Josephine Niggli’s Letter to Family - June, 20th 1935

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INTRODUCTION

The following edition is based on a letter written by playwright, novelist, and poet Josefina Niggli, addressed to her family on June 20th, 1935. The letter itself, written home to her family, recounts Niggli’s experiences during auditions, a musical performance, and a school dance while at UNC Chapel Hill. Born Josephine Maria Niggli, it is worth noting that the spelling of Ms. Niggli’s first name changed throughout her life. Although she does not use her own name when signing this letter in particular, other letters written during this time period (located in the Hunter Library Special Collections) show she was still using the name Josephine while studying at Chapel Hill. This edition is titled using this spelling in order to maintain historical accuracy. Some of Niggli’s early works are published under the name Josephina and her later works use the name Josefina; additionally her death certificate lists her as Josefina Niggli. This name change signifies a move toward a more traditionally Spanish spelling, which is no surprise as Niggli always felt a strong connection to her Mexican birthplace as evidenced in her life and writing.

Born in Monterrey, Mexico in 1910 to a Texan father and a Virginian mother, Niggli nonetheless felt more drawn to the culture of Mexico than that of the United States. From a young age she was consistently encouraged by both family and mentors to pursue writing, for which she clearly had great passion and skill. After receiving her B.A. in 1931 she studied playwriting under the director of the San Antonio Little Theatre. She went on to study, write, and earn her M.A. at UNC Chapel Hill beginning in 1935 (during which time she penned this letter). From this period onward she wrote a multitude of well-received plays and novels centering on Mexican heritage and tradition. Her novels include Mexican Village, Step Down, Elder Brother, and A Miracle for Mexico and her plays include, but are not limited to, Tooth or Shave, Sunday Costs Five Pesos, and Soldadera. After a stint in Hollywood working as a screenwriter, she came to Western Carolina University to teach English and Theater from 1956-1975. Niggli died on December 17th, 1983 in Cullowhee, NC.

(An annotated bibliography for the sources of the above information, as well as for all information found for textual notes can be found after the transcription.)
EDITOR’S NOTE
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The following edition is formatted to simulate how it would appear if it were published in a print format. Its presentation combines aspects of a facsimile and a diplomatic edition. Digital scans of the original letters are placed directly next to transcribed versions. The edition is purposely structured in landscape orientation in order to fit these documents side-by-side and large enough for easy comparison. The line breaks in the transcriptions align with the end of the page and transition to the next line in Niggli’s original letter. This was done to maintain the format and therefore to recreate the reading experience of the manuscript. Authenticity was the goal of many editing choices, including keeping any spelling, grammar, or punctuation errors in tact. Additionally, all writing idiosyncrasies were maintained. For example, Niggli usually signifies the word “and” with an ampersand looking character, therefore “and” is represented in the transcription with “&.” However, occasionally Niggli opts to spell the word out and in these cases the word is transcribed as “and.”

Other represented peculiarities include underlining titles or plays and movies, but not always. For instance, the second time David Copperfield is mentioned it is capitalized, but not underlined. A final note on idiosyncrasies is her treatment of times. Sometimes they represented purely with numbers, others they are follow by the word “o’clock,” and once both methods are used. These writing quirks are all purposely preserved in this edition. Also to maintain accuracy, some words are tabbed over or right justified to appear where they do on the page in the original letter. Any notations included in the transcription that do not appear in the original letter are contained in brackets and italicized. This occurs minimally, to denote words that were either crossed out or indecipherable due to wear/damage of the document itself.

Niggli’s handwriting is a neat cursive that separates between each word. Some of her writing conventions include crossing ts to the right of the ascender, long run on sentences when she is caught up in the movement of the narrative, and occasional dashes after dates, page numbers, etc. Her writing utensil appears to be a black fountain pen, which is smeared minimally on a few pages. The letter itself is in fairly good condition, written on two pieces of 11x7 stationary. The paper was folded in half to create a booklet style presentation creating smaller 7x5 ½ pages. Her method for writing on these is quite unconventional. She began by writing on what presents as the
cover page of this mini booklet, followed by the page to the right when the booklet was opened. After that she back tracked and wrote on the page to the left, or what appears to be the inside front cover and then finished by writing on the back of the booklet. This same process was repeated for the second piece of paper, which was then slid inside the first booklet. Although two of the pages are hand numbered, only the number 2 is chronologically correct; what Niggli numbers page 4 is actually page 5 when the narrative is followed. There is one final crease horizontally across all pages, which presumably was made in order to fit the letter into an envelope. The following edition represents each page as a separate scan to prevent confusion due to the disjointed format of the original document.

The only page with substantial damage is the last one. There are a few small holes at the center crease as well as on the top half of the document. A bit of staining on the bottom half of the letter is evident, but does not obstruct the writing. Additionally, it appears as if something adhesive was applied and then removed, taking the top layer of parts of the page with it. Due to this, some of the words are obscured and one in particular is entirely indecipherable. This has been noted using brackets as mentioned above. Footnotes were used instead of endnotes to more easily access supplementary information while reading. As far as information provided in footnotes is concerned, due diligence was applied to make notations for all unexplained people, places, and theater references. Spanish words are also defined to aid with comprehension. Unfortunately, no additional information could be found for many of the people mentioned in passing. As stated in the notes, the majority of them are presumably fellow UNC Chapel Hill students, but this could not be confirmed.

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Special thanks to the staff of WCU’s Special Collections for providing scans of the original letters and to WCU Reference Librarians for assistance with research questions. Thanks as well to Heidi Buchanan, Research & Instruction Librarian/Associate Professor; Paromita Biswas, Metadata Librarian/Head of Cataloging; and George Frizzell, Special Collections Librarian for information regarding the history of changes in spelling for Niggli’s first name.
Thursday-

Dear family-

I've got so much to tell you that I hardly know where to begin so I will begin at the beginning. Yesterday morning I made a straight line for the theatre to find out that I and a couple of other girls were retained for the first tryout of Iphigenia\(^1\) to attend the second. Of course I was thrilled to death. Afterwards I saw Darius Jackson\(^2\) & she said that Harry\(^3\) said (he's the director & her brother in law) that he much preferred my reading but that I was not tall enough, so my heart went back into my shoes again.

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\(^1\) Iphigenia is the shorted title referring to the play *Iphigenia among the Taurians*, written by Euripides around 414 B.C. In this tragedy, Iphigenia, the daughter of Agamemnon, opens by telling of her narrow escape from sacrificial death by her father. The goddess Artemis replaces her with a deer on the altar and sends her to the distant land of Taurus where she is made priestess. Soon after this she is reunited with her long lost brother Orestes who she almost sacrifices after he is caught attempting to steal a sacred statue. After learning of each other’s true identities, the siblings plan to escape together and succeed thanks to the assistance of the goddess Athena.

\(^2\) This is presumably a fellow UNC Chapel Hill student and classmate, but no corroboration could be found.

\(^3\) Despite the amount of information provided about Harry by Niggli, neither a last name nor verification of him being a professor at UNC Chapel Hill could be located after searching a variety of sources including census records, school yearbooks, and newspapers.
At noon I saw him, and he said “Come to tryouts at seven-thirty.” “But I’ve got to sing,” I wailed. “That’s all right, I’ll let you go in time. By the way Darius said you wanted to see The Scarlet Pimpernel. We’re not doing much in class. Go see it.” I could have fallen on his neck, because the movie only shows at 1:30 in the afternoon, and from 6:30 on in the evening. So I got to see my beloved Leslie Howard. I rehearsed at 5:00 with Francis Hülme, and then I came home, bathed & dressed, & went back to the theatre. Now

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4 *The Scarlet Pimpernel* is a 1934 film directed by Harold Young. Set during the French Reign of Terror, the film follows Sir Percy Blakeney, an aristocrat who is also secretly a part of the underground effort to rescue French nobles from the guillotine. The film is an adaption of the play and book both written by Baroness Emmuska Orczy in 1903 and 1905 respectively.

5 Leslie Howard is the actor who plays, Sir Percy Blakeney, the main character in the *Scarlet Pimpernel* (see above).

6 The Francis Hülme referred to in the letter is likely previous Western North Carolina native Francis Pledger Hulme (1909-1986). During his life Hulme published three books of poetry and worked as a professor at New Asia College, Hong Kong; University of York, England; and Warren Wilson College, Asheville.
comes the lucky part: the man who speaks with Athena\(^7\), & the only one who speaks with her, is the King of Thoas\(^8\) played by a man with a voice between a clap of thunder & the crack of doom, and the two active contestants for the role had high soprano voices, so that when he finished speaking they couldn’t be heard at all! Of course my old fog-horn swarmed out as usual so that it sounded like we were having a hog-calling contest. Harry said I should go and that I would hear the final result tomorrow (this morning). Well, I went from there.

\(^7\) Here Niggli is referencing the role of Athena from *Iphigenia among the Taurians* (see footnote 1), for which she mentions auditioning and getting a second call back earlier in the letter.

\(^8\) King Thoas, king of Taurius, is a character from *Iphigenia among the Taurians* (see footnote 1) who Iphigenia tricks in order to escape with her brother.
to Graham Memorial\(^9\) (it looks like Mount Vernon\(^10\) only it's red) and I wore my red chiffon with the black lace cape, which made quite a hit. Some little boy from New York attached himself to me, I think his name was Richard Selfridge, but I'm not sure. Then I dressed up in my rebozo\(^11\) & sang “Así es el Mundo,” “La Borrachita,” and “Patito, Patito.”\(^12\) They told me afterwards that they wanted me to come back for another one, but I simply dived out the door. People seemed to like it, but it sounded terrible to me, and was I glad when it was over. When I

\(^9\) This is a building on the campus of UNC Chapel Hill that opened in 1931 as the school’s first Student Union. It has since been renovated to house the James M. Johnston Center for Undergraduate Excellence (JCUE).

\(^10\) This is likely a reference to George Washington’s plantation home and burial place located in Fairfax County, Virginia (see appendix for photographic comparison of the two buildings).

\(^11\) A shawl or long scarf covering the head and shoulders, traditionally worn by Mexican women.

\(^12\) “La Borrachita” is a Spanish song originally written by Mexican composer Ignacio Fernández Esperón (also known as Tata Nacho). The other two songs mentioned are also Spanish songs, however research did not turn up any definitive answers as to the original artists.
came out decently dressed.
Infant Richard asked me if I wanted to go up and dance. Of course I wanted to go, but I didn't know any boys, so I didn't think it would be such a success. Still, I wanted to go & there was Richard, and he didn't look like much, still he was of the male sex so I said O.K.

Of course he turned out to be one of those dancers that loves to do beautiful flips (long & swooping) which is just my meat, so we swooped & halfway down the room Frances cut in because he wanted to swoop, and anyway he liked the red dress. We hadn't reached the

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13 No information could be found for this name in yearbooks or other school records, but he was likely a fellow UNC Chapel Hill student.

14 Again, no information found, see above note.
corner until a voice said
“Con permiso”\textsuperscript{15} and it was a
Cuban boy who has been trying
to meet me since I arrived.
We shrieked Spanish at
each other & did a danzon,\textsuperscript{16}
so I really felt as though
I were back in Monterey.\textsuperscript{17}
Then somebody else cut in,
and by the time the evening
was over I danced with the
entire map of North Carolina
and part of Tennessee. I had
the grandest time! Along about
eleven the Cuban Miguel
brought up a boy named
Fred Aldred,\textsuperscript{19} and he asked if
I would like some punch. By

\textsuperscript{15} Spanish for “Excuse me.”
\textsuperscript{16} Danzón (spelled with an accent mark, but Niggli does not use one in her letter) is the official musical genre and dance of Cuba.
\textsuperscript{17} As mentioned in the introduction, Monterey, Mexico was Niggli’s birthplace. Although she was sent away from Mexico at the age of three due to the Mexican Revolution, she spent much of her childhood traveling back and forth between Monterey and her new home in San Antonio, Texas.
\textsuperscript{18} See footnote 13.
\textsuperscript{19} See footnote 13.
that time I was ready to drop as I had been dancing steadily for over an hour and a half without once sitting down, so [crossed out word] we went down, and he asked if he might take me home, and I said yes, so I didn’t get to bed until one o’clock, & that bed felt grand to me. He asked me for a date today, but I said no, as I wanted to see – yes, you’ve guessed it – David Copperfield so we’re going walking Saturday afternoon.

This morning I was up at my usual time: 7:00 o’clock, I don’t have a class until ten, but that way I can

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20 David Copperfield is a 1935 film that follows the tumultuous life of the title character from the death of his mother and abuse suffered from his stepfather as a child, to the refuge he finds living with his kind Aunt Betsy, and finally to the complicated love he finds as an adult. It is based on the Charles Dickens novel, The Personal History, Adventures, Experience, & Observation of David Copperfield the Younger of Blunderstone Rookery (Which He Never Meant to Publish any Account), originally published in 1850.
get in an hour’s library work before class. I have a permanent desk in the library which makes it very nice.

Then I went to the theatre, & my fog-horn had won the [illegible]. I am now a goddess, if you please. I went to see David Copperfield this afternoon, & when I came out I couldn’t realize that I was in Chapel Hill. This evening I went to rehearsal, and now I am going to bed, and so 
Goodnight from Pallas Athena.21

(Between the hours of 7:30 & 8:00 P.M. only) Thanks for the clippings. They were certainly interesting.22

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21 “Pallas” is an epithet that was given to the Greek goddess Athena after she killed a giant goat of the same name who tried to rape her. Niggi signed the letter with this name instead of her own in reference to her newly required role in the play as the goddess.

22 The note that appears perpendicularly scrawled in the right hand margin indicates the date the letter was written. It is in another hand and done with a different writing utensil. Similarly written dates appear other letters in the Hunter Library Special Collections; presumably this was written by a staff member for record keeping purposes.
This document was attached as a part of an email correspondence with Hunter Librarians to determine why Niggli’s first name was spelled a variety of ways across the library database.

This is a program pamphlet from UNC Chapel Hill’s Graduation Commencement in 1937. It was used to confirm that Hulme and Niggli both attended Chapel Hill during the same time period.

This Spanish-English dictionary was used to define Spanish words and phrases Niggli uses throughout the letter.

This edition of David Copperfield provided summary info about the text used in a footnote.

This book discusses the many iterations The Scarlet Pimpernel has gone through as a text (print, stage, etc.). It was used to get summary info about the source text for the film Niggli references.

This is a book that has a translation, summary, and editorial notes for three of Euripides’ plays. It was used to write a footnote of summary for Iphigenia among the Taurians.

This website was used to find out information about the Graham Memorial Building on Chapel Hill’s campus.
This resource was provided by a WCU reference librarian as a suggestion when no results turned up when searching for the Francis Hülme mentioned in the letter. This alerted me to the change in search results when using different characters in the spelling of his name (Hülme versus Hulme).

This website is an archive and databases that keeps records on dates of performances of Greek and Roman dramas. It was used to find out about when Chapel Hill performed the play.

This encyclopedia entry was used to find the location, photo, and information surrounding the Mount Vernon mentioned as a comparison to the Graham Memorial Building.

This was used to find information about "La Borachita," a song that Niggli mentions singing for an audition.

The abstract from this encyclopedia was used to figure out why Niggli used Pallas before Athena in her signature.

The dictionary was used to find the definition of rebozo, which did not appear in the Spanish-English dictionary.

This biographical entry was used to provide a history of Niggli’s life.

This literary magazine provided the first connection between Niggli and Hulme, as they both have publications listed within it.

This yearbook was used to attempt to find what years Hulme attended UNC Chapel Hill.
APPENDIX

Graham Memorial, UNC Chapel Hill

Mount Vernon, Fairfax County, Virginia