



To the Letter: Contemporary Perspectives on Epistolarity

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“Judith Wright and Barbara Blackman – correspondence 1950-1970”.

Judith Wright, the most eminent poet of her generation, had not yet published her first volume of poetry, *The Moving Image*, when she first met her younger contemporary, Barbara Blackman, in Brisbane in 1945. At that time Barbara was still a high school student, a member of the *Barjai* group of young poets and painters. Towards the end of her subsequent university studies Barbara was diagnosed with optic atrophy and declared legally blind. Nevertheless she went off to Sydney, as so many talented young Brisbane people did at the time, and there she married the painter, Charles Blackman. They settled first in Melbourne, then lived in London and Sydney. In the 1950s they would make winter visits to Queensland, often staying in the house while Judith Wright and her partner Jack McKinney and daughter Meredith went travelling. The two women corresponded regularly, and their exchange of letters gains particular poignancy as, later in life, Judith became totally deaf. She wrote rather gloomily, ‘I do think visiting is not a proposition for us now – how could we possibly communicate? I wouldn't hear you and you can't see me...’ To which Barbara responded, ‘Dear friend, a kiss is still a kiss, a hug is still a hug. Of course we shall meet and embrace again’.

In 2007 a volume of letters, *Portrait of a Friendship*, was published, encompassing many of the letters exchanged between these two writers over the period 1950 to 2000 (the year of Wright's death). I would like to examine this volume as a correspondence, at least over the period 1950-1970, when both women were bringing up a family as well as pursuing their own ambitions, both as writers and as activists.

