennessee and only during September and October of 1878, DePelchin worked in both Tennessee and Mississippi from roughly September 1878 through early January 1879. Furthermore, whereas all but one of Heckle’s letters were composed retrospectively after she had arrived home in Houston, most of DePelchin’s correspondence was contemporaneous with the Epidemic. The following geographical timeline illustrates the location and relative duration of DePelchin’s nursing assignments as well as the spacing of her letters.

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15 The table of contents is deceptive to the extent that it has only two epistolary entries for Heckle even though she wrote four of the thirty-one letters contained in the collection. One explanation for this seeming oversight may be that DePelchin only listed the letters sent directly to Payne. Heckle’s four letters, which were originally sent to DePelchin, were passed on in two batches (the first containing 1 letter; the second containing 3 letters) in other letters from DePelchin to Payne.

16 Heckle wrote DePelchin one letter dated October 25th, 1878 from Memphis, TN. DePelchin’s first letter is dated August 28th, 1878 and the last letter is dated April 15th, 1879.
DePelchin Geographical Timeline

$L_x = \text{Letter Number}$

$L_1$: August 28th, 1878
Depart: Houston, TX
“Determined to go to nurse yellow fever
East of the Mississippi.”

$L_{14}$: October 14th, 1878
Depart: Memphis, TN
Arrives: Senatobia, MI

$L_{21}$: December 19th, 1878
Arrives: Memphis, TN

$L_{24}$: January 27th, 1878
End Narrative

Houston, Texas

Memphis, Tennessee

Senatobia, Mississippi

Sewanee, Tennessee

Memphis, Tennessee

Houston, Texas

$L_{13}$: November 23rd, 1878
Depart: Senatobia, MI
Arrives: Sewanee, TN

$L_{15}$: September 3rd, 1878
Arrives in Memphis, TN

$L_{25}$: December 28th, 1878
Returns: Houston, TX
When I first saw the letter boxes, I remember thinking their blue-gray color scheme was oddly appropriate, considering the documents contained therein were composed within a few decades of the American Civil War. My initial amusement soon gave way to disappointment when I discovered that I would be handling photocopies of the letters as the originals were far too delicate to be handled by (non-professional) archivists. An authentic archival experience, I initially thought, entailed gingerly turning pages and inhaling the occasional puff of noxious dust and spores from the decomposing text. In light of this requirement, I was further prepared to contract the sort of real archive febrile affliction described by Carolyn Steedman. Indeed, for me one major component of my early romance with archival research was the risk involved in retrieving and analyzing texts that other scholars sought to find … or hide. This strange fascination with the dangers of the archives might be called “Indiana Jones Syndrome,” the condition whereby an academic desires the stakes of scholarly exploration to be (her own) life and death.

But there would be no archival fever for me, at least not caused by the DePelchin/Heckle letters. I quickly realized not only that a sound body as well as a sound mind behooves productive research, but also, more importantly, that working with photocopies has its advantages, namely the ability to move more swiftly through the text with less fear of destroying that which you are trying to study. Another virtue of the letters (independent of their photocopied status) was the authors’ clear handwriting. Neither DePelchin nor Heckle employed the sort of loose, lofty scrawl common to many other nineteenth-century letter writers. DePelchin was particularly meticulous about her

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penmanship: she consistently differentiated her “T’s” from her “F’s”; crossed out mistakes without smudging or smearing the surrounding text; and evenly spaced her words.

Eventually, I transitioned to reading computer printouts of the photocopies, which 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 for some unknown reason 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: Heckle writes to DePelchin, DePelchin writes to Payne, I write to both, but in the absence of any written replies no one seems to be answering anyone else. What emerges then is a sort of epistolary round robin that leaves one guessing as to the responses of Heckle, Payne, and DePelchin. The DePelchin/Heckle archive can thus be dually characterized by a multiplicity of voices as well as silences.
Archival Metastasis: Beyond the DePelchin/Heckle Letters

Carolyn Steedman 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.18 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’s and Heckle’s extensive descriptions, I was also suspicious and curious as to what might have escaped their fastidious record. These conflicting impulses thus inspired two archival projects, “Narrativizing Disease” and “The Legacy of Infection,” which are respectively based on those stories offered by and omitted from the DePelchin/Heckle letters.

Archival Project #1: Narrativizing Disease

This first archival project, “Narrativizing Disease,” is defined more by archival presence than absence in that it primarily uses the letters of DePelchin and Heckle to answer the following questions:

- Why write home about illness?
- How did Heckle and DePelchin (consciously or unconsciously) construct themselves as authors/authorial figures?
- How do epistolary descriptions of infectious disease function differently from other texts that deal with the same topic (e.g. medical case histories, diary entries, oral narratives, nursing manuals)?

My preliminary analysis of the letters has revealed various potential answers for the first question regarding DePelchin and Heckle’s respective motivations for recording their yellow fever experiences. Their particular emphasis on the disease’s ability to kill even the healthiest (seeming) individuals within a few days suggests an impulse to convey the

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severity of the Epidemic to those geographically removed from it. Furthermore, the economic, ethnic, racial, and religious diversity in the women’s catalog of yellow fever victims also implicitly conveys the pervasiveness of the disease, thereby lending credence to its “epidemic” status.¹⁹

DePelchin and Heckle’s inclusion of various anecdotes regarding the Epidemic’s impact on communication and transportation also works to demonstrate how yellow fever adversely affected multiple aspects of life in Mississippi River Valley. DePelchin, for example, noted the delay in mail service:

I received a letter from New York a fortnight ago, the writer mentioned having sent me some Houston papers. I went to the Office for them, The Post Office is only open two or three hours a day; and no letter carriers are out yet, all that sort of thing is stopped by the fever…²⁰

By coupling such accounts of the Epidemic’s deleterious mundane effects with descriptions of the horrific physical manifestations of yellow fever, DePelchin established the region as in dire need of assistance. She was, however, careful to insist that only qualified medical personnel (that is to say, those who were trained, and preferably, immune to yellow fever) should make the trip to Mississippi River Valley. In her second letter, she described encountering well-meaning but misguided volunteers on the train ride from Houston to Memphis:

Several of the young men from Little Rock finding we were nurses came and talked with us. I implored them to return. no, they would not hear of such a thing. I was in hopes that even at the last they would not be allowed to enter Memphis. The impulse is noble, to come to help suffering humanity. but it is like someone who cannot swim plunging into a

¹⁹ Although the majority of DePelchin and Heckle’s patients were white, middle to upper class, and Christian, both women at various points (officially and unofficially) nursed minorities. DePelchin and Heckle each cared for a Jewish patient family (see the Dickeys in DePelchin, 10.27.1878, Senatobia, MS and the Kaufmanns in Heckle 3.28.1879, Houston, TX). DePelchin also described the spread of yellow fever in the black community, noting “when the colored people were taken sick it appeared more like a common chill: indeed, it is hardly ever so bad with negroes” (DePelchin, 10.8.1878, Memphis, TN).
²⁰ DePelchin, 10.9.1878, Memphis, TN.
foaming torrent to save a Drowning man. two who can swim must then jump in to try to save them, and the chances are against them…

Through this simile DePelchin validated the presence of outside professionals by differentiating their work from that attempted by other “amateur” care-givers, and, by extension, justified her own decision to enter the front lines of the Epidemic to any doubting loved ones perhaps reading over the shoulders of Sallie Payne.

My “front lines” metaphor in the preceding sentence is intended to reflect the language of DePelchin and Heckle, who, in the process of expounding on their motivations for volunteering, also frequently deployed military rhetoric. Less than one month into her tour, DePelchin, for example, wrote to her sister:

> Why is it that [the nurses] ... When it is almost certain death? Some call it rash but who censures him or calls him rash who volunteers to go upon the battlefield. Then the drum beats, recruits are called for. Here are no gilded trappings. no martial music to stir the blood. A true heart felt sympathy has brought them: to contend on this battlefield; For it is not a battle. the enemy is silent but strong, and subtile [sic], his ensign is the black flag and he gives no quarter.

The high frequency of this and other war metaphors in the letters suggests to me that DePelchin and Heckle may have sought to posit the 1878 Yellow Fever Epidemic as a new sort of battle, a purer, nobler conflict devoid of “gilded trappings,” “martial music,” and other base ostentation. DePelchin here implied that those who risked their lives in the fight against yellow fever were not self-serving soldiers attracted to the pomp and circumstance of war but rather altruistic volunteers propelled only by “true heart felt sympathy.”

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21 DePelchin, 9.3.1878, Memphis, TN.
22 DePelchin does not explicitly refer to any misgivings on the part of Sallie Payne regarding her decision to nurse in the Epidemic but nevertheless may have been implicitly addressing her sister when she wrote: “My friends are divided in their opinions about my going…” (DePelchin, 8.28.10, Houston, TX).
23 DePelchin, 9.18.1878, Memphis, TN.
In her March 31st 1878 letter, Heckle too compared nurses to soldiers as she explained why she left an ailing DePelchin to recover by herself: “Had you had yellow fever I would not have left you, but it was like war time we were like minute men had to obey the call.”24 By analogizing the Epidemic to “war time” and (female) nurses to “minute men,” Heckle not only subtly argued that the conflict of humans versus disease should be considered as urgent and serious as that of humans versus humans, but also specifically made the case for the service of female volunteers. DePelchin appeared to take this argument one step further in her October 14th, 1878 letter describing the fear inspired by yellow fever:

The jailer and his family are gone—the court House is deserted. Judge and jury have fled. Men who have faced the common fire, run from this silent enemy; well it makes me think of Elijah. he braved the King, the priests of Baal, but ran from a woman.25

In claiming that “men who have faced the common fire, run from this silent enemy,” DePelchin implied yellow fever was an uncommon enemy that consequently gave rise to an uncommon fight. Furthermore, her comparison of men who flee from “this silent enemy” to Elijah who “ran from a woman” implicitly feminizes the disease as well as suggests male volunteers as such will find themselves ill-equipped to fight it. It thus seems in this letter that DePelchin was quietly asserting that female volunteers were the best match for the extraordinary female foe that was yellow fever.

Such language in this and other epistolary passages has led me to wonder if DePelchin and Heckle were (intentionally or unintentionally) positing the 1878 Yellow Fever Epidemic as a sort of “women’s war,” a special kind of conflict that could only be

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24 Heckle, 3.31.1879, Houston, TX. This analogy is then repeated in the Preface by Moore Davis: “The writer of the following letters, a lady for many years a resident of Houston and well known in its social circles, at the first cry for help from the cities afflicted by the Yellow Fever left home and friends to answer that call.”

25 DePelchin, 10.14.1878, Senatobia, MS.
won by female soldiers. If this is the case, the stakes of the Epidemic become far more complicated (and interesting). Fighting yellow fever was then not simply about maintaining the health of the American population but about affirming women’s role in protecting the nation from a new type of enemy, the foreign contagion. And, given the temporal and geographical proximity of the Civil War battles to the Mississippi Valley Yellow Fever Epidemic, any categorization of the latter on the part of Heckle and DePelchin as a “women’s war” may be part of larger American female reaction as to how the former was memorialized and historicized as a ‘male’ conflict.

The accounts of DePelchin and Heckle have also led me to hypothesize that for them letter-writing functioned as a type of psychological coping mechanism. Through epistolary descriptions both women may have been able to “write off” the horrors of the Epidemic, to recover from its traumas and go on with their nursing work. However, the fact DePelchin chose to chronicle the majority of her experiences as they occurred while Heckle wrote after the fact leads me to consider the letters as exemplar of what I consider to be two different genres of trauma writing. The first, which I call the acute genre, describes writing that occurs immediately or very soon after the event, usually in response to its initial physical and emotional effects, whereas the second or latent genre, describes writing that emerges when composition is significantly postponed.

Trauma theorist Marian MacCurdy argues that “the actual process of constructing stories, is instrumental in the therapeutic effects of writing,” and that “writing about trauma removes the experience from the inarticulate parts of the brain and puts it in contact with the more cognitive areas, allowing the impression of control over the trauma, even if that control is only linguistic.” Writing about yellow fever may have also facilitated DePelchin and Heckle’s resistance to the physical as well as emotional ills of the Epidemic, for, as MacCurdy further outlines, researchers like James Pennebaker have demonstrated that writing about trauma confers certain health benefits like heightened immune response. (The Mind’s Eye: Image and Memory in Writing About Trauma. [University of Massachusetts Press, 2007], pp. 40–5.)
Heckle’s reasons for writing in the latent genre to DePelchin seem fairly straightforward. In her March 28th, 1878 letter, Heckle implied DePelchin had recently and explicitly requested that Heckle send her experiences. As these epistolary accounts are as precise and detailed as those of DePelchin, I believe it is possible if not probable that Heckle had written regularly and consistently to other friends and family during the Epidemic (that is to say, in the acute genre) and subsequently drew from this correspondence to compose her letters to DePelchin. As for DePelchin, nothing in the letters indicates exactly why she adopted the acute genre, though I suspect her authorial fastidiousness prompted her to record her experiences in a timely fashion lest she forget any details. It is also possible that she believed writing about the Epidemic after returning home would require in a way reliving it, and thus, to ensure her life after illness was relatively free even from textual traces of yellow fever, she made the bulk of her epistolary accounts contemporaneous with her experiences. In this way, DePelchin sought to minimize or at least control the legacy of infection in her own life.

While both women may have used writing to cope with the trauma of yellow fever, I do not, however, believe their epistolary accounts were purely a means of recovering from the Epidemic. The lurid descriptions of bodily emissions, the painstakingly transcribed deathbed speeches, and the general excess of grotesque details contained within the letters have made me wonder if DePelchin and Heckle chose to write home about the Epidemic in part to provide vicarious entertainment. When she sent Heckle’s accounts to Payne in late April of 1879, DePelchin provided this preface: “I send you Mrs. Heckle’s letters to me. Truth is stranger than fiction. therefore the most

27 “You ask me for my experience. I will try and oblige you for I never can forget it” (Heckle, 3.28.1879, Houston).
A thrilling romance could not compare with many scenes in the epidemic."\(^{28}\) Four months after returning to Texas, DePelchin appeared comfortable proffering Heckle’s experiences as an alternative to the “most thrilling romance” rather than as a somber record of a national health crisis. Perhaps her geographical and temporal displacement from the Epidemic (which had ended one month prior) enabled DePelchin to see that letters about illness had diverting as well aesthetic value.

Regardless of the specifics of DePelchin and Heckle’s epistolary agendas, both women became authors through their published accounts of illness. This achievement presumably meant more to DePelchin, who explicitly announced her authorial aspirations: “My adventures, escapes, mishaps, good luck on the way would of themselves make a respectable story; if I was only young, goodlooking and romantic, but I am not.”\(^{29}\) Despite its lament regarding her deficiencies in youth and beauty, this proclamation nevertheless suggests to me that at least DePelchin at various moments consciously sought to narrativize, rather than simply record, her experiences with yellow fever.

Answers to my second question regarding how and when she and Heckle established themselves artistic and/or authorial figures rather than just ‘regular’ letter-writers may be found by analyzing the women’s deployment of literary devices such as extended metaphors, classical allusions, analogies, and personification, as well as the inclusion of certain paratextual elements (namely, the Preface, dedication, and letter inventory that serves as a table of contents). I am especially intrigued by DePelchin’s claim in the prefatory note that the letters “contain truthful pen pictures, a word painting

\(^{28}\) DePelchin, 4.15.1879, Houston, TX.
\(^{29}\) DePelchin, 11.23.1878, Sewanee, TN.
of those awful times, in which a nation felt to the utmost limits the sorrow and affliction of a state.” The metaphors she invokes (“truthful pictures” and “word painting”) suggests she meant to mix subjective artistry with objective empiricism to describe the Epidemic.

In offering “truthful pictures” rather than “veracious photographs,” was DePelchin making a subtle case for syntactically lavish, personalized accounts as opposed to unadorned stoic reporting? If yes, did that lead her to novelize her and Heckle’s letters: to inventory, dedicate, and bind them into a coherent book? And how and why did that text become part of a formal archive?

To answer these queries I must investigate how the letters moved from the private hands of Sallie Payne to the public ones of Charles McBrayer, who donated the collection to Rice University in 1973. At the time, McBrayer was head of the DePelchin Children’s Center, a social services organization that grew out of a charitable institution originally called the “Faith Home,” which DePelchin started in 1892 for Houston’s unwanted and abandoned children. How and why DePelchin’s personal letters were bequeathed to the Center remains a mystery. DePelchin’s niece, Martha Payne, took over the Faith Home following DePelchin’s death and therefore may have passed on her aunt’s letters to the Center. Staff at the Woodson Archive has thus far been unable to provide me with more details and I am hoping an in-person visit to the Center may yield some answers since my emails to their employees remain unanswered. In my quest to trace the DePelchin letters, I also to plan to visit Dolph Briscoe Center for American History at University of Texas

30 The parentage of Martha Payne is uncertain. All sources suggest DePelchin had only one sibling, an unmarried sister named Sallie Payne. If Sallie did, in fact, marry and have a daughter, then presumably that daughter would have taken her father’s surname, not Payne; if, however, Sallie had a daughter out of wedlock, it is possible that child adopted her mother’s maiden name. Perhaps also DePelchin had a brother (or stepbrother) who has for one reason or another been omitted from the historical record; his child could be Martha Payne. (Handbook of Texas Online, ed. Diana J. Kleiner, s.v, “Kezia Payne DePelchin,” http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/DD/fdekt.html [accessed April 25, 2010]).
at Austin, which houses the papers of Mollie E. Moore Davis (author of the 1879 Preface). She may have documented how the letters came to be published as well as her involvement in that process.

The third and final question addressed by this first archival project, that is, how epistolary descriptions of disease function differently from other texts, requires analyzing the DePelchin/Heckle letters alongside other contemporaneous nursing and disease narratives, such as J.M. Keating’s *The Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1878, in Memphis, Tenn.* (1879) and Peter Murtough’s *Condensed History of the Great Yellow Fever Epidemic* (1879). I will also examine Dr. John Dromgole’s *Yellow Fever Heroes, Honors, and Horrors of 1878* (1879), which DePelchin herself mentions having read in her letter dated March 1st, 1879. In order to determine how the DePelchin/Heckle letters compare to other epistolary accounts of yellow fever, I will look at Florence Nightingale’s *Letters from the Crimea: 1854–1856*; the letters of E.B. Jennings to uncle Dr. Roscoe Jennings, which describe the 1878 epidemic in New Orleans; and the letters of F.R. McCoy (1844–1867), which concern, among other things, the Galveston yellow fever epidemic. These latter two collections of correspondence are respectively located at the Louisiana State Historical Association and Rosenberg Library at the Galveston and Texas History Center.

Because “Narrativizing Illness” relies most heavily on texts I have already examined (the DePelchin/Heckle letters) and those I know to exist (other nursing/illness narratives), I am more confident about its potential to yield publishable scholarship. However, I am cognizant that the significant “archival presence” associated with this project, that is to say, the availability of a number of relevant materials, may prove to be an embarrassment of riches. The biggest challenge in formulating a focused argument
may be determining how and where the DePelchin/Heckle letters intervene in the field(s) of illness narratives.

Archival Project #2: The Legacy of Infection

Unlike “Narrativizing Disease,” this second project primarily addresses that which is not in the archive, specifically accounts of life after illness. I aim to examine 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. As mentioned previously, Heckle, and DePelchin, in particular, sought to provide meticulous accounts of their nursing experiences, and to that end, included many salient details about how patients and families operated during the Epidemic. The task of this project is therefore not so much learning about the state of these households in the midst of illness, but extending and/or resolving those narratives of them begun by DePelchin and Heckle. Because I hypothesize that the legacy of yellow fever is stronger and more complex in households that lost multiple members to the disease, I will focus on tracing the movements of larger patient families after DePelchin and Heckle exited from their lives. The Calhouns of Memphis, Tennessee; the Dickeys of Senatobia, Mississippi; and the Tomenys of Bartlett, Tennessee stand out from other households described in the letters, not only because their primary familial configurations were seriously affected by yellow fever but also because DePelchin/Heckle seemed particularly emotionally invested in their well-being. Furthermore, given that all three families were able to employ domestic servants as well as doctors and nurses, I assume they were financially secure and perhaps of some prominence in the community. The Calhouns, Dickeys, and Tomenys are therefore also good subjects for this study as their
higher class and social status makes it more likely that local and state archives would hold some records of their lives after the Epidemic.

DePelchin encountered the Calhouns at the beginning of the Memphis epidemic, caring for twenty-two-year-old Mrs. Calhoun while her husband lay sick in a hospital (also with yellow fever). Following the death of Mr. and Mrs. Calhoun, their young son Arthur became an orphan, and DePelchin arranged for him to be left in the care of a family friend, Mrs. Phipps. A few weeks later, she attempted unsuccessfully to see him:

I was up today: and went to see Arthur. how disappointed I am, the lady got tired of keeping him, and took him out the Leath orphan asylum. there are so many children sick there; I cannot however reproach myself, because I have had no time to see after him. and I said I would pay his board if necessary. no one came to me so I did not know; I will write to his grandmother as soon as letters will go through…

No indication is given as to whether Arthur was eventually given over to his grandmother. In subsequent correspondence, DePelchin continued to express concern for Arthur, mentioning in a December 19th, 1878 letter that she wanted to visit him in the asylum. Upon returning home to Houston, DePelchin bequeathed $10 to Arthur out of the $55.50 in compensatory donations she received from other nurses and doctors.

DePelchin also became attached to the Dickeys, a Jewish family that lived just outside Senatobia, Mississippi. Initially summoned to care for twenty-four-year-old Dabney Dickey, DePelchin eventually also nursed his seventeen-year-old sister Mattie, their sixty-year-old father Mr. Dickey, and his wife Mrs. Dickey. All but Mrs. Dickey died from yellow fever within a few days. Despite initial personality conflicts with Mrs. Dickey, DePelchin stayed with her for several weeks following the deaths of her husband and children to cook and fumigate the house. On her last day, DePelchin noted, “Mrs. Dickey took some willow twigs, and made me a little basket to remember her by; as if I

31 DePelchin, 10.9.1878, Memphis, TN.
could ever forget her.”32 Since illness had destroyed Mrs. Dickey’s entire immediate family, DePelchin was especially anxious to arrange for her accommodation with extended family and took some comfort when Mrs. Dickey went to go live with her sister and brother-in-law in Colliersville.

Heckle’s experience with the Tomenys of Bartlett, Tennessee similarly testifies to the ability of yellow fever to swiftly decimate a large family. When Heckle arrived at the Tomeny residence (“a beautiful place on Bass Avenue”), Mrs. Tomeny’s mother and her youngest son Hale (11 years old) had already died from the fever, with Hale passing just one night prior. Three other children, Helen (17 years old), Blanche (13 years old), and Willie (15 years old) were also sick. Helen died within forty-eight hours of Heckle’s arrival and shortly thereafter Mr. Tomeny and Mrs. Tomeny also fell ill and died. Before leaving to go live with their uncle Mr. Gaither, the remaining children Blanche and Willie exchanged tearful goodbyes with Heckle.

DePelchin and Heckle wondered as to the ultimate fate of these and other patient families but were often left without answers due to the transient nature of their profession and the relative unavailability of reliable records and contact information. My project “The Legacy of Infection” attempts to resolve Heckle and DePelchin’s questions regarding life after illness and in this way functions similarly to a medical follow-up visit. However, since the Calhouns, Dickeys, and Tomenys are not here to tell me of their post-infection lives, I have to rely on the material and textual traces, if any, they left behind. To that end, I must leave the archive at Rice University and partially retrace the nursing journeys of DePelchin and Heckle.

32 DePelchin, 11.6.1878, Senatobia, MS.
I will begin, as DePelchin did, in Memphis, Tennessee, where I will go to the Porter-Leath Children’s Center (formerly the Leath Orphanage and Asylum) in the hopes of obtaining more details about Arthur Calhoun. I will then visit the Tennessee State Library and Archives to examine any existing birth, death, and property records concerning the Calhoun and Tomeny families. The next stop on my archival journey will be the Bartlett Historical Society, which claims to hold files on Bartlett residents starting in the 1840s. I will also inquire at the BHS about any remaining historic houses in town and if necessary, visit the Tomenys’ original home on Bass Avenue.

From Bartlett, Tennessee, I will travel to Senatobia, Mississippi, where I will first visit the Tate County Genealogical and Historical Society to see what records exist about the Dickeys. The Coldwater Library, located five miles north, might also prove helpful as it contains copies of family tree charts of those living in Tate County from 1883 to 1900. From Senatobia I will travel to Jackson to do research in the Mississippi Department of Archives and History. A general search of the words “yellow fever” in their voluminous collection yields over eighty results, several of which might offer additional information about the Dickey family. The following texts are of particular interest: Harris Allen Gant’s *Yellow fever in Mississippi, 1878–1905: Personal recollections, experiences, reminiscences, autobiography and history* (1937) and John MacLeod Keating’s *A history of the yellow fever: the yellow fever epidemic of 1878, in Memphis, Tenn., embracing a*

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33 Sarah Leath founded the Leath Orphanage and Asylum in 1850 to provide food, clothing, and shelter for Memphis widows and their children. Today, Porter-Leath runs a variety of social programs for over 10,000 at-risk children. Since their website makes no mention of an organizational archive, I emailed Director of Development Michael Warr to inquire about the presence of any historical records. He has referred me to Nicole Vernon, who is currently searching their records (which, according to Warr, are sporadic) for any relating to Arthur Calhoun.

34 In the spirit of faithful historical re-enactment, I also may visit, as DePelchin did, the monument to yellow fever victim Mattie Stephanson located in Memphis’s Elwood Cemetery.

35 As a preliminary measure, I have already emailed Suzanne Coleman, the President of the Bartlett Historical Society.
complete list of the dead (1879). Finally, because the Dickeys were among a handful of Jewish families living in Tate County in the late nineteenth century, I will also journey to Cincinnati, Ohio to visit the Jacob Rader Marcus Center at the American Jewish Archives, which provides various resources for conducting genealogical research on America’s early Jewish families and thus may help me track the movements of the surviving Dickeys after the Epidemic.

The speculative tone of the aforementioned follow-up plans testifies to the uncertain viability of this second archival project. I have no assurance that records of the Calhoun, Tomeny, or Dickey families exist, and furthermore, that such records, if present, address in any detail their lives after yellow fever. In an ideal archive, I would find a diary or letters written by, for example, Mrs. Dickey, that outline at length (and in gloriously clear handwriting!) her reactions to the Epidemic: perhaps how losing all her children caused her to question her maternal identity, or how becoming a widow forced her to evaluate her own capacity for self-employment. But searching for such a dream document seems a bit like chasing a ghost in that one’s enthusiasm for something to exist will not necessarily induce its presence. The best I can do is poke around the former haunting grounds of the Calhouns, Dickeys, and Tomenys and hope for something to show up. In the course of searching state and local archives, I can realistically expect to find less overtly personal, but nevertheless useful, records such as marriage/death/birth certificates, bills of sale, licenses, or deed transfers. Although such documents may hold few explicit clues as to the interiorities of the Calhoun, Dickey, and Tomeny survivors, they might still allow me to speculate more responsibly about the nature of their lives after the Epidemic. A certificate showing the remarriage of the (former) Mrs. Dickey, for
example, suggests a desire to build a new existence; likewise, any additional facts about her new husband provided by this form (e.g., age: younger or older?; religion: Jewish like her or Christian?) may enable further hypotheses regarding the shape of her new life. Even simply knowing the name of her new spouse may advance my investigation by leading me to a whole new branch of materials.
Post-Archival Journeys

As outlined in the preceding section, my two potential archival projects, “Narrativizing Illness” and “The Legacy of Infection” require time spent at various locations outside the Woodson Archive. The flow chart below provides a rough itinerary:

What I find on my post-archival journey will determine whether either of my two proposed archival projects evolves into meaningful, coherent scholarship. I have already predicted the academic prospects of “The Legacy of Infection” to be more precarious than those of “Narrativizing Disease,” but I am still hopeful the former project may give rise to something more polished and publishable. This “something” may not necessarily take the form of a scholarly article; among the possibilities I have considered include a biography, a non-fiction travel narrative, or even a collection of ghost stories. As
DePelchin and Heckle did not confine themselves to one particular thematic genre in the course of their epistolary accounts nor so will I.