ALICE BUTLER

close writing

Kathy Acker, Cookie Mueller

& Love-in-Pieces


BUY

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Prologue

BELOVED, SO BITTERSWEET

In the interval between reach and grasp, between glance and counterglance, between "I love you" and "I love you too," the absent presence of desire comes alive.

Anne Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*

An Office of Undying Letters

If two women had not died—or if the post could still magically find them—their mailboxes would be full of love letters. Licked, sealed, enveloped. Successfully delivered to 600 West 163rd Street. Or safely received at 285 Bleecker Street. Both dead women lived, at times, in New York City. But knowing what we (think) we know (staying with the surface of things)—that the two women cannot receive or reply to such letters—it seems likely that these vulnerable missives failed, got delayed, or lost, destined for the Dead Letter Office (figure P.1). Or rather its ghosts: white women clerks inspecting stray mail.[1] Perhaps the handwriting on each envelope

stray mail
letter detectives
the undying shadows

P.1 *Dead Letter Office*, glass negative, 12.7 × 17.8 cm. George Grantham Bain Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

was illegible, or communication channels got blocked, said these nimble letter detectives who examined the dead and undeliverable letters. Theirs was a type of skilled labor that was administration that was autopsy that was care.[2]

Unstable, precarious, purloined. *These* love letters move in the shadows.

I am consumed by the perversity of the impossible letter. Undeliverable.

Or undying.

* * *

Dear Cookie,

With flowers garlanded in your forever-blonde hair, scrap heaps of gold metals around your tiny wrists, bronze and pink beads draped at the neck, and gemstones on your clasped fingers: You picked out your favorite gold lamé dress to wear for the occasion. It was a farewell swamped in twinkling stars. It was a copper-silk sunset. A letter-in-a-bottle. It was an ending and a beginning.

It is hard to believe that your heart had stopped beating when your friend, Nan Goldin, took that candlelit, vanitas picture of you. I feel the warmth of your glow, like it was your Summer of Love in San Francisco all over again, or your first time on screen as an underground film actress just a few years after: those bronzed adolescent cheeks, the strange life in your still-life. I commence my correspondence here—in the middle of life and death: a sick time of suspension, a corpse-portrait of sleeping, dreaming, *writing* (your gathered pasts and presents)—to see how far and where your voltage burns. Still.

I fly to New York to feel close to you.
I fly to New York to feel close to your writing.
I fly to New York to feel close to the you that became your writing.

I search through manuscripts that did and did not make it: plays, short stories, art columns, an autobiographical novel. I spend time in the light and the dark. I dwell in the intimate inks of writing and image: midnight black, Cibachrome color, and mourning gray. It is never just one shade with you.

What was it like to write it, the closeness of pleasure and pain?

I hunt down ivory-satin wedding gowns and antique gold dresses in the cheap Downtown thrift stores of the city you call home. I feel your partial presence in my haunted palm. Loose threads spiral from the damaged seams, which I twist together with my fingertips, like the touch of this letter.

I pick up a shiny crimson dress cut from the same red satin entrails you sported at the Mudd Club. Then a denim jacket in the eighties indigo that sheltered your shoulders. To me this is buried treasure, but also a gift, like a message from you. Soon I realize all the blondes wandering these gentrified streets are wearing shiny crimson dresses and indigo denim jackets, too. Your generosity spreads wide. Your influence is contagious.

I spot the bright turquoise shine of your little last book in an East Village shop window. I carry my own loved copy (creased from years of contact, littered with messages in the margins) everywhere; all I need to do is open it, like an envelope, and I hear the candor of your voice so clearly. I hear you, speak with you, in the rustling, time-traveling intimacy of letter writing. I reply to the cares and pleasures and experiments-with-love of your pages, the ones that accumulated and accreted as a sickened but powerful effect of living and writing with AIDS toward the end of your not-too-late creative, embodied life. I fear what might happen to both our writing lives if I lose this jewel-sized paperback. Although, of course, in some ways, it's swallowed deep inside me; it's lodged there.

I knew you from the portraits first, but then I found words within them, as I also discovered the intimate rebellions of your life in writing, its utter refusal to conform, its beautiful practice of living and making and re-worlding and re-wilding, beyond the categories, to form twisted lines and vines and veins of loving and writing free. It was this desire that I recognized a glimmer of in myself, bringing me to your doorstep to release our shared stories in first-person mail, widening my capacity to love.

I gaze at the fourth-floor windows of your Bleecker Street apartment. A blind is half-drawn, and a light is on, its soft glow sneaks through the slats. A sash is shunted a little bit open to let in the crisp fall air, constant car horns on a loop. From outside to inside and inside to outside: I hear the clickety hops of shuffling footsteps, the soundtrack of your repaired spring-o-later heels, moving from typewriter to door. A torn-out manuscript page floats suspended, mid-flight: somewhere between sky and ground, you

and me. Could it be you there, at home, with Max or Sharon or Vittorio or Nan, in the intimate throes of writing? Still?

But while I sense your abstract traces strangely alive all over the city, it is through witnessing the picture of you reclining in your gold and bronze and pink dashed casket, me cross-legged on a pitch-black museum floor, the sounds of Petula Clark's "Downtown" piercing through the space, my skin, my jet-lagged brain, that the love that I feel for you sparks as bittersweet. I cross time and space, from life into death, and back again. I feel my heart race too quickly. I struggle to breathe, unable to comprehend the injustice of you being physically gone.

And yet there are moments of connection, a bringing of life at the borderline, like the flicker of a lace glove on your wedding day: holding a ten-dollar note rolled up, ready to ingest a line of cocaine, bright like a strip light, becoming brighter again as a line of writing.

I see words in the crochet lattice of your antique glove: slipped inside the arm of your husband-to-be. He is held there, close to you, forever in your writing.

I cannot re-create that protected kind of closeness or love, for that was yours alone. But I am ready to take a risk, to gesture newly to love, to attempt to touch you and your stories back (of life and death, often both at once). My letters are falling (mid-flight, suspended): like the first snowfall of the year.

* * *

Dear Kathy,

The shirt was a smart choice. I'd be pretending if I wasn't enchanted, that I hadn't looked. In the sickened time of suspension—an in-between space where life and death move one across the other—you wore the finest polyester leopard-print mesh, lined in black satin, only one button fastened just above the navel to create a deep plunging V. The slippery shirt's undoneness encloses the viewer to stay with you there, at the intimate flesh, a form of accompaniment. From tight tummy to the shadowy beginnings of a scar: I begin to see your muscular, freckled mastectomized chest. Is that the dash of a drawing underneath? Soon I read the enfleshed line of writing; you marked it here and everywhere. There's a beautiful sense

of ornament to the whole thing. Like ritual. I wonder if you went shopping for the shoot with a friend. This another kind of ritual.

And yet, with your peroxide-tinted shaved head downturned, those smudged kohl eyelids nearing closure, it's also a portrait of rest and sleep: the fray of living and dying. And writing, too? I dwell in the gauze of girl and boy. I stay with the enmeshed afterlife of image and writing, in this portrait named *RePose*. Taken by your close friend Del LaGrace Volcano, it would go alongside your illness essay published in the *Guardian*. Here, in "The Gift of Disease," you lacerated in words the personal and political circumstances of your breast cancer diagnosis, double mastectomy, and walking away from Western medicine, its many injustices. You turned to the possibilities of the imagination instead.

I follow your lead, twenty years after your devastating death at an alternative clinic in Tijuana, where you received palliative care. It was only thirty kilometers down the highway, and over the border, from the bed that had once been your writing desk, in the San Diego of your early twenties, many decades before.

I fly coast-to-coast to feel close to you.
I fly coast-to-coast to feel close to your writing.
I fly coast-to-coast to feel close to the you that became your writing.

While the tattoos may've got my attention when I, too, was a writer of "great expectations" (to purloin the title of your purloined punk novel), it's the quieter pictures of you I take with me: like *RePose*, or the state of recline captured in a friend's photograph of you dressed in a modest but artfully deconstructed tunic while daydreaming on your bed in your Lower East Side loft of the early 1980s. Your tufted head of hair sinks into an animal-print cushion propped up against your too-full library of books. A sense of synchronicity takes over, strangely spectral, when I find myself repeating this pose in the recurring jet-lagged dawn of early morning, as I lie strewn across the sheets of my sublet apartment (a few blocks over from yours): surrounded by your silver and pink paperbacks.

I read. I cite. I copy. I look. I touch. I sense. I write. It happens in the apartment, or the hotel, often while walking the city (was it you outside the Mudd Club struggling with too many books in your hand? For a second, I swore it was), sometimes sat on the subway's curved plastic seats, and always in the archive. I am experiencing a state of incorporation, as you

incorporated the words of others—as well as yourself—in enchanting, illegitimate acts of licentiousness and renewal. Could I assume permission in no permission? Even your friends at the San Francisco memorial dipped their fingers into the beaux arts vase holding your ashes and *licked*, before your cremains got taken with the tides of the Pacific. It was a scattering that echoed the dispersal of your manuscripts: from the numerous notebooks in New York, to the papers at Duke, to the correspondences opened in California.

I skulk the aisles and passageways of the Geisel Library in San Diego, sense the shadows of your scribbles in the edges of the printed word. I scratch my finger on the staples of your handmade chapbooks. I listen to the open mouth of your letters to friends and lovers making room for the paradoxes of feeling. I talk with your friends who received them. I feel your partial presence in an imagined piece of paper retold as a story: the mailing list the performance artist gave to you so you could send your writing out. I travel from the university to the coast to summon a shared map of checkpoints. I run across the beach to end each day in your footprints.

I rest and catch my breath as the La Jolla waves lap and cool my feet. These are the same seas that took your ashes into their mouth. It's a swirling that sparks as beautifully but painfully bittersweet.

I am beginning to sense a voice on the page that is not just mine (could it be ours?), like the combined ink of two love letters caught in the rain, or the swirling foams of physical traces. It's the intimate stuff of your life in writing that has brought it to the surface. As I open ring-bound notebooks, diaries, envelopes, and photographs, where you were trying to figure it out (your creative and sexual and sensual life), not finished, not resolved (there are no neat conclusions), another kind of opening occurs. It's in those vulnerable pages that I touched my relationship to writing.

Too young for the memorials that happened all over the world, these daydreaming letters are all I have to say hello and goodbye—to stay with the ornament and quiet of you: your infectious contradictions—each letter as charged as a first-time meeting. Fragments of the personal have entered my writing. Quite simply, and I know I am not the first to write to you, but I could not have done it without you.

Fleeing, Flying, Longing, Love-Letter Writing

I grasp for their inked, jeweled fingers: *almost* touching, their bodies in pieces—their lives *in and as writing*.

ACKER, KATHY (née Weill Alexander, first name Karen), was born April 18, 1947, on New York's Upper East Side, an area that can be traced to the Manhatta of Lenape lands before their tribes were forcibly removed. Kathy's biological father, a German-Jewish businessman from Buffalo, New York, had abandoned her mother, Claire Weill, of Austrian-Jewish heritage, when Claire was just three months pregnant. A new husband in Albert Alexander came into the fold, becoming the infant's stepfather; a half-sister, Wendy, soon followed. But Wendy is not present in an early black-and-white photograph cut with shearing scissors of a young girl then named Karen, aged three. Karen wears a double-breasted woolen jacket. She shuffles inquisitively closer to the camera, her mouth partly open as she tries for new words, soft brown curls grazing her cheek. Soon after the picture was taken, she attended a private girls' school in an illustrious neighborhood, which was "unofficially known as the only 'white glove' Upper East Side" institution "that was widely open to Jews" (or was accessible to any white student whose family could afford the tuition).[3] She was a voracious reader. She was a "pirate" who ran away, "into the world of books."[4] And here she stayed: into adolescence. In an essay on her favorite writer of childhood, Colette (its typescript pages protected within an envelope scrawled with the French novelist's name), she would describe living a "double life, a life in the parent/school I had to inhabit and a life in the art world about which I could not talk."[5] She had an older filmmaker boyfriend when she was aged sixteen. She met poets and artists. This was her adolescent "forbidden world."[6]

The 1964 yearbook committee characterized her thus: "Whatever she is, she's different. She's more intellectual than many of her class; she reads more; and she acts more avant-garde. She practices a studied nonchalance, taking things in her stride, letting trivial matters in one ear and out the other."[7]

MUELLER, COOKIE. In Baltimore, a city that resides on the unceded lands of Indigenous Piscataway and Susquehannock peoples, she was born—on March 2, 1949—after her older sister and brother. She was officially named

the somewhat demure Dorothy Karen, but as she remembers the mythic beginnings of what became her life in "My Bio—Notes on an American Childhood," "Somehow I got the name Cookie before I could walk. It didn't matter to me, they could call me whatever they wanted."[8] She is sweetly "Cookie" in a photograph of her taken in school, as she pirouettes on tippy toes in a sequin-splashed ballerina tutu. She danced, she read, she wrote, she wandered into the woods, as a young girl. She suffered unimaginable loss when her brother died after climbing a tree. Then, aged fifteen, she began escaping, like a daily ritual, the white middle-class home in which she grew. "I was always leaving," she would write, much later, "standing on the porch saying goodbye to the older couple in the living room."[9] New familial shapes would follow—in San Francisco, Provincetown, Positano, and New York City.

On graduating from high school in 1967, she was awarded the prize for "most expressive."[10]

Fleeing and flying, they longed to become writers. *Like little birds testing their wings*.

Almost Touching

Sometimes their paths physically crossed, like on Valentine's Day, 1980, when they performed alongside one another at the Mudd Club: the Downtown New York venue on White Street that was once a textile warehouse. Acker read aloud letters addressed to ex-boyfriends, and Mueller played the part of an ex-boyfriend in drag, for her friend Gary Indiana.

But it is more likely that they *almost touched*, too, as they shared the same publishers, the same pages, the same places, the same photographic portraitists (Robert Mapplethorpe, Marcus Leatherdale) the same people (friends and lovers, even the same hidden name in Karen), while never inhabiting the known boundaries of a close relationship.[11] Instead, proximity was conjured in echoes and traces and thumbprints, not always legible lines of contact, but palpable all the same, like the sensorial hum of an affective plane, from which my own correspondence is energized. And so, I speculate: that the spectral mutters of Kathy Acker reading her writing aloud for the first time at the St. Mark's Poetry Project in 1971 could also be heard nearly two decades later, at Cookie Mueller's funeral. Beneath those same vaulted ceilings, her friends said goodbye to her body but not her pieces. Their words filled and crossed and combined through the air.

It's possible, too, that Acker attended the 1990 launch of Mueller's small-in-scale but vast-in-spirit book, *Walking Through Clear Water in a Pool Painted Black*, which was published by Semiotext(e)'s Native Agents series, in painful, posthumous proximity to her AIDS-related death, the night of November 10, 1989. Kathy's hot-pink paperback of short pieces came out in the same series, which was founded by the then filmmaker, and later Native Agents author, Chris Kraus, just a year after Mueller's own compilation was published. Reflecting back on the series in a 2014 essay, Kraus describes how she soon realized that these works "had something in common": "*Yes* they were all written by women—*yes* they were all written in the first person—and like practically all books and films of their time, they included writing about sex."[12] Theirs is an "active, public 'I,'" a performative "I," who moves "through the text and the world."[13]

An Afterlife in Pieces

I have touched my beloveds' bittersweet pieces. In the archive, on the street, while *dreaming*—this is how they have come to me, and I have come to *love* them. I have absorbed reflections and refractions, pieces of text and textile, swatches of writing, and traces of voice. I have assembled their pieces into unfinished portraits. I am haunted by the piecemeal afterlives of my beloveds, flowing outward, sideways, refusing the conventions of the catalog or container. This is the capacious world in which my love for them has grown and flourished, in spite of the spatial, temporal, and physical distance between us. Closeness is conjured in flashes of contact, a fleeting feeling, the scribbling of correspondence.

In "Cookie," whose body is only familiar to me in the afterlives of her objects (an attachment that is a fantasy but that is also felt as *real*), I have also felt, physically and affectively, the pulse of her body through her fragments, the feverish part-objects of her writing: ring-bound and blue-lined notebook pages freckled with forget-me-not notations; friends' phone numbers so she could stay "in touch," or get her writing out; clothing designs near desiring drawings; drafts of pieces that emerged beyond her private envelopes (and pieces that did not); handwritten renditions of her own fantasy letters of healing sketched in a rush; doodled lines becoming figurative drawings (of her husband, Vittorio Scarpati); newspaper cuttings kept, folded, stacked, covers printed with headlines, horrible but true: "Die young, stay pretty";[14] incomplete copies of her "Art and About" columns for *Details* magazine and clippings that declare suspension;

fragments of her columns, sketches for stories, and stories repeated; drafts annotated and redacted; mountains of manuscripts; résumés when she needed more work; letters received and sent (intimate and administrative [and both]); hundreds and hundreds of *lists*. (She, like I, like Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, takes pleasure in "the additive mode."[15])

I have fixated on the *c* to the twinned *o*'s to the *k* and the dotted *i* ending in the smile of an *e* of her signature, scrawled in biro on her manuscripts. Her name sings through time when I utter it. I have copied down her phone numbers and addresses (surreptitiously gleaned from the margins of her manuscripts). I have absorbed the specter of her in my writing, corresponding without a need for a conventional reply—just to talk or write—through and with the pieces of her life and text, including private and public correspondence.

She entered my life as "holographic projections" in printed pages bearing her name, in the photographs caressed in the archive not officially her own, or bad-quality portraits found online.[16] She's almost present, too, in the clothes I pull over my skin, those secondhand lace garments, or frayed, "too-full" denim jackets. In the ambient, amber-lit pictures taken of her by her close friend Nan Goldin (who was Nancy before leaving home), she is the sweetest morsel of a name on a tongue; she is *Cookie Laughing, New York City* (1985). In a different way (I know I could never, should never, claim that closeness), she is "Cookie" to me, too: I hold her in my open mouth.

Sometimes, encounters between her and me are momentary and brief, like the receiving of a letter—a voice, a sound—sent from the past. I hear her so clearly in the intensity of that contact, although the sharpness fades at the edges. She re-surfaced once at the surface of the page: the see-through paper upon which the details of her memorial at the Downtown venue MK were printed. Originally sent to the people with whom she was intimate, that is, "familiar," I held it delicately at the fingertips: life and death meeting at the transparence of its boundary.

My world vibrates with Cookie's body in pieces. Three short words written by her hand for the poet Richard Hell could be mine for her. "*Hi—I miss you*."[17] Each sentence that I form in my mouth is spiked by this bittersweetness: the pain and pleasure of saying hello and goodbye in one epistolary gesture. I can taste it on my tongue. Eros, writes Anne Carson, is shaped by such emotional paradoxes, as the lover wants what she "does not have," sustained in ambivalent orbits, the energies of love and hate, presence and absence circling her.[18] She is hungry (*I am hungry*)

for the body of her (*or my*) absent beloved. The distance between lover and beloved is what keeps desire alive, electrifies it. It keeps the desire of this writing alive, too. As Carson explains, "A space must be maintained or desire ends. . . . The reach of desire is defined in action: beautiful (in its object), foiled (in its attempt), endless (in time)."[19]

Kathy crawls and scuttles in the crevices and shadows of my life, too. She is the Black Tarantula, the pseudonym she used to author her early chapbooks sent through the mail or to sign off letters with a spider symbol drawing. She is the mysterious correspondent with an "enemy list."[20] She is this disguise, a game of literary hide-and-seek, which foreshadows the pose, the gesture, the cutaway Lycra leotard, performed and worn in a Robert Mapplethorpe portrait. She is the library she ate up as a young writer studying Classics. She is her copy of Virgil's *Bucolics and Georgics*, its solidified lines of Latin interrupted and smeared by ink-spilled insertions. She is the thousands of books she wanted to be available for public use after her death. She is archived in an answering machine message. She is wound in a tape reel or pixelated by VHS. She is an assemblage of fairytale-gothic tattoos. She is a wardrobe of designer clothes stored away in boxes. She is a Vivienne Westwood pirate jacket hanging on a wooden hanger. She is an astrological chart, or a natal chart mapped by Scary Spice. She is the Kathy Acker described by the friends of hers I've met, as well as the author absorbed in essays about her life and work. She is the stack of silver paperbacks strewn across my desk, infiltrated with felt-tipped lines and penciled annotations (messages of correspondence) across the years of my loving her. She once made contact with Virgil, as I've made contact with *pieces* of her: love letters; friend letters (sent and received); diaries and notebooks; published and unpublished part-objects (the books featuring her name and face, and the books in which she featured); videos; invitation cards; proofs; photographs.

She *is* her writing matter: It's where she viscerally realized, abstracted, her body, memories, and desire. When I cradle her correspondences in my palm, her childlike handwriting touches mine. My own desire to know or love her in writing swells with the turn of each typescript page, the obsessive handling of diaries, notebooks, and novels-in-notebooks. I peel away handwritten fragments collaged onto proofs and pages to uncover the physical processes of her writings, their intimacies with visual art; these are the pieces with which she made and re-made herself and writing body. I peel away at her pieces to pick closer to her life-in-writing.

She is and is not only, or never entirely, all of these *things*. She is a body in pieces. Only partial, never whole: *like Cookie*. In the archive, on the street, while *dreaming*—this is how they have come to me, and I have come to *love* them.

It is how they have come to me in their writings, too. Here they pieced together *in closeness* autobiographical episodes, bygone memories from childhood and adolescence, the ambivalent angles of their social, sexual, and sick lives. Their author portraits—of Cookie wearing black jersey in the shadows, or Kathy greased in punk leather and piercings—illustrate the glossy back covers of their Semiotext(e) paperbacks. My proximity to them through these pictures, the penetrating gaze held by their kohl-rimmed eyes, is unstable, as it was in the books' pages in which they mediated, abstracted, flayed, and picked apart the visceral substances and textures of their embodied lives.

I reach. I reach. I reach. I desire to get close, closer, closer still. But it will always be the boundary, the blanketing of absence that is interlaced within and around their bodies in pieces, which motivates my love for them in writing: "the boundary of flesh and self between you and me."[21]

When Carson describes in *Eros the Bittersweet* that it is the realization of the edge, the separating seam between lover and beloved, which defines and energizes the experience of desiring, loving, reaching, and imagining what or who could be, or could *never* be, pleasured and *touched*, she does so by turning back to the ancient poet Sappho—and the adjective coined by Sappho, *glukupikron*, with which the essay begins. Bitter-sweet, sweet-bitter: "There may be various relations between the two savors," begins Carson, later elaborating that, "like Sappho's adjective *glukupikron*, the moment of desire is one that defies proper edge, being a compound of opposites forced together at pressure."[22] Sappho sketched the conflicting forces of love as "bittersweet" in Fragment 130, which Jonathan Goldberg has read as a queer "divided, doubled, self-contradictory state."[23] It is a piecemeal state that emerges in my beloveds' written pieces, too, across the intermeshed spaces of the private and public in which their work materialized.

Goldberg calls Carson's book "about eros" a book also "about Sappho," "about the language for eros she created," which conjoined loving and writing into the same fabric of experience. Writing-as-loving and loving-as-writing is sapphic, argues Goldberg; it is the condition of being

sapphic, which is not as universalized, or as ungendered and unsexed, as it first appears in Carson's book.[24] Reading Carson closely, Goldberg notes the gendering of the lover as the poet as Sappho as *her* when Carson revisits Fragment 31 in an essay fragment titled "What Does the Lover Want from Love?" It is that wanting which maintains the reach, the pulse, the lines of the network electrifying desire: "Having would annihilate eros."[25]

And eros, claims Goldberg, originates in the female poet writing to her same-sex beloved, like my sapphic letters to the dead; like Acker's erotic epistles to her friend, Terence Sellers, that she signed off in bold felt-tip "I MISS YOU I LOVE YOU";[26] or even like Mueller's anecdotal description in the portrait piece "Tattooed Friends" of the intimate attachments sewn together by inking your best friend's flesh, a letter laid over the skin.[27] All of us—Kathy, Cookie, Sappho, and *Me*, born years, decades, or centuries apart—use the first person "I." We learn and *love* from our bodies: in all their mess and multiplicity, in all their broken pieces. In loving my beloved writers in short bursts and broken lines—letters, messages, postscripts, pieces, which "create in the elusive, illusive fragmentary net of words the absent one, the desired one"—I, too, have felt the "disorder in the body in love . . . a body in pieces, disjointed, a broken set of organs, limbs, bodily functions."[28]

I endure disturbed nights in bed, consumed by the words to reply. I experience sudden menstruations, convinced it is our cycles aligning with the moon.

Fragment 31 is one dismembered part among many broken lines, shattered shards, absorbed citations in later authors' works, bits and pieces "painstakingly reconstructed from ancient papyri exhumed from Egyptian sands," and then re-read, translated, translated again (their sapphic desire and queer eroticism often erased), through which Sappho—in all her multiple configurations, echoing the first names with which I address the overlapping lives and texts of my alliterating beloved (from now on, always: *Dear Kathy; Dear Cookie*)—has come to us, too.[29] She is, as Page duBois writes in *Sappho Is Burning*, "not a person" whom we can ever truly know; she is "not even a character in a drama or a fiction, but a set of texts gathered in her name."[30] She is, like the queerness of the bittersweet desire she writes, an assemblage, a patchwork of pieces, wherein the voice that speaks blurs with the poet herself, creating a destabilizing slippage between life and fiction. As duBois announces, "We know her work only

in fragments," before questioning how historians might begin to approach and access Sappho's poetry when so much of it, so much of *her*, has been rendered unknowable and indistinct.[31]

Thinking with Sappho (figure and verse) as a body in pieces, duBois invites a relationship to the past and its fragments that does not focus on "the restoration of lost wholes, or even on the tragic impossibility of the reconstitution," but recognizes instead its always partial, contingent nature.[32] DuBois describes this dialectic, between the postmodern thinker and its fragmentary objects, as being similar to the "disparate collection of body parts" that combine in the domain of the Lacanian symbolic, wherein the subject "alternates between a fictional 'I' and an invented memory, a phantasy, of a time before the capture of this 'I.'"[33] Suggesting that the desire to mend the past, to cohere it, to repair or clean up the "tears, frangible edges, erasures, abrasions," neglects the *processes* of historiography, duBois instead proposes that we "read what we have," to dream and desire and speculate these fragments *reparatively* anew.[34]

This mode of repair, which pleasures the partial rather than the whole, motivates my writing. I reach, *across absence*, for the bittersweet pieces of Kathy and Cookie, their (oft-misunderstood) lives and writings and part-objects and pictures. I am committed to reinvigorating their bodies in pieces, but in a way that I hope goes deeper than simply bringing their figures out of the dark and into the light. I look for the gray tones in between—by writing to and beside them, beginning with the dead letter. This book is a project of paying close attention; it depends on reparative gestures to do so. Such an approach has emerged with the recognition of what Kathy and Cookie—their lives and deaths; their expanded autofictional archives of paper ephemera, publications, photography, clothing, correspondence, books; their bodies in pieces; their afterlife—deserve and need. To be close like this invites me to slip between life and text, just like they did. I reject the urge to either mythologize like a biographer or analyze like a critic; instead, I do both (they always did *both*). I do both to unravel the formal and political textures of their performing, fictionalizing, and materializing of lived experiences in writing. Underpinned by a practice of reparativity, the book is interwoven with a three-way intervention: to reignite (rather than make whole) pieces of Kathy and Cookie by illuminating the radical complexities of their lives *in* and *as* writing; to show how such writing used interdisciplinary practices between art, literature, and performance; and to propose and perform a queer feminist methodology that feels and writes closely to them. Writing from love, as

Hélène Cixous would say, it asks how taking risks with form can engender new ways of taking risks with content, in a way that attends to the mess, the complexity, the vitality, of our subjects' lives and works.[35]

I cannot let my beloveds' bittersweet bodies in pieces go, decades after their deaths. I write *to* them and *with* them—closely, affectively, passionately, erotically, even *perversely*.[36] I do this to touch and breathe new life into their lives and texts, to explore their entangling, across word and image, and to newly attend to the complex feminist effects of such crossings in what I call their *close writing*. I match close writing with close writing, a reply to sender. I do this *for* them: the *risk* of writing reparative love.

x x v i This act of correspondence echoes Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's loving-at-a-memorial-distance of the art critic Craig Owens, following his death from AIDS-related illness on July 4, 1990. As a "strange—*not* to say rare—form of love," it flourished across the "love of part-objects, snatches of print, glimpses and touches of a largely unfamiliar body."[37] Her eros writing was "sent out" at a time of devastating, deepening precarity, pain, and loss for the most vulnerable, shamed, and stigmatized in society, which included queer and trans people, sex workers, and IV drug users (as the "queer paradigm" of the epidemic depended on, with its homophobic, racist, and fundamentally biomedical, discriminatory narratives of risk-taking sexually deviant behaviors).[38] It also included Latinx and Black communities enduring unequal conditions "embodied as ill-health and vulnerability to disease"—what Adam Geary has termed in specific relation to anti-Blackness, "the violent intimacy of the racist state."[39] Writing near this context, there was much at stake for Sedgwick to turn "to love" in critical writing.

She addresses the "nauseatingly familiar blankness" she feels upon the death of her writer-beloved, that "someone whom so many of us saw as so self-evidently treasurable, could be in a society that so failed to treasure him . . . a society that found it (to put it no more strongly than this) so possible, so little painful to let Craig die."[40] Sedgwick challenges the pain, the hurt, the devastation of *a* death (although her attention is both singular and collective) wrought by pervasive and repetitive societal oppressions aimed at queer subjects, and responds not with what she would later describe as the paranoid impulse to anticipate, to know, to expose oppression to be true, but with the affective pleasure of a reparative reading.[41] This is an alternative critical position to the paranoid—one that does not deny the "reality or gravity of enmity or oppression" but instead undertakes a

"different range of affects, ambitions, and risks" as a means of survival and love—which was theorized in two versions of the essay "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading," published in 1997 and 2003.[42] Departing from Melanie Klein's depressive position, described by Sedgwick as an "anxiety-mitigating achievement," whereby the infant or adult is able to "use one's own resources to assemble or 'repair' the murderous part-objects into something like a whole," though "*not necessarily like any pre-existing whole*," the reparative reading position seeks and sustains pleasure and plenitude as political energies and resources of resistance.[43]

As a mode of repair, I am indebted to its always partial, performative, and in-process effects. Rather than seeking full restoration of my beloveds' lives, bodies, and texts, this version of the reparative that I develop as close writing acknowledges cuts, tears, abrasions, fragments; it writes *with* them in a speculative afterlife, as a pleasure-glimpsing position and practice of love-as-attention-as-care. "The body beckons us," as Peggy Phelan writes in *Mourning Sex*—grappling with the corporeal myths and meditations that framed the overlapping emergencies of HIV/AIDS—and yet always "resists our attempts to remake it."[44] My performative writing also dwells in the paradoxical lure of this "resistant beckoning," recognizing that the "affective outline of what we've lost might bring us closer to the bodies we want still to touch than the restored illustration can."[45]

Similarly, in "Memorial for Craig Owens," Sedgwick was embodying and practicing the absent-present performativity of the reparative frame, as she recuperates within the short text a personal experience of writing (an essay inspired by "a couple of cryptic paragraphs of Craig's") that is also an experience of reading, or rather a felt fantasy of him reading her.[46] It is the "fun of imagining sending" the part-finished essay to him, which motivates her to write, binding writing up with reading, with influence and love, akin to epistolary exchange.[47] This fantasy is a source of "pleasure" for Sedgwick the writer, with her beloved's "magical . . . enigmatic, magnetic" words becoming "permanently lodged" in her heart, like the Kleinian printed part-objects with which she comes to love him, as noted in the second sentence, and with which their relation is nourished and sustained.[48] The adjectives Sedgwick uses to describe her beloved's writing suggest the alchemical, the otherworldly, the cosmic: forces and flows of energy that engulf her, merging language with body, subject with object. Toward the end of the memorial, Sedgwick mourns the loss of this binding. Her grief is entangled with the process of writing, with the felt loss of exchange and comment and echo and citation that animated their connecting worlds,

and electrified Sedgwick's desire for him, the author (she affectionately calls him by his first name "Craig," too). In many ways, the relation she mourns continues to unfold following his death, becomes dangerously but resourcefully illicit, across the piece's three short paragraphs that were first spoken and then printed—another part-object.

How can writing lovingly to another writer after their death be both dangerous *and* resourceful? Jane Gallop notes in Sedgwick's queer theoretical memorial the affirmation of "stigmatized desire in the face of AIDS and death" and the crucial articulation, "at one and the same time" of both "desire and loss, both radical perversity and grief."[49] This, argues Gallop, energized queer theory in the early 1990s, as the connection between "mourning and theoretical insight," which Jacques Derrida had contemporaneously described as "indecent," became politically necessary: a source of reparative resistance for the dead and for the living and for so many living precariously in between.[50] The radical perversity imagined in Sedgwick's memorial extends to the web of erotic relations that brings writers into close, intimate, and thrilling proximity.

I am indecently familiar in my letters and letter-essays, collecting love-in-pieces and pieces of my love, written beside my bittersweet beloveds' own bittersweet pieces. As a reparative reader and writer, I take this risk for *them*, my absent beloveds: two sick women, as the contemporary artist Johanna Hedva would call them, suffering diseases and disorders that have come to them (but are not part of them), resistant to the forces of the "Western medical-insurance industrial complex" that thinks it understands them.[51] For Cookie, it was HIV/AIDS; for Kathy—and for Sedgwick—it was cancer that began in the breast. Sedgwick identified as queer *across* the lines of gender when her experience of being diagnosed with breast cancer brought her closer to the devastating effects of the AIDS epidemic felt by her closest friends. She writes about, and *through*, this identification in "White Glasses," an essay that anticipates becoming an obituary for her friend Michael Lynch, and also in her essay on reparative reading, wherein she describes, from a position of lived experience shared with friends like Michael, the "brutal foreshortening of so many queer life spans" as changing the paranoid stiffness and regularity of generational narratives.[52] Other relations are possible, suggests Sedgwick, producing lines of contact and love that track forward and back and *sideways*. To rethink erotic relations across time on behalf of the sick woman writer foreshortened is a necessary act of love, attention, and care, pointing to another of this book's motives—rooted in the urge to alleviate absence by paying attention to

method, feeling, and writing (*what I can give you*). The sick woman calls for such reparative risks to be taken, and so I spill love letters to them: a way to illuminate, care for, and touch the wild and radical complexities of their lives in and as writing, their *close writing*.

I feel myself falling.

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*

Introduction

A WRITER'S LOVE

Because I write for, I write from, I start writing from: Love. I write out of love. Writing, loving: inseparable. Writing is a gesture of love. *The Gesture*.

Hélène Cixous, "Coming to Writing"

I want the you no one else can see, the you so close the third person never need apply.

Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts*

A note slipped under a door or a crumpled message passed from cell to cell, hand to hand is called a kite—words travel even when we can't.

Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives Beautiful Experiments*

The Envelope (*You*: My First Love)

Etched into the pale interior of my right arm, close to the sweaty crease of my elbow, from which my stronger forearm extends, and then the hand I write with (letters, notes, *pieces*), is a small

tattoo of an envelope. It's roughly the same size as a first- or second-class stamp, a simple line drawing. It encases bare, hidden-from-the-sun pale skin with its jet-black marks: a lightly tufted carpet of blonde, downy hairs. Comprising horizontal, vertical, and diagonal dashes, the symbol depicts a strangely anonymous verso of a sealed envelope, hiding the unwritten touch of desire in the secretive flaps, folds, seams, and seals. The desire to touch is palpable, if not clearly legible. *Who goes there?* There is no address to whom it might be sent, or where it might be returned to, if it gets delayed and lost. But if I look closely enough, their names coagulate at the surface of the cut. *Beloved*.

Prior to getting this "mail art," my body had never been inked. But after returning from six weeks in New York, where I'd touched my beloveds' bittersweet pieces and touched them with draft letters back, I had my heart set on imaging, on the surface of my skin, how our writings met. And yet I panicked about the thought of the needle, the shame of exposing this romance that bordered on obsession, as if I was writing/possessing their name on my flesh like a lover (*yes, that is me*). It took the breathing person I loved and lived with to surprise me with a tattoo appointment at a parlor in Brighton, a few streets back from the beach on which we met, near the pier on which one half of my epistolary beloved once walked, for me to finally get inked.

The tattoo is for them both, a permanent mark of how much their lives in and as writing have touched me. I feel them forever: at the envelope of my body, the boundary, where our pieces merge. Their words have touched my relationship to love: the difficulty to express it, inhabit all its broken pieces. After it was drawn, my secret envelope glowed bright pink, and now I'm blushing once more, the rising pulse of the personal. It bubbles and steams at the paper's folds.

(Almost) Pink Steam

Rather than send me a birthday card, a friend left a love letter at my door instead, a month after I was scored with epistolary lines. The letter was housed within an envelope, despite the fact I was then living on a forty-foot narrowboat that cruised the canals of London and was without an official address. She surreptitiously created her own postal network, so the letter wouldn't get lost. It was a gesture that gestured toward, with affective love and corporeal attention, the epistolary symbol printed on my body.

To write a friend a love letter is to feel the effects of what Dodie Bellamy calls her 2004 collection of essays, *Pink Steam*. The cover is hot pink,

with a typeface that looks as if it has been cut from an eighties horror movie. Printed at its center is a singular almond-shaped eye in yellow; its curved lines and gloopy flicks of mascara clustered at the lashes suggest it to be part of a feminine face, the desire of a female gaze. Despite a long history of gendering with color—which Thomas Gainsborough captured when he painted a full-length portrait of a blushing boy wearing salmon-pink silks that ripple like the muscular tissues studied by the boy's anatomist grandfather (*The Pink Boy*, 1782)—Jane Gallop prefers to think of pink as "*the* color of sexual difference," a "blatant little-girl color." This association is expressed in her own essay on love letters that addresses the subjects of Flemish seventeenth-century painting (to which Gainsborough also turned) alongside an epistolary essay from 1977 by the French writer Annie Leclerc.[1] But before Gallop's close reading of suggestive ripples gets her there, she considers the penetration of French theory into American academia, which made an anthology such as the 1982 *Writing and Sexual Difference* possible, with a cover, dipped in "mauve . . . [a]lmost pink," that suggestively implies how pinkish tones unfairly (and phallocentrically) carry the "burden of sexual difference."[2] Pink is unseemly, explicitly girlish, which Bellamy (knowingly) mimics and plays with in *Pink Steam*, as she offers up intimate, adolescent-style letters and diaries as essays. Within them, she pushes pinkness to a state of girl gore that flirts with the blush of shame, with making it public, these vulnerable states of bodily abjection.

In the first-person piece "Barbie's Dream House," for example, Bellamy imagines "walking through Barbie's living room feeling off-kilter," its "cheap cardboard walls . . . those of postwar prefab housing."[3] In Bellamy's psychedelic queer reading, she begins to see "adolescent sexual secrets burst[ing] through cardboard dimensionality," which echoes her own autoerotic experience—of never owning a Barbie but touching one: "I . . . pulled down the top of her swimsuit and rubbed her rock hard breasts with my thumb," writes Bellamy.[4] Noting the "creamy angularity of Barbie's body" as manufactured in 1962, Bellamy alludes to what Erica Rand critically examines in *Barbie's Queer Accessories* (1995): that "'white' Barbie" has been made the "standard," the desirable norm, by racial capitalism, even when diversity is superficially displayed; or queer usages, subversions, and reinterpretations of the doll (like Bellamy's) seek to unsettle the heterosexist dominance of her surround.[5]

Magenta pink (named "Barbie Pink" by Pantone) was also chosen as the background for the poster publicizing John Waters's 1974

Baltimore-set film *Female Trouble*, which stars beloved Cookie, her friend Mink Stole, and a companion to them both, the drag star Divine, as three delinquent schoolgirls in an American high school.[6] Their eyes are heavily smoked, and their backcombed hair is monstrously big, to the extent that their white middle-class girlishness is gory and frightening. Pink, then, when cleverly parodied, can trash and transgress social norms—school, family, class, gender—and critically race. And, so, perhaps it is useful to think of pink as a range, as tinted with ambivalence, which Gallop also does when she recognizes how the book's cover is "not quite pink" but more like mauve: "a stylish, sophisticated version of that color, one that bespeaks not the messy, carnal world of the nursery but high culture, high feminine culture."[7] Neither Cookie as Concetta nor Bellamy in *Pink Steam* is seeking that sort of sophistication, but there is a use to thinking of pink as a palette, like femininity itself, and also like the love letter, the ways it can ooze girlishness and boyishness, embarrassment and exposure, innocence and lawlessness, unseriousness and critique, or, as Bellamy describes it in another epistolary performance (a book of blog posts to an ex-lover), "oppositional weakness."[8] She muses on the term's meaning: "an in-your-face owning of one's vulnerability and fucked-upness to the point of embarrassing and offending tight-asses is a powerful feminist strategy. Writing is tough work, I don't see how anyone can really write from a position of weakness. Sometimes I may start out in that position, but the act of commandeering words flips me into a position of power."[9] Could the love letter be pink, or could it be mauve, or could it be a shade in between? Could this edgewise pigment be a spatial territory to occupy in love-letter writing, where, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick would say, "strong *and* weak theory . . . interdigitate"?[10]

Nowhere in the book does Bellamy define pink steam as a term for her own oppositional/weak writing; we just have the blurb on the back to help us: "Pink steam rises from the vats of melting goo in the Vincent Price 3D horror classic, *House of Wax*. Railroad buffs know 'pink steam' as the first blast from a newly christened steam engine, which appears pink as it spews out rust."[11] Rising, melting, blasting, spewing—pink steam is a substance that travels, changes shape and consistency. It recalls the abjection of a gooey bodily fluid. Could pink steam (I picture sticky, hot vapor; or a young girl's blushed cheek; or a sickly menstruation; or the infected blood of the "gay" disease that killed Cookie Mueller) be the subversive

substance of the love letter *as* essay? By turns messy, explicit, emotional, desiring, overloaded, innocent, sexual, sensual, critical? Should I call it *almost-pink steam*?

"Almost" implies being near to something but not quite *it*—or being multiple things at once. Likewise, Gallop attends to the ways Leclerc's essay contains slippages, from the private, feminized space of letter writing, to the public (and more "masculine") domain of an "essay published in a book."[12] As Gallop writes—inspired by Leclerc's queer address to her lover, and also Mary Cassatt's depiction in *The Letter* (1890–91; plate 1) of a woman with skin as "smooth as the paper," handling, licking, and kissing the seal of another (address-less) envelope in "direct oral contact": "Love letters have always been written from the body, in connection with love. Leclerc wants all writing to have that connection; she wants love to enter into general circulation, inscribed knowledge, rather than remaining private and secret." Impassioned, Gallop continues further: "We women must continue to write from our loving bodies, but we must break 'discretion' and 'intimacy' and 'risk that subversion' in public, in print, in general circulation. . . . Leclerc brings the love letter out of the closet and into the public domain."[13] Following Gallop's correspondence with Leclerc's essay—which inhabits its own erotic correspondence with the working-class maid in Vermeer's interior painting who waits in the background while her mistress pens a letter—the homosocial letters I write to my beloved, whom I feel as both proximate and distant, risk the projection of desire and love in critical writing. As a space of almostness, it holds dozens of shifting, paradoxical pieces, by turns close and far away, private and public, hetero and homosexual, alive and dead. To be almost real, and almost fiction, to know and to never-know at once: This is the fragile state of displacement from which my letters grow.

Sent out into the atmosphere, almost-pink steam moves through time, space, and bodies, holding distant writers together in similarity and difference. Bellamy's essay "Delinquent," which takes the form of a letter written by Bellamy to our shared beloved, Kathy Acker, buzzes with this stuff. The first time I read it, I ate up Bellamy's use of the past tense—"Kathy *worshiped* the girls who were bad" and "I wish you *had* met her"—rather than her occasional use of the present.[14] I fell for the neatness of the life narrative, immediately assumed that Bellamy's epistolary essay had been written in late 1997, in the aftermath of Kathy's death from cancer. I saw an echo between Bellamy's epistolary gesture and Kathy's earlier,

"almost" attempt at expressing grief publicly in the form of a love letter, which she considered doing for her friend Robert Mapplethorpe, after the photographer's death from AIDS-related illness.[15]

My assumption that Bellamy's piece was trying to touch the dead in epistolary writing came despite this letter-essay first appearing in 1994, with its unlicensed quoting from the unpublished manuscript of Kathy's novel-in-progress at the time, *My Mother: Demonology*.[16] This novel also features abject letters of love, as Kathy reimagines the erotic and emotional correspondence sent between the French writers Colette Peignot (pen name: Laure) and Georges Bataille. "Dear B," writes Kathy *as* Laure, "All my emotions, fantasies, imaginings, desires are reality because I must have a life that matters, that is emotional."[17] In epistolary, interdisciplinary novels like these, Kathy critically reimagined the much-historicized, often-pathologized conflation of women with weak, private, domestic love letters.

We might think of Samuel Richardson's characterization of Clarissa in his titular, serialized novel of 1748, or Vermeer's earlier domestic visions of women sat at wooden desks, draped in silks and furs, and daydreaming of their epistolary beloved, as indicative of this Eurocentric historical stereotype that is entangled within imperialist, colonialist, capitalist, and patriarchal regimes of power.

So, I made a mistake in my casual assumption that Bellamy's love letter is also an elegy, but might there be a use to my blunder that's "sexy, creative, even cognitively powerful," as Joseph Litvak once told Sedgwick in a "personal communication" (the epistolary impulse resurfacing again in critical gestures), which she later draws on in her essay on reparative reading?[18] Inspired by my error, I entrust the affective, attentive, desiring, erotic, loving, fantastical, and speculative energies of the love letter, as a way to *almost* touch, *nearly* get inside, get *closer* to, the bodies of my beloveds, the vitalities and complexities, even perversities, of their close writing. My own close writing beats with a never-ending correspondence, akin to Carolyn Dinshaw's vision of queer affective communities touching "across time."[19] This "queer historical touch," writes Dinshaw (in close contact with Roland Barthes), involves "partial, affective connection," rather than a full embrace.[20] It is all the more erotic for denying the complete, final grasp of a body. I empathize. Close writing is an attempt to draw *closer*, without fully healing, the severed line separating life and death, the present and the past.

The Author Is Dead (But I *Love* the Author), or, From Close Reading to Close Writing

In the essay "Sedgwick's Perverse Close Reading and the Question of an Erotic Ethics," Meridith Kruse is curious as to how methods of close reading, like the ones her former teacher Jane Gallop had taught her, could be "erotic and ethical at the same time."[21] Kruse remembers Gallop's "2007 seminar on Sedgwick" and her invitations to the class to "slow down and savor the queer details," to "linger over the features of an unusual image," to "trace the way a minor phrase or odd word shifted in significance."[22] In many ways, this echoes the attentive, accumulating style of critical reading, involving "looking at what is actually on the page, reading the text itself, rather than some idea 'behind the text,'" which Gallop described as an ethical practice in an essay published seven years earlier.[23] Here Gallop argues that when close reading "pays attention to elements in the text which, although marginal, are nonetheless emphatic, prominent," the surprise of finding them can facilitate a closer, more ethical, awareness of difference and "specificity."[24] It can help us to listen "to the other," suggests Gallop, the voice and desire, for example, of the queer working-class correspondent who desires from the margins of a painting.[25] And yet, in spite of the fact that Kruse's description of Gallop's close-reading classroom is charged with an erotic, bodily atmosphere (savoring, lingering, tracing: I feel their bodies moving together), the author comes up against a paradox when they read Gallop's earlier essay—which considers the desiring projections of the reader (be they seeking to love *or* to criticize) as totalizing and dangerous—finding within that text an "undoing" of passion entirely.[26]

This is, of course, a reversal of the dynamics Maggie Nelson writes of in *The Argonauts*, when the author encounters Gallop—whom Nelson "liked" for her "heady, disobedient books on Lacan"—coming up against the art historian Rosalind Krauss in a research seminar.[27] After Gallop showed a slide show of naked photographs of herself and her son, taken by her husband named Dick, Krauss "excoriated Gallop for taking her own personal situation as subject matter," without any appreciation of Gallop's in-process, accumulating ideas about the maternal and photographic representation.[28] Krauss is shown to be the paranoid scholar, acting "as though Gallop should be ashamed for trotting out naked pictures of herself and her son in the bathtub, contaminating serious academic space with her

pudgy body and unresolved, self-involved thinking (even though Gallop had been perfecting such contamination for years)."[29] And, so, perhaps Gallop's practice of close reading is muddier, more contaminated (full of almost-pink steam)—in the ways it sensualizes, even spoils, critical acts with scenes, spaces, and affects of love and eroticism—than Kruse's analysis first implies. Could it be closer to Sedgwick's passionate, perverse, obsessive, overidentifying style of close reading than Gallop recognized it to be in 2000, when she equated close reading with the dispassionate, but certainly important, ethics of listening to others? Interestingly, Nelson brings both thinkers into her loving orbit in *The Argonauts* (as I bring all three of them), paying as much attention to the ways their intimate work entered their intimate lives, as the work itself, with life and work exchanges being central to her understanding of queer *practice*. Of Sedgwick, Nelson writes, "Such were Sedgwick's identifications and interests; she was nothing if not honest. And in person she exuded a sexuality and charisma that was much more powerful, particular, and compelling than the poles of masculinity and femininity could ever allow—one that had to do with being fat, freckled, prone to blushing, bedecked in textiles, generous, uncannily sweet, almost sadistically intelligent, and, by the time I met her, terminally ill."[30] Like many of Sedgwick's own writings that directly name the friends, associates, and citational bodies of combined presence and absence who sustain her theory and give her pleasure, Nelson does not withhold the facts of her lived proximity to her charismatic and sick teacher. She appears to be writing alongside Sedgwick, who, according to Kruse, was committed to the idea that "projecting one's own desires and expectations onto a text is not unethical; rather, it serves as a valuable survival tactic to counter cultural erasure," which includes the silencing of sickened bodies.[31]

I, too, am inspired by Sedgwick's close-reading methods for what they can *do*: from the making of "invisible possibilities and desires visible," to smuggling "queer representation in where it must be smuggled," to investing our "mysterious, excessive, or oblique" objects of attachment with "fascination and love."[32] These urges, both "formalist" *and* "passional," are put forward in the introduction to "Queer and Now," which (*almost*) begins the 1993 essay collection *Tendencies*.[33] Reading from the first person and "against the grain," identifying with the text or object or author viscerally, "becoming a perverse reader": These positions are inextricably bound up with the ethics of her intellectual project, of realizing the full and complex possibilities and solidarities of queer experience, its lived

entanglement with reading and writing, as is expressed in the intimate, close readerly absorption of life, text, and body that defines "Memorial for Craig Owens," Sedgwick's work of creativity, grief, and "fairly strange" love-at-a-distance-through-words.[34]

If we read closely elsewhere—in the 2011 book by Gallop, *The Deaths of the Author: Reading and Writing in Time*, which followed the seminar on Sedgwick and features close readings of the theorist's essays—it is possible to pick up on a similar tendency throbbing throughout Gallop's work. And yet the book was, she says, in its initial stages of planning, titled in a similar way to the earlier article: "The Ethics of Close Reading."[35] Gallop was inevitably drawn to the work of Emmanuel Levinas while researching this book-in-development and his theory of ethics based on one's inter-subjective encounter with the other. As a result, when Gallop received a separate invitation to "write about Derrida's work and [her] work" (this article for *differences* was an early testing ground for her imagined book on the ethics of close reading, before it transformed into *The Deaths of the Author*), Gallop turned to the book she was surrounded by (ever the spatially oriented, *close* reader) and thus "decided to write about the only book by Derrida sitting on my desk at the time, his *Adieu à Emmanuel Lévinas*."[36] Published in France in 1997 and translated into English in 1999, this volume comprises two texts, Gallop tells us—a short piece, titled "Adieu," which was delivered at Levinas's funeral in 1995, and a much longer piece called "Le mot d'accueil" (translated as "A Word of Welcome") that opened a conference focused on the philosopher's work a year later.[37] A greeting combines with a farewell in this volume; the closeness of the two gestures comes into sharper focus.

(I remember an epistolary line to my beloved: *These daydreaming letters are all I have to say hello and goodbye*.)

In fact, the passing gesture of "Adieu"—the first text of Derrida's volume—contains within it the self-shattering intimacy of grieving someone just lost while also caring for them, talking to them, as if they're still alive. "I've feared having to say *Adieu* to Emmanuel Lévinas," Derrida writes (but he also spoke it, on the day of the funeral): "I knew that my voice would tremble at the moment of saying it, and especially saying it aloud, right here, before him, so closely to him . . . addressing *directly*, *straight on*, the one who, as we say, is no longer, is no longer living."[38] In direct and dazzling proximity, Derrida conjures contact with his friend, in a way that echoes Levinas's *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, by rejecting binary thinking, the "traditional 'philosophical and religious'

interpretation of death as either 'a passage into nothingness' or 'a passage to some other existence.'"[39] In Derrida's phrasing, "The greeting of the *à-Dieu* does not signal the end."[40] Through reading and writing *with them*, beside them, "the dead can speak."[41] In this way, I am reminded of Derrida's work on hospitality, and the arrival of an "invited guest, or an unexpected visitor . . . a living or dead thing," forcing an "insoluble antinomy" between the absolute law of hospitality and the conditional laws that bind it.[42] Indeed, within the second volume of *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, titled "Word of Welcome," Derrida speaks *with* Levinas, finding within the textures of his thought an unnamed commitment to an ethics of hospitality, the "welcoming of the other."[43]

Gallop picks up on this as well, reading both texts of the volume in close relation and in close relation to her own work. She writes with Derrida:

> If we connect the two titles respectively between hospitality and death (the two themes of the book, I would say), we might see this double title pointing to a relation between hospitality and death. If I were still writing a book on the ethics of close reading, I would want to connect it to this ethics of hospitality toward the dead. I would certainly want to connect this hospitality toward the dead with Barthes's notion . . . that even though the author is dead there are nonetheless authors we "live with," authors we welcome into the texture of our life.[44]

To close-read, then, in this context, and as is felt in Sedgwick's memorial, is to care for the words of the dead, to absorb their words (hospitably) into our writing, our *text-ures*; it's to say welcome and farewell, all at once—which also sounds erotic. "These are theorists *I love* to read," Gallop writes, referring to Barthes, Derrida, Sedgwick, and Spivak, whose "lively" work sustains the close readings the book contains.[45] In the chapter on Barthes, Gallop encourages us to look sideways, away from the theoretical concept that gained currency due to the "elegant, memorable last clause" of a "little essay written in 1967" ("The birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author") and toward hints and glimpses of the author's piecemeal return that got written into his essays soon after.[46] As Gallop close-reads, addressing Barthes's 1971 *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*, the author's return is described as "friendly," and it occurs when we embrace "the pleasure of the Text."[47] This encounter is relational, synergetic. It draws out the kinships we can make in reading and writing. To some, "friendly"

might suggest a dynamic of reserved withholding. But I am attracted to the word for its role in the homosocial network, how the figure of the friend is laced in erotic mystery, too, especially when transferred to this readerly encounter, full of desire if not exactly sexual. As a relation, it then gets even steamier in the 1973 book-length essay-in-pieces *The Pleasure of the Text*, which Gallop quotes from: "As institution, the author is dead: his person . . . has disappeared . . . but in the text, in a certain way, I *desire* the author."[48] In spite of the author's absence, there remain traces of fantasy in the reader/writer for them, like the perverse desire for split and fragmented body parts, akin to fetish objects.[49]

In *Becoming: The Photographs of Clementina, Viscountess Hawarden* (1999), Carol Mavor shares in some of Gallop's attachments, including Barthes and Sedgwick, as part of an intimate and self-proclaimed fetishizing, flirtatious address to a woman photographer "'just missed.'"[50] "[Clementina] Hawarden and her work will always remain young, a brief moment marked by death, absence of information, mature life, images of self, diaries," writes Mavor, in an articulation of an entangled life and practice that, while from a different century, resonates with my own beloveds' piecemeal corporealities, materialities, and temporalities.[51] Out of this chasm of "ghostly image[s]," the writer is bound to a state of longing akin to Barthes's sense of a trembling, desiring language.[52] As Mavor writes, "Although my fingertips have longed to touch the beaten hems of their skirts . . . their bodies and all that has touched them, I have only touched the precious edges of their pictures."[53] And yet, in touching images and materials *with words*, in combining close reading with close looking, in traversing the synergetic relations of animating the absent subject and becoming animated by it, Mavor comes into a space of reciprocal and critical pleasure, surfacing the long-erased secrets of the homoerotic energies and gestures of "sapphic love" that infuse Hawarden's photographic fragments depicting her adolescent daughters as sisters.[54] It is a project in flirting critique, argues Mavor, which, "as a game of suspension without the finale of seduction, keeps our subjects alive" (in elusive and desirable ways).[55] Led by this writerly form of sensual and flirtatious discovery, Mavor's work has helped me to find my fantasy sisters, by recognizing their desire and withholding. She has given me the permission to write and read *closer*, pulling me—with tenderness and daring, in dialogue with Sedgwick's sense of adolescence as a model for queer critique that is theorized within *Novel Gazing*'s introductory essay—into the risky and reparative (blissful, flirtatious) edges of close reading becoming close-writing practices.[56]

Interestingly, *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction* (1997) is cradled by the tender touch of a Clementina Hawarden cover image, alluding to the intertextual and intimate atmospheres resonating in the work of both authors: of shared nineteenth-century citations and queer-feminist acts of revisionist re-reading,[57] transforming the close looking, close reading, and close writing of Victorian paintings, photographs, novels, and homosocial love letters.[58]

Indeed, for Sedgwick, it is the Victorian novel—"queer texts (or authors) and non-queer ones . . . female ones and male," as she puts it in the *Novel Gazing* introduction that articulates the sensual praxis of attending intimately to texts: with pleasure and in absorption of the "speculative . . . methodologically adventurous" adolescent reader—that fills her world.[59] Many of the essays in the collection strike up a readerly relationship with nineteenth-century figures (Marcel Proust, Henry James); others turn to "the age of AIDS" (in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*).[60] Such a cross-historical range is thought-provoking, as the propositions made by such texts also inform Sedgwick's opening call—which is mobilized and contextualized by the ethics and emotions of AIDS activism across the long 1980s into the 1990s, and also cites Proust—for the queer and critical practice of reparative reading, which is intertextual and affective in its close, "overattached" readerly and writerly identifications of "deroutinized . . . temporality."[61] Already this had been felt in the earlier "Memorial for Craig Owens," wherein the queer temporalities of sickness, death, reading, and writing are intimately drawn across the distances of time and space, the paradoxes of presence and absence. This is the pulse of when close reading—in all its textures and identifications—becomes *close writing* to critical and reparative effect.[62]

The Ambivalence of the Reparative Communion

I encounter similar "close" terms and temporalities in the Black feminist scholarship of Saidiya Hartman, while recognizing that there is in her work a specific encounter that grapples with the absences, the silences, the violent misrepresentations, registered in the historical archive of the racialized dead. Critically engaging the unbearable difficulties of ever being able to trace, represent, and recover the full lives and social deaths of enslaved, incarcerated, confined young Black girls and women, for Hartman, *to read* the historical archive *closely* is rather "to imagine what cannot be verified" within the textures of an "impossible *writing*," as she theorizes in the essay

"Venus in Two Acts."[63] It is a methodological gesture that combines fiction and history: a specific and necessary movement toward "redressing the violence that produced" precarious, captive, and enslaved Black lives during chattel slavery as "numbers, ciphers, and fragments of discourse."[64] Hartman's method, *critical fabulation*, seeks to register the gaps in the archive, particularly the absent autobiographical narratives of female captives who survived the Middle Passage, and speculate anew, *with care*—always negotiating, rather than smoothing over—the murderous violences that constructed the archive as a repository of disappearance for young Black women and girls.[65] In this practice, close reading is transformed as an act of attention that does not simply seek to recover, console, or even repair the absent "lives of the enslaved . . . the dead."[66] Instead, close reading for Hartman is reconfigured as a reparative method that depends on a paradoxical encounter with the archive's limits; its construction (history's construction) as fiction itself; the always-present impossibility of resuscitation. Writing imaginatively through narrative fiction, in and among archive traces, opens out a contingent set of possibilities for what else might have been said, or done, or desired, or *sensed*, in the past, the enduring present, and for a future otherwise. Close reading in Hartman's work stimulates the critical imagination of a *counter*-historical close writing.

In her *Wayward Lives Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* (2019), Hartman develops this critical practice more explicitly into a language defined by *closeness in* and *as* storytelling, what Hartman terms *close narration*: a speculative, choral writing of multiple vantage points, wherein the voice of character and narrator collapse into one another, in the desire and effort to "inhabit the intimate dimensions" of her subjects' sensual lives.[67] Close narration also runs subversively counter to the vast, dispersed archives attached to "rent collectors; surveys and monographs of sociologists; trial transcripts; slum photographs; reports of vice investigators, social workers, and police officers; interviews with psychiatrists and psychologists; and prison case files," all of which sought to surveil, pathologize, discipline, and control young Black women and queer folk dreaming and practicing new forms of social life, love, and affiliation within turn-of-the-century urban enclosures in northern US cities.[68] The attention, the *care*, with which Hartman "elaborates, augments, transposes, and breaks open archival documents"—the intimate register from which her collaged, choral, close picture-of-moving-pictures emerges—has also been read as a gesture of love, *to* and *for* her "minor figures."[69] It is an affective investment that pulses through the shifts, processes, and

compositions of writing, an enduring and necessary project given how far "Black women are treated with such little regard . . . in the world": their bodies, desires, lives, and literatures "dismissed and ignored," "belittled and mocked," rather than loved and cared for, *recognized*.[70] Nourishing Hartman's wayward writing of wayward practices are "utterances from the chorus," the "circle" of Black radical and feminist thinkers to whom she reads and writes alongside (in motion), whose work Hartman recognizes as also underpinned and sustained by love.[71] I read these citational slips of italicized lines in her book as indirect traces of love-letter writing: a close correspondence.

The love letter is both conceptual and material in Hartman's close-
1 narrative writing of archival fullness. It is a writing tool *and* a research
4 object. Many of the snapshot biographies that constitute its collective song are based on the case files of personal interviews, family histories, psychological and physical examinations, intelligence tests, social investigators' and probation officers' reports, personal correspondence, love letters, photographs, poems, and life writings attached to the New York State Reformatory for Women at Bedford Hills, where young Black women and girls were incarcerated for desiring to live differently—marked "as pathological and immoral, if not criminal."[72] These documents create the trails of traces that Hartman follows, then disturbs. Reading "against the grain," she writes, Hartman breaks "open the stories they told in order to narrate" her own, and get closer to the radical, riotous beauty in and of their waywardness, wherein this "collective endeavor to live free unfolds in the confines of the carceral landscape."[73] We learn of how the act of writing letters (to mothers, to friends, to companions, to lovers) came up against the institution's disciplinary racist forces—the controlling gaze of a matron reading and surveilling the girls' letters before being re-enveloped and sent—exerted in the name of social hygiene and "reform."[74]

And yet—recalling the fugitive letters written and sent by Harriet Jacobs from her tiny crawlspace attic enclosure, where she hid for seven years, enacting a written practice of correspondence from within her space of confinement to imagine and discover new forms of freedom, creativity, kinship, intellect, and love—Hartman catches "glimmer[s] of possibility . . . the ache of what might be," even in the files where letters are physically missing.[75] There is the surreptitious desire for intimacy, for contact, and also for writing itself, held in the punishable passing of notes to other girls in prison, as Mattie Nelson, one of Hartman's wayward figures, did (*or could have done*), before being sent to the Disciplinary Building in

1918 for "hiding stationery and stamps in her room." Hartman begins to imagine stories of sensual and creative life otherwise, between the lines, and amid the silences, working *with* and *against* the archive. "What stories were shared in all the letters lost and disappeared, the things whispered, and never disclosed?" she asks. "Is it possible to conjure the sentences and paragraphs and poems contained in that lost archive? Or find a way to Mattie's language of self-expression?"[76] For Hartman, the question holds a speculative, close reimagining of a life's desire.

Lines from prisoners' love letters also enter the counter-historical frame more tangibly, akin to a close writing of correspondence transcription, as in rioting refuser Loretta Michie's letter "to 'Devoted Pal'" that addresses the "sweetheart in my dreams I'm calling you."[77] But Hartman holds contingency in her grasp, through the narrative deliberations, questions, and pauses, the mixing of tenses and timelines, the improvisations of the writing (that recall the Bedford Hills rioters' collaborative energies), meaning that her minor figures desire and move, articulating wayward practices of radical love through fugitive letters, in a sensitive, carefully wrought relation to their right to opacity. This again echoes the fugitive register of desire, movement, and creative practice as situated within "impossible strictures of enclosure and confinement" signaled by Jacobs's "loophole of retreat," which Tina Campt, alongside Hartman and the artist Simone Leigh, has mobilized "in an effort to revalue black women's intellectual labor."[78] As a site of writing, the crawlspace reminds us of the resourceful strategies developed by Black women to narrativize their private worlds, and kindle intimate relations across textual forms, from within brutalized and suffocating spaces of enclosure. When *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* was first published in 1861, Jacobs used the pseudonym "Linda Brent" to protect herself, family, and friends from punishment during the Antebellum period; it was addressed, as Ashon T. Crawley notes, "to white women to engage them in abolition work," signaling the degree to which white reading publics, even for a "proto-black feminist project," shaped the parameters and reception of the text.[79]

Hartman collages her love-letter traces as a speculative rendering of close still lives, of fugitive letters, of pseudonymous private texts, as moving pictures. This is a specific Black feminist method that mobilizes the archival tools, the storytelling contingencies, the cross-historical effects of close writing, in a particular way: an expansive "love letter to all those who had been harmed" in an age defined by state and sexual violence against young Black women and girls, involuntary servitude, ghettoization, segregation,

anti-Black legislation, the shadows and afterlives of slavery—within and beyond the archive.[80]

Scholars such as Tavia Nyong'o have recognized the critical and conceptual linkages and tensions between the Black feminist thought of Hartman, queer of color critique, and Sedgwickian queer theory of affective tone and reach: bodies of work I, too, correspond with—letters, memorials, archives, close readings *with* and *to* the dead—as I trace close writing's particular elaboration and performance of the reparative position.[81] Nyong'o emphasizes that what motivates the impulse to "redress" or "repair" in Hartman's reparative practice of critical fabulation, for instance, is *ambivalence*: a freighted and careful grappling with the frictions and limits of historical rescue. In fact, José Esteban Muñoz's own ambivalently reparative reading of the controversial project that saw the editing, afterwording, and publication of the stories, journals, and notebooks of Gary Fisher, a minor, sick, unarchived, racialized figure, by his friend and former teacher, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, after Fisher's death from AIDS-related illness in 1994 (resulting in *Gary in Your Pocket: Stories and Notebooks of Gary Fisher*, 1996), provides Nyong'o with an example of this complex strand of queer optimism that troubled the "identitarian logics of the multicultural academy."[82] Muñoz deliberately locates this "rich, complicated, and sometimes troubling collaborative scene" within the context of a "sponsorship," indexing as it does a "history of African American cultural production that was not possible without a certain level of white patronage."[83] Muñoz also recognizes that such a history finds a difficult contour in Fisher's own writing of submissive desire that was "intricately linked" to an "experience of the self as a racialized sexual object."[84] "Reading Fisher," Muñoz writes, "is a challenge for those of us who toil in the archives of collective dispossession."[85]

But then from here, Muñoz pivots, reconsiders Fisher (his writing, his desire, his Blackness), reads him—*with* Sedgwick—another way, and not simply by foreclosing the realities of systemic racism that condition the "erotics of racial fetishism" the dialogic project plays out.[86] Instead, by turning (via Jean-Luc Nancy) to the sensed relations of this shared scene—wherein "Eve 'knows' . . . Gary" and "Gary 'knows' . . . Eve" through "trajectories and intersections between our senses of the world that make the world"—the reparative forces of *Gary in Your Pocket* emerge with Muñoz's gesture: a "sharing (out) of the unshareable."[87] This, argues Muñoz, helps us to return to the "strange optic allowed by their communion with each

other," which existed and flourished *because of* awkward convergences they felt and wrote.[88] An affective relation surfaces that is the "experience of being-in-common-in-difference," that is rooted in a "vaster commons of the incommensurable," that is the excess (strange, intangible) *sense* of queerness.[89]

Occupying the ambivalence of the reparative communion, I, too, write *through* a sense of the incommensurable, to share what perhaps can never be shared. It is a strange optic. It troubles, but it is tender, also (potentially, perhaps) invasive. Or uneasy. In this orbit of likeness but not sameness, I ask what we, too, can glean about the difficult contours of Kathy and Cookie, through loving and communing and speculating and corresponding with them this way.

As a triangulated scene of association, affection, and attachment, which brings together the lives, bodies, works, and love letters of three white women writers, it could also be read as reproducing racialized dominances in art and literature. I am aware here of how whiteness, as Sara Ahmed argues, "orientates bodies in specific directions, affecting how they 'take up' space."[90] Perhaps this also includes the affectionate and desiring "taking up of texts": an example of what Ahmed understands as an "inheritance . . . of orientations."[91] In this understanding of inheritance, a problematic occurs within gestures of feminist research, as the reader absorbs "proximities (and hence orientations)" to certain objects (meaning physical things, but also "styles, capacities, aspirations, techniques, habits," and archives of *writings*), which shape "'what' we come into contact with," in a way that enables, but also delimits, the availability and "*reachability*" of certain objects, encompassing the texts we read and cite, *write to*.[92]

I acknowledge the project's entanglement within such lines of contact. In response, I question and surface how the structural forces of whiteness impacted my subjects' writing lives, alongside the contemporaneous creative labors of artists and writers of color, whose intersectional working lives intersected with Kathy's and Cookie's at varying degrees of proximity. Such relations also draw attention to racialized violences and the disorientations of social and aesthetic formations. Connections, tensions, differences, and ambiguities of contact and affection are unraveled—in ways that future work could further trace to critical effect in circular rather than triangular motions—in this reparative gesture of ambivalent communion.

Love Letters and Love-in-Pieces (Dwelling in My Pocket)

Neither only a memorial, nor a work of close narration, nor a posthumous stage: In *this* close-writing archive of affection and ambivalence, it is the queer feminist love letter that touches, smuggles, makes visible and palpable, despite (or because of?) the temporal distance that separates us, "the powerful, refractory, and exemplary" forces of my texts, who are also my beloved, who are their own close writing.[93] I receive their pieces like letters, to which I relate, reply, and respond, ask questions, and move dangerously and precariously closer, through the acts and affects of writing itself. Close writing is process; it captures the perpetual loops of correspondence. It is an elastic space that liberates critical scenes of interpretation, as the intimate enclosure of the letter gives me the courage and protection to say the (perverse? embarrassing? risky? overinvolved?) thing that *I think* my beloveds would want me to come out and say (saying *too much*) about their works enveloped in their lives and their lives enveloped in their works. Close writing breaches distance: It addresses authors as if they were kin, making space to be proximate with one another. It creates an atmosphere of electrical charge that is edgy. Close writing is attentive, like close reading, but it is not always duly precise, seeing the erotics of fantasy—the exposure of it onto the page, an un-closing—as another form of attention.

In the short letters I write *to* my beloveds, I am repeatedly "*thinking of you*." These pieces of exploratory love-letter writing—which are etched with the affective and bodily temporalities, materialities, and textualities of the private, almost-pink-steamed, handwritten missive—hold a waking "out of . . . forgetfulness," as Barthes describes the powerful effects of the familiar epistolary address in love-letter writing.[94] The fleeting absences of the beloved, suggests Barthes, electrify and solidify their return.[95] The writing of the love letter sustains the beloved in an erotic *relation*, bringing "together two images."[96] This networked loop involving flashes of presence and absence is "like desire," writes Barthes: "The love letter waits for an answer; it implicitly enjoins the other to reply."[97] I wait and wait and wait—in the devotional, undeliverable, unreturnable letters that reach and revive my beloveds in a different way, through the persistent writing of and through desire.

I think of Paul B. Preciado writing in *Artforum* after being sick with COVID-19; the short piece's haunting echoes with my own position of

expressing love but forever living "with the impossible anticipation of a physical encounter," the tangible arrival of a letter "that would never take place."[98] Preciado's attempt to reach, *across distance*, for his ex-lover, also occurs in the postviral, delirious writing of a futile letter: "a poetic and desperate declaration of love . . . a shameful document for the one who had signed it."[99] The letter did not enter the postal network; he could not move beyond the sick scene of his quarantined confinement of care to send it. It found a more familiar, intimate home instead, close to his own feverish body: the bottom of his garbage bin. It is a seductive, spatial image, his love letter first housed within a "bright white envelope," then placed within a dark, cavernous passage of waste (his domestic Dead Letter Office), seemingly going nowhere.[100]

Preciado's is the letter that evades physical delivery, or the reception of what is materially legible, echoing Ocean Vuong's irreconcilable, never-to-be-read letter to his mother, a Vietnamese immigrant, whom he had once tried to teach how to read "the way" his "third grade" teacher had "taught" him. As he remembers of this reversal of pedagogical "hierarchies" traditionally inscribed onto the parent-child relationship: "After the stutters, the false starts, the words warped or locked in your throat, after failure, you slammed the book shut."[101] Vuong writes across this chasm, traversing the unpredictable, aching line of yearning: "I am writing to reach you—even if each word I put down is one word further from where you are."[102] I hear the frequency of this ache. However undeliverable, or unreceivable, Vuong's or Preciado's or my own letters might be, new paths (not necessarily chronological) can still stretch out, through the feeling processes of writing.

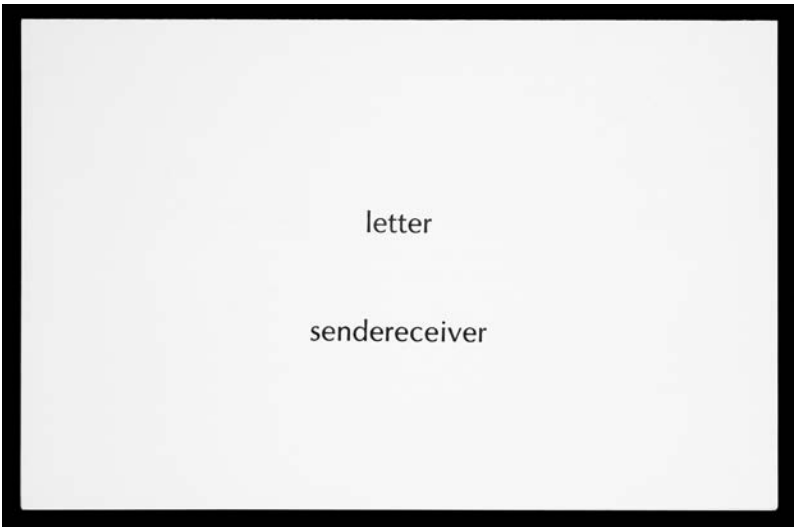
I, too, am interested in the love letter—be it to someone dead or alive, deliverable or not; be it to a person, or species, or idea, or feeling, or thing—as shaped by a desiring relation that is always marked by distance, by lag, by missing messages and missing bodies (sapphic-style), as if the love letter is always (ambiguously) a part, section, or fragment of something else. Indeed, Anne Carson recognizes in *Eros the Bittersweet* how in "numerous epistolary scenarios to be found in ancient novels," "Letters stand oblique to the action" and the lover's strategies are "obstructed by an absent presence."[103] Written or received, the love letter, therefore, is always partial, constructed of divergent pieces and paradoxes, including the poles of proximity and distance, as the love letter travels across time, space, bodies, and readers.

Moreover, when loving means writing means *waiting* (as Carson also writes, "The experience of eros is a study in the ambiguities of time. Lovers

are always waiting. They hate to wait; they love to wait"), the love-letter writer experiences pleasure and pain at once (another almost-pink-steamed paradox).[104] And it was Carson again who recognized Sappho to be the first poet to conceive of such splitting, whereby love involves a kind of emotional and bodily fracture, with the lover navigating conflicting affects—pieces of sweet and pieces of bitter—that rub one against the other.[105] This ambiguous state is intensified through the composition of close writing's partialized love letters, as the form becomes a reparative means of "coming to terms with," as Page duBois writes of the historical positioning demanded by Sappho's archived body in pieces, the poetic traces of which emanate with self-seeing, unshamed, disordered bodies in love.[106] It is a state, position, and form that facilitates a piecemeal broaching of the breach (temporal, spatial, physical) separating and connecting my fragmentary beloved and me.

To think of love's configuration is to think of those unsealed edges, which echo the wasted materialities of Sappho's own ancient poetic pieces, or the spare, lightweight sheathes of cloudy papers that form Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's 1977–78 mail art and performance project *Audience Distant Relative* (figure I.1). In this iterative work in pieces, Cha explores the contingency of correspondence, its fragility to refract, to never *quite* reach. Her empty envelopes (printed with words becoming concrete poems: "audience distant relative"; "lettersenderreceiver"; "messenger"; "echo"; "object/subject"; and "between delivery") do not meet the closure of the (material, linguistic) seal; they remain adrift in a space of belated in-betweenness, which is particularly significant for Korean American diasporic identities and social bonds. Could the "irresolvable problem of distance" at the heart of the second-person address in letter writing—which Cha addresses directly in the 1977 live performance of this work, when she articulates, "You are the audience / you are my distant audience / i address you / as i would a distant relative / seen only heard only through someone else's description"—make a different kind of contact and community formation happen, that loves with the dispersal of *traces* rather than intelligible wholes?[107] Materially and figuratively suggestive of this characterization, the contemporary poets Ada Limón and Natalie Diaz have more recently described their poem-letters exploring abstractions of kinship, heritage, and belonging as "envelopes of air."[108]

The unending letters, asides, messages, fantasies, and postscripts interlaced throughout this close writing listen to the idea that the love letter is messy like love itself; both the feeling and its writing are made of affective,



an empty envelope of air
(printed with words
becoming concrete poems)

I.1. Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *Audience Distant Relative*, 1977–78. Black ink on six white envelopes; 6 ¼ × 9 ½ in. University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive; Gift of the Theresa Hak Kyung Cha Memorial Foundation.

bodily, durational, linguistic, and material pieces and shards. These are *my* relational *love-in-pieces*; these pieces are *me*, which I share with my beloveds. Through these nonlinear pieces, written in an ever-changing personal present tense, and sometimes retrospectively (or nostalgically; it is a long love story in letters), I love them, think of them, seek to know and understand them (never "own" them), while reckoning with the impossibility of ever knowing them *completely*. I am *always waiting* for their return, if only in short glimpses.

Like Emily Dickinson making thrifty use of envelopes as tactile and domestic materials for her penciled poetry, the love of this writing arrives obliquely: at odd temporal angles formed by scattered shapes. Strange mergings of past and present occur that are physical and affective, akin to Sedgwick and Michael Lynch's tender caressing of Dickinson's gravestone, which became the black-and-white photographic-collage frontispiece that begins *Tendencies*—dedicated "in memory," and "with love," to her fellow Dickinson devotee.[109] "We are both obsessed with Emily Dickinson," Sedgwick writes in "White Glasses," manifesting in the queer collecting of "tokens, readings, pilgrimages, impersonations," which could be seen to embody the desire of an epistolary response *to* one of their "lesbian ego ideals."[110]

Dickinson's "envelope poems," as they have come to be known, are letters-in-miniature. They are poem drafts. They are, in a way, a series of preliminary sketches for something fuller, more "epic" to come. But it did not come in her lifetime. Instead, Dickinson lingered forever in this intimate zone of unfinished pieces, perhaps preferring not to "officially" publish her writing. She sent it in the post instead, circulated it among friends and associates, hidden within letters "that were often indistinguishable from poetry."[111] Lined by wrinkles, spotted by ink stains, smudged by a lip, these are fragile paper-things that recall the touch and smells of a previous owner, which in this case happens to be two, as Dickinson unfolded, smoothed out, ripped, cut, and manipulated with delicate abstractions of form, the epistolary materials she first received, then wrote on, or we might say replied *to*, in her distinctive, spaced-out pencil script. She was, as Jan Bervin writes, "reading and responding to her materials, angling the page to write in concert with the light rule and laid lines of the paper, using internal surface divisions, such as overlapping planes of paper, to compose in a number of directional fields."[112] She wrote into the space of the envelope visually, made space anew. And so, as well as pieces of poetry, or little bits of letter, these objects should be "understood as visual

productions," as Susan Howe writes; they hold multiple disciplines and practices—the *artistic* and the *lived*—in their capacious, sprawling reach.[113]

I like the word "piece" as a writing descriptor because it is malleable and stretchy, which extends, as it did for Dickinson, into my love-letter practice of braided pieces traversing poetry and prose, art and literature, creative and critical writing, which is intercut with the influence of Carol Mavor's own writing—visual, intimate, spare; sewn and unsewn—on and beside Dickinson's sketched poems.[114]

I hold my beloveds close in this process, caressing their words and pieces in my pocket, occasionally pulling them out from inside, up to the surface and into the air. Dickinson's envelope obsession was matched by a love of pockets, to which she would secretly store her materials of and for writing close to the outline of her flesh: slips, scraps, envelopes, letters, pencil, thread. Only a few items of Dickinson's clothing remain, one of which is a demure, inexpensive house dress typical of late 1870s and early 1880s New England fashions: "cotton piqué, loose fitting with no waistline, featuring a box-pleated flounce at the bottom, twelve mother-of-pearl buttons, a flat collar, and a pocket on the right hip."[115] I think of that right hip pocket edged with a scalloped lace trim—its intimacy with the body's sweat and smells; its location within the private-domestic; its capacity to care for things, while also inviting erotic play with them, too—as a close-to-flesh, tactile dwelling for my own *love-in-pieces*.

Similarly sensorial, my "writer's love"—its partialized love-in-pieces—has grown with *archival touch*.[116] Within research repositories of varying degrees of order and strategies of assembly, located within cities across the United States, the body has touched material has touched affect. I thumbed the transparent invitation to Cookie's memorial at the venue MK, felt death between thumb and forefinger as I clutched and creased the see-through paper. I feverishly turned the fever-suffocated pages of Kathy's ring-bound notebooks. I began with the version at 8 x 10 inches, the size of a picture frame, which she marked with her address in blue fountain pen, could not decide if it was a "diary" or "poems" (plate 2).[117] I held Cookie's fragile postcards in my hands, trying desperately to not smudge the marble print (plate 3). I unfolded from envelopes the typed and handwritten letters they pocket. I caressed fraying manuscripts of fading typewriter ink, dog-eared at the annotated edges. I stroked the lists in CVs. I pressed the play button to hear them read aloud. I grasped my beloveds' worn pieces of presence and absence and "erotic crypticness," as Mavor describes the scattered archives of Sappho's poetry.[118] In such meetings, a cross-historical relation

of love flourished at fragmented sites of text and texture: sites that Kate Eichhorn suggests are important for queer feminist writers, artists, and activists in that they open out "the possibility of being in time and in history differently," staging reengagements with feminist pasts that seek to imagine "other ways to live in the present."[119]

From the one-time touch of the recipient, through the posthumous touch of the researcher, to the belated touch of the close writer: Letters are contagious in their complex appeals to the tactile sense. And so, even if archival research is mostly tactile—although the polymorphous pandemic era has shifted sensory interactions into digitally haptic domains—it's doubly so with the strange temporality of close writing. As Jean Luc-Nancy's epithet provokes, "*Touching*—happens in writing all the time."[120] Touch in close writing is physical and emotional; it is by getting corporeally close to their writing objects that I am "touched," or *invaded* (because love is also a "microbial intruder," as the poet Daisy Lafarge has written).[121] Through this touch, I *fall*, into the textures of my love-in-pieces, *trying* to touch them back.

I steal pieces of my beloved, *with love*. Their pieces merge with my looped and threaded pieces, in letters "small enough to fit in your pocket."[122]

Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* conjures a similar image in its piecemeal materiality and visual layout. I picture slips of paper: handled, folded, scored at the seam, then stitched back together. Dickinson's envelopes also recall the dashed lines found on the flimsy paper pattern for a dress. However, when looking for a citational model, Nelson turned to Barthes's *A Lover's Discourse*, as swatches of quotation get closely woven into her personal writing in an echo of the French writer's fragmentary pages. These inked "figures" bring her company, kinship, hope for survival and love, amid oppressive threats to queer intimacies. Theory sustains life, and life sustains theory; reading meshes with experience: Both are to do *with love*.

Love flies in *The Argonauts*; it has multiple wings—romantic, familial, political, *written*—that spread out across multiple genres: pieces of essay, memoir, autofiction, queer theory, and love letter. The first paragraph is dated "October, 2007," and it begins with the most euphoric of epistolary denouements: "The words *I love you* come tumbling out of my mouth in an incantation the first time you fuck me in the ass, my face smashed against the cement floor of your dank and charming bachelor pad."[123] Nelson speaks directly to her lived beloved, in a writing of visceral contact, as

forceful and loving as the anal sex it describes. She "smashes" us into their moment, between "I" and "you," because, as Barthes writes, "*I-love-you* has no 'elsewhere' . . . no distance, no distortion will split the sign."[124] Nelson creates the closest of spaces for her love projection: Subject, object, and reader become entangled—*beside one another*—as one body.

While Barthes's discussion of the "I love you" phrase in *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* is referenced just a few pages after Nelson's incantation, there are other figures in *The Argonauts* with whom she writes "beside," with love—this another kind of writer's love—to explore the queer possibilities of sex, family, survival, and *writing*.[125] Sara Ahmed, Judith Butler, Anne Carson, Eileen Myles, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick are just some of the names she gets close to (their names listed affectionately in the margins—spatially and emotionally *close*). Nelson does not specifically reference Sedgwick's discussion of "beside" as a critical practice (which is stitched into *Touching Feeling*), but it beats throughout the relational, reparative energies and spatial, affective proximities of her writing.[126] Indeed, when Nelson calls on Sedgwick's work on reparative reading (which the discussion of "beside" both extends and prefaces, "beside" being an alternative to paranoid critical practices of *beneath*, *behind*, and *beyond*, which conversely seek a climactic "drama of exposure"), it generates the effect of an echo, two writers in epistolary contact.[127] *The Argonauts*, with its affectionate desire to write with those whom Nelson loves in life and language—stitching their words of desire, connection, sex, and politics into her personal flow—is surely what Sedgwick had in mind when she explained the queer potential of reparative work.

Hence, the reparative position enables the risk of writing openly and emotionally (across all the paradoxes of feeling), even when it "feels . . . like a bad idea," as Nelson describes of her own work.[128] To write with love has always been dumped into the category of "bad idea" for most critics and scholars, but in *The Argonauts* such desire is inseparable from the broader arguments it's making about gender, sexuality, and representation: the freedom to write (in close dialogue with Sedgwick's 1987 essay "A Poem Is Being Written," which links poetry with spanking with "female anal eroticism"), an incantation as naked as "I am not interested in a hermeneutics, or an erotics, or a metaphorics of my anus, I am interested in ass-fucking."[129] It's as if she's emotionally involved with "Eve" *and* Harry—the person whom she fucks. Thus, *The Argonauts* not only opens up the complexities of sexual desire and the ways we write it; it also shows the complex emotional, often erotic involvement it's possible to have with the people

whom we love and read, the figures she calls "the many gendered-mothers of my heart."[130] Nelson writes against the paranoid voice of criticism and against the policing of desire; for her, the two intentions are knotted as one, in her "wild theory" *of love*.[131]

Nelson's desire to be close to Harry, as it's posed within the terms of an epistolary address, describes the relational writer's love that nourishes this close writing: "I want the you no one else can see, the you so close the third person never need apply."[132]

(*I pocket this slip*.)

"Love-in-pieces" in this book—as an enveloped, partialized form and force field—is spun with the affects and attachments of a writer's love. I dream and write and love beside my writer-beloveds, feel them closely in my pocket. I piece letters together—an impulse to repair—to love and care for their bodies in pieces, across life and text and scattered archives, across the pieces of their close writing. These are the "fragments and part-objects" I encounter or create, as a "reparatively positioned" close reader and close writer.[133] In piecemeal, private, public, and unpublished close writings, which mined epistolary and autobiographical materials, Kathy and Cookie always pocketed (like adolescent shoplifters) more than one genre or discipline. I attend to this undisciplined approach by *responding to* it in a similar way, inhabiting the unresolved, tentative, and speculative tendencies of the torn piece, rather than the finished letter. Writer's love is a project of endurance. I hold back from reassembling their bodies in pieces when the cuts and violences of their lives in and as writing are so central to their understanding. A different shape emerges that listens to the breaks, the absent space around the pieces we have left. These letters shift across time and space and come in short, grasping bursts with the closing in of a pandemic; they have no fixed route mapped out for them.[134]

Encompassing dual senses (aesthetic and affective) of writerly form and writerly love, I use "love-in-pieces" as a method to address, almost touch, get closer to and care for the similarly cross-genre and cross-disciplinary effects of my beloveds' close writing, which was tested and performed in their partialized, piece-by-piece archives becoming *diary pieces*, a *novel-in-pieces*, and *letter pieces* (each explored in the book's three full-length but patchwork chapters). Love-in-pieces is a state of slippage, enfolding love as a feeling, love as a historical relation between writers, and love as a piecemeal, epistolary, undisciplined literary form (that expands on histories and practices of the love letter in queer feminist lives and works,

which I have addressed in this section)—all slipped inside its pocketed vessel. And form and content get close within it: "Love-in-pieces" gathers multiple genres and forms to speak *to* a chaotic, messy, paradoxical, enduring, never-finished cross-historical experience of writing love, of feeling love *in* and *with* writing. As the third correspondent and character in the love triangle, love-in-pieces is my offering, my output: reparative pieces rather than paranoid wholes. Kathy, Cookie, and Me. To commit to this unfinished task is to write through the bittersweet, ambiguous, partialized, transitional, erotic, afflicted, and fragmented spaces of writerly love across time, the breach between life and death, the *and*.

The Intimate Slippages of Close Writing

Energized by the formal and affective method of love-in-pieces, close writing stakes its claim as a queer feminist methodology that offers a way of reading and writing differently and makes possible reparative engagements, newly touching what is risky, sexual, sensual, and surprising about the works and lives of my beloved, including the formal and political possibilities, the queer feminist effects, of their own close writing. I propose that we need approaches like this to remind us of the textures of thought—and otherwise readings—that come through the textures, affects, processes, experiments, and embodiments of writing itself. This is writing as feminist praxis, practice, and research, writing that does not, as Lauren Berlant describes in an interview on their collaborative project with Kathleen Stewart, "separate the tone of the action-voice from the ambition for knowledge production."[135] In so doing, I absorb the epistolary materials of my beloved into my writing, a way to think beside them. Their tools meet other tools in my "feminist toolbox" (to cite Sara Ahmed), which expands as I read, as I *write*, gathering fellow correspondents across the spaces of art, literature, and theory: Ahmed, Berlant, Stewart; also, Anne Boyer, Tina Campt, Alexis Pauline Gumbs, Saidiya Hartman, Johanna Hedva, Quinn Latimer, Carol Mavor, Maggie Nelson, Eve Sedgwick, Julietta Singh, authors to whom I continually return, or feel nearby, at the skin of the page.[136]

Love manifests in this book as a writing practice-oriented methodology that highlights the bodily and affective materialities of the pieces that make my beloveds' interdisciplinary close-writing archive. By writing, looking, feeling, and loving (*in/as pieces*) closely, I move closer to the intimate matter they transcribed and transformed in art and writing: how

far they mined the visceral substances of their intimate lives to shift the boundaries of sexual desire, the sick body, and love, and subvert and challenge the sexed, classed, and gendered limitations placed on them, from the misogynistic attitudes of the 1970s conceptual art world in America, to the stigmatizing absence of treatment, education, and support for high-risk groups during the American AIDS epidemic in the 1980s. "Close writing"—the book and the term—is an interdisciplinary intervention into the existing scholarship on the two writers. Showing how their discipline and genre-shifting pieces provided new understandings of what it means to desire and love, *in* and *through* and *with* the sick body, "close writing" revitalizes the queer feminist politics of their lives in and as writing—which frayed the edges separating fiction and lived experience, past and present temporalities, visual and literary modes. Our close writings slip and collapse into one another.

Never have their entangled lives, works, and archives received such close and dialogic attention, in synchronicity, affinity, and correspondence, and through this interdisciplinary lens. To highlight the hybrid crossings at work in close writing—between the visual, the material, the performative, and the literary—I inhabit a position that is figured in close proximity to Kathy's early works, which meshed private and public documents in response to conceptual and feminist art practices: from her diary experiments in the 1970s, to her self-published chapbooks, to her 1980s novels combining stolen life writings and literary texts. The focus of this research emerged from daily, desiring encounters in the archives of Acker's notebooks and papers, at New York University and Duke University, over a six-week period. In this regard, this study builds on the archive-rich research of literary scholar Georgina Colby, theorist McKenzie Wark, and writerly biographers Jason McBride and Chris Kraus.[137] While Wark attends to the philosophical transness of Kathy as a "low theorist" via a textured "web" of archived citations, in a differential swerve from these methods of critical surface and dance, I harness the depth of close reading made possible with close writing.[138] It is a mode of close archival attention that also determines my critical objects. Indeed, while Colby focuses on unpublished poetry materials in the archive, drawing links between these early 1970s experiments and the work of the L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E poets, I turn more explicitly—as Kraus also does in *After Kathy Acker*—to the unpublished diaries and private notebooks that preceded Kathy's first self-published chapbook *Politics* (1972), newly positioning these earliest pieces in an often-ambivalent correspondence with conceptual art, experimental

poetry, and feminist art practices. I am grateful to Kraus for the archival drive of her literary-biographical work and for the passion, commitment, and sheer breadth of McBride's life-writing research, which I broaden and deepen here, in dialogue with theoretical debates and concepts coming from multiple disciplines: feminist and queer theory, performance studies, critical theory, art and literary history, and philosophy.

My interest in the visual and performance aspects of Kathy's close-writing practice also aligns with Courtney Foster's proposition that in *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula by the Black Tarantula* the author invented a mode of "performative reading" in response to developments in 1970s performance art.[139] But for the most part, and following a conference on Kathy's work held at New York University's Fales Library five years after her death in 2002, which then became the 2006 essay collection *Lust for Life: On the Writings of Kathy Acker*, critical scholarship has tended to come from exclusively literary circles, focusing on Kathy's avant-garde aesthetics in the context of postmodern theories and punk poetics.[140] Beyond recognizing that Kathy experimented with modes such as *autoplagiarism*, wherein the author recounts "one's own life as if it, too, were a stolen text"—also *allobiography*, "the writing of one's life *as other*"—I ask why there has been a reluctance to address the particular, transgressive role of the autobiographical "matter" that informs and nourishes, to the extent it is often transcribed and reworked *into*, her interdisciplinary close writings.[141] In some ways, the intimate perspectives engineered in the hybrid works of Kraus, McBride, and Wark have loosened this censoring; I take this project up and advance it, as I meet close writing with close writing: a creative-critical reply that revitalizes the queer feminist complexities and narratives of sex, sickness, and love that animate Acker's interdisciplinary (diary, letter) *pieces*.[142]

Cookie Mueller, meanwhile, is more familiar to art and film historians as a portrait sitter for the photographer Nan Goldin (flickering as an image in slideshow versions of *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*) or as an underground "sort-of-famous" film actress affiliated with John Waters (flickering as an image in low-budget movies like the 1970 *Multiple Maniacs*, which was her first big-screen role: won after her ticket stub was drawn in a door prize).[143] In this Baltimore-set B-movie about the gigantic and glamorous Lady Divine's "Cavalcade of Perversion"—a traveling and thieving "freakshow," featuring a trash troupe of misfits' wild and grotesque acts, desires, fantasies, and manias—Cookie plays the owner's hippie daughter, also named Cookie. Becoming a firm member of Waters's Dreamlander

crew, parts in the so-called trash trilogy of films followed: *Pink Flamingos* (1972) sees diva Divine resolving to fight off the attempts of two kidnapping sociopaths to retain the notoriously criminal title of "Filthiest Person Alive" before an infamously scatological end (while Cookie plays the part of a spy who is abused by a delinquent armed with live, then decapitated chickens); *Female Trouble* (1974) revolves around the criminal activities and fame-hungry trash-beauty enterprises of a pregnant high school student turned mother, Dawn Davenport (played by Divine), alongside her delinquent friends Concetta (played by Cookie) and Chicklette (played by Susan Howe); lastly, *Desperate Living* (1977) follows the exiled life of a suburban housewife (Peggy) and her lesbian lover (Grizelda) following the murder of Peggy's husband, as the couple join a shantytown of social misfits (including Cookie's part as a one-armed lesbian named Flipper) ruled over by a tyrannical queen.[144] On the surface or in the frame, Cookie is all image and style (still and moving and anachronistically clothed; enchanting, original, infectious, resplendent), despite the autobiographical art writing she performed and published, which included pieces recording her countercultural life in film and fashion. Rather than the movies themselves, glossed briefly here as an instructional guide, it is Cookie's autofictional remembrance of certain filmic episodes that I prioritize, within and against the "look" of her, in my intimate address of analysis and attachment: soon-to-come snapshots of close writings *to* her own.

Some of Cookie's close writings "made it" within her lifetime; others, tragically, did not. I recuperate her in these pages as an important artist-writer whose autofictional close-writing archives (across images, letters, manuscripts, chapbooks, paperbacks, performances) offer vital resources in reimagining the representation, the voice, the desire, the community, and the care of the sick body with AIDS. By bringing Cookie's close writing into an interdisciplinary conversation that explores interactions between images and words—in correspondence with Kathy's own intermedia piecemeal experiments—I deepen the critical engagements provided by similar feminist projects that have revisited, often from a personal lens, the journals, events, and publishers with which *both of my beloveds*—never before brought together side-by-side—were involved with.[145] I also broaden the literary scope offered by Jennifer Cooke on "the new audacity" in contemporary feminist life writing and by Kaye Mitchell on the feminist effects of inhabiting a negative affect like shame in experimental autofiction.[146] This book builds on such explorations, offering an original, energizing, interdisciplinary term through which to think beside

such work by women—work that sits between art and literature, fiction and criticism, autobiography and performance.

Furthermore, while there has been, in recent years, renewed critical interest in the visual and literary productions of Downtown New York artists with whom Cookie was writing in close proximity *to* across the late 1970s and 1980s (such as Jean-Michel Basquiat, Keith Haring, Jack Smith, and David Wojnarowicz), and in the aesthetic field of AIDS visual representation more broadly, her rich and distinctive writing—which emerged *near* artistic practice and scenes of the visual—has not been foregrounded in histories of Downtown aesthetics. A comprehensive, scholarly study of her genre-crossing fiction and art writing has not yet been written, although I hope this book, together with a recently expanded edition of her writings, will correct such cultural neglect, encouraging further complex and interdisciplinary readings of her writing as well as her image, which avoid the dangerous tendency to separate and police the boundaries between them.[147]

Love Triangles

Offering a radical mode of making reparative contact between feminist writers, I use close writing as a tool to (almost) touch, explore, write, and breathe life (momentarily, partially) into Kathy Acker and Cookie Mueller—two magnetic but indefinable figures and writers who left the world too soon. This is not a memoir; it is a relational, critical gathering, collapsing subject and object. Resonances, affinities, and synchronicities between my two subjects, across the aesthetic and the lived, across art and writing—from the friends and acquaintances they shared in Downtown circles, to scenes of possible commingling, to queer feminist provocations shared and animated in their close writings of autofictional performance and disclosure—reverberate across these pages, sometimes loudly, but more often quietly, like the hardened hum of chronic illness and end-of-life care, which both writers wrote through near the ends of their lives. It is a love story of more-than-one-story, characterized by embodied experiments and speculations in sexuality, sickness, intimacy, and care.

Held within those two alliterating names is the closeness of body and text. They were casual friends (published by the same presses; they also read at the same clubs and contributed to the same films), but I'm bringing them closer together—drawing out their shared political commitments to rewriting the sick body and its desires, the intimacies and care networks

they crafted—in this strange, writerly love triangle. I remember how, in her essay-of-fragments *Eros the Bittersweet* (1986), Anne Carson even goes as far as to call erotic desire itself "a three-part structure": "three points of transformation on a circuit of possible relationship, electrified by desire so that they touch not touching."[148] I think of the friendships I had at school, always three: casting in while casting out, in tense lines of contact; always seeking the approval of the intruder; always unsure of whose turn it was to be her. It would be awkward to hold hands all together. Two was safer, but less exciting.

I wonder, then, if this love triangle is also kept alive erotically, sustained reparatively, by the other "lovers" and intimates of Kathy and Cookie who have written on and about them, too, over the course of my own loving writing. For example, Wark's erotic study of Kathy's low theory praxis expressed in gender and sexual multiplicities begins with the author recounting the visceral fusion of their own bodies and words. The "gift" Wark received from her lover/beloved? "A body that writes is a body that fucks."[149] McBride's biography "on the radical life and work of Kathy Acker" also begins with a fleshy, if less sexual, encounter at a public reading; he confesses to being completely "bewitched by her."[150] And Chloé Griffin's oral history, *Edgewise: A Picture of Cookie Mueller* (2014), no doubt a labor of love in its admirable endeavor to archive the beautiful imagination and spirit of her subject by talking at length with those closest to her, is described by its author as an act of "communing": "I saw something in Cookie that I desired in myself."[151] So much of the storytelling (its snapshots, anecdotes, and details) in this book would not have been possible without Griffin's formidable and tender historical project in life-writing collage and collective chorus-making.

As an affective, networked, and citational kind of fandom, the feeling that Cookie and Kathy are "my beloveds," then, is strangely shareable, rather than sacredly singular. As the contemporary artist Celia Paul writes, in her own book of fantasy love letters to the modernist portrait painter Gwen John, "Jealousy heightens love"; it asks for *more*: endless replies.[152] In recent years, a plethora of biographies, novels, and book-length essays have emerged, inspired by—or in kinship with (real or imagined or both)—my beloveds' wild lives, texts, theories, and practices. In addition to Griffin's *Edgewise*, McBride's *Eat Your Mind* (2022), and the life-writing intimacies of Semiotext(e) affiliates Chris Kraus, Dodie Bellamy, and Eileen Myles, there's been Douglas Martin's lyric essay *Acker* (2017), Linda Stupart's Acker-ghosted experimental novel *Virus* (2016), and Olivia Laing's

novel *Crudo* (2018), which meshes the autobiography of the author with Kathy Acker's own life and writing. These antecedent works of attachment have been important and influential to my distinct theorization and performance of close writing as a mode of creative critique that enlivens my beloveds' bodies in pieces; their partialized archives; their piecemeal, intergenre, intermedia works; and their own expansive and infectious close writing.

Love for my beloveds is contagious, infecting the space around the triangle itself, marked by "affective entanglements and encounters, by echoes, citations, mutterings, and silences: words said, left unsaid, confusing who said what," which are felt in the choral epigraphs that begin each chapter of this book.[153] It is an erotic shape of multiple relational lines that has also structured the citational correspondence practice of Tina Campt, when she "hear[s]" the work of Saidiya Hartman, Christina Sharpe, and Denise Ferreira da Silva (three points), in concert with a triangulated grouping of Black contemporary artists whose multimedia work resonates with and responds to past images in fugitive gestures of "visual frequency."[154]

First, I felt protective, so close that I felt uneasy about another writer also being close, within this triangular orbit that attends to word and image together. But my beloveds' lives and works defy such a possessive engagement; they seek—they celebrate—multiplicity instead, relations outside of familiar, familial patterns, in correspondences that travel between past and present. As Wark notes "in passing" of her and Kathy's position on such things: "We shared a dislike for both writers and scholars who treat some body, or some body of work, as if they owned it."[155] The power of my beloveds' close writing also comes from its seductive status as an invitation to be responded *to*—from more than one correspondent. In this way, the "writer's love triangle" that has made this book is kept going by the spiraling effects of more triangles multiplying, as if an expanding envelope formed from equilateral parts.[156] This is "love-in-the-background," the reparative force of choral competition. I see those frictions as nourishing for (post) critical acts that break and remake, for the continued revitalization of Kathy Acker and Cookie Mueller, and for the ways their close writing also transformed configurations of love. I do not think I could have touched it, had I not written them endless, enduring letters that listen and respond and fantasize anew. Through this epistolary queer feminist method that breaches the distances of time and space; that gets intimate with visuality, materiality, and textuality at once; that applies archival, historical, and theoretical close reading *in* close writing: This book of blurred

love-in-pieces acquires an accreting and original power and communion that dwells in the afterlives of its subjects, enriching, expanding, and energizing the narratives by which they have been read, framed, "known." Close writing reckons with the precipice of never knowing them completely; love draws its breath here: the edge.

As the third point of the love triangle, I send love letters to the dead, which *touch not touching*. However much there are others in the background, this triangular orbit is *ours* in *this* writing, a relationship I feel to be real. It is a heady, hot, sticky space from which to write, calling to mind the early adjectival meanings of "close" as confined, concealed, fastened, secret, before it shifted to its allusions to nearness, proximity, and intimacy.[157]
3 I do not claim to be "the same" as the two points of the triangle whom I
4 love, absorbing the contagious influence of their writing in my own. I do not claim—cannot claim, would never claim—the trauma, sickness, suffering, and loss they endured. Nor do I absorb the specific scenes of their "wild" undisciplined lives of desire *as* and *into* my own. (Such scenes fed and sustained their lived and literary praxes *as* [to cite Jack Halberstam] queer "wild thinkers."[158]) My love for them doesn't rest on identifications drawn from biography-infused likenesses that are in any way "exact"; it draws its breath instead from a particular connection that is sustained by our shared, embodied relationship to, and discovery of, close writing.

Addressed to Kathy and Cookie, my love-in-pieces offers a subversive means through which to create careful discussions about their works and lives. I risk the embarrassment of such a wild gesture in order to get close to the nakedness of their wild writing: to care for the boldness and braveness with which they put their emotional, sexual, bodily lives to paper, sculpting different "ways of being that resist expert knowledge," which "fail to resolve into identity forms" rendered legible or coherent within conventional social structures organized around work, reproduction, and the nuclear family home.[159] From wild locales beyond these recognizable axes, they provocatively wrote what was personal in *their* close writing: How could I *not* write them letter pieces in response?

You helped me come to (close) writing.

Cookie's short stories and art criticism, documenting weird and wonderful and *wild* life events (from burning a friend's house down in British Columbia to performing a violent sex scene bloodied by the presence of chickens in *Pink Flamingos*), were published in the chapbooks and magazines of New York's Downtown scene and collected later in two posthumous collections, *Walking Through Clear Water in a Pool Painted Black*

(1990) and *Ask Dr. Mueller: The Writings of Cookie Mueller* (1997), following her death from AIDS-related illness on November 10, 1989. Kathy also wrote closely to the stuff of her own life, collaging pages from her diaries in her first self-published chapbooks, and appropriating correspondence sent to friends and lovers as raw material for performances and novels. In 1974, for example, she wrote a strange letter to the artist Alan Sondheim, asking him to collaborate on an epistolary art project that would explore the mutual desire they shared for one another after a brief meeting in New York. "How close can I get to someone?" she wonders. "Will we become each other?"[160] It is an intellectual question, and an erotic seduction, where desire, identification, and writing get messy and confused—just like they do in my own close writing through the forms and affects of its love-in-pieces. Inasmuch as Kathy's and Cookie's writings *flirt with* the autobiographical (get *close to*, but not right next to, hence inconclusive: displaced) in diaries and notebooks, almost novels, and epistolary pieces—the forms of their own close writing—they invite this kind of contact.

Pieces of Diary, Novel, Letter (I Collect Close Writing)

The three-part structure of this book arises from close, erotic encounters with my beloveds' own close writing that traverses published and unpublished contexts and materials, collapsing archive into art into writing into performance. These encounters manifest as letters, essays, letter pieces, essay pieces, asides, messages, P.S. additions, and notes in parentheses: the formal objects of my love-in-pieces, which sustain the reparative desires of my close writing. Through this, I attentively reach for, and *collect*, the never-before-felt forms of my beloveds' close writing: *diary piece*, *novel-in-pieces*, *letter piece*. I collect epistolary materials like an adolescent in love. Seeking ephemeral, interdisciplinary, sometimes-secret-or-small pieces that lie on the edges of what is labeled as "finished" in the hierarchies of cultural production, my practice is spun with the wild desires of a "low theorist."[161] Such a position echoes the "low theory sort of philosopher" characterization Wark has also recalled in Kathy: "a philosophy whose skill is threading words together as its own kind of more carnal love."[162] Similarly, it is through the threads and affections of close writing that *I flirt* with improper conduct in knowledge making.[163]

Endless collecting, flirting, love-letter writing: These "unfinished" activities that are also lived practices recall the undisciplined attentions of adolescence. I adopt this creative-critical practice to enter my beloveds'

worlds and writings, which are *pliably* and *perversely* adolescent: in narrative content, in spirit, in style (the literary and the sartorial). I tap in to their adolescent "genres of the middle"—diaries that could be prose fictions that could be experimental poems that could be conceptual artworks; autobiographical stories that could be works of fiction or nonfiction (or both) that could be the parts of a novel that could be a series of anecdotes; letters and epistolary pieces that could be documents of performance art that could be intimate archives that could be art writings.[164] Close writing, like adolescence, occupies the messy middle ground of genre and discipline. Kathy was out of her teens when she committed herself fully to the practice of writing beyond academic assignments in Classical Literature. Cookie, also, was getting closer to thirty when she landed in New York with the adolescent hope of becoming a professional writer. Neither were typical "adolescents" if we think of adolescence as a fixed age category. But as wild thinkers, low theorists, reparative close writers, they, too, were somehow always, fluidly, nonhierarchically "adolescent" in the ways they resisted finalized outcomes, traditional family units, and resolved subject and aesthetic positions, including ideals of the "well" body. In the introduction to an interview with Kathy published in *Artforum* in 1994, Laurence Rickels also finds in her work a passion for adolescence: "not as the phase or phrase everyone has to get beyond rather than stuck on, but as a channel that is always there, ready to be tuned or turned into."[165]

In chapter 1, "The Diary Piece: The Line, the Cut, the Blur of Two Lives, or, Kathy Acker's Bad Sex Blur," I pick at the scrappy pages of where she first "tuned in": the piecemeal diaries, notebooks, and diaristic chapbooks that she filled up with personal explorations "4 hours a day every day" during the early 1970s, first while living and working in New York City, then later in Southern California. This expansive and partialized diaristic archive—the feverish outputs of her extended adolescence in her early twenties—contains the visceral and messy *material* forms of her automatic, autoerotic close conceptual writing. I emphasize that the slippages across form, genre, and discipline that occur within these inked, typed, and performed diary pieces—as Kathy wrote *within* and *against* the fields of conceptual art, feminist art, experimental poetry, and prose; *in between* private and public domains—change our understanding of those art and literary histories, while making possible a different kind of blurring, too. Following the bad sex–oriented work of Jennifer Doyle, I argue that, within these diary experiments, Kathy opened out the ambivalent, paradoxical, shifting, and *sapphic* blur of female sexual desire, its perverse

loose ends, its "sick" spaces and embodied states, its plural forms and affects, and its complex shapes, *at home and at work*.[166] This is an important feminist contribution, offering a vision of sex and sexual desire that does not silence or shame its violent, uncomfortable angles, recognizing instead how those angles can bring pleasure, excitement, curiosity, and knowledge.

Narrative threads, not necessarily linear, begin to twist outward from the throat of the text, like the spiral of glass language that spills from the open mouth of an adolescent Francesca Woodman communing and communicating crystallized speech (in her photograph *Self-Portrait Talking to Vince*, 1977).[167] The conceptual figure of the adolescent—her wayward desires and tendency toward wayward writerly forms; her crossings of all kinds of category (sexed, gendered, aesthetic; healthy versus sick)—returns in chapter 2, as an association between the two writers (Kathy and Cookie) is drawn across these first two monographic, archive-incorporative, materially attentive chapters, which connect sickness and adolescence as correspondent states: intimate, vulnerable, resistant. Offering risky and reparative visions of pleasure, the body, and time, their autofictional close writings challenge pathologizing narratives and power structures. From the autoerotic drive of Kathy's partialized diary pieces sketching the ambivalence of sexual desire comes the restless, never-full desire felt and depicted in the similarly sapphic and scrappy materials, narratives, and forms of Cookie's "unfinished" manuscripts: the traces of her sickened-by-AIDS "adolescent" productions. Accompanying the reader throughout all of this, too, is Me, or rather the echoes of their close writing through my own, beating, reverberating, in self-directed curiosity and bittersweet pleasure. Like them, my form is my content.

In chapter 2, "The Novel-in-Pieces: 'Like Little Birds Testing Their Wings,' or, Cookie Mueller's Adolescent Reverie," I feel my way—physically, affectively, and attentively—through Cookie's archival, unpublished, and published pieces: lists, letters, personal documents, chapbooks, notebook pages, autobiographical stories in journals and collections, and an unfinished novel. I propose, via Jack Halberstam on queer failure, that the scrappy, unfinished materialities of her work and archive offer their own queer possibilities, political imaginations, and temporal resources, revising narratives of the sick, pathologized body and its care networks and disordering the capitalist wellness of chronological time.[168] By encountering the scattered, speculative, genre-defying parts of what I term her novel-in-pieces, I touch on the reparative *adolescent* energies of her retrospective close writing. Here, in short, distracted, unfinished pieces of writing,

she restored the transgressive marks left in her perverse adolescence—incorporating the adolescent's never-full desire for freedom, for bad taste, for pleasure, for the paradoxical bittersweet—when the mortal frame of her sick time pressed hard on her body: vulnerable *and* resistant. To nostalgically *become* a "perpetual subject-adolescent" *in writing* this way, I argue—drawing on the adolescent-attentive work of Julia Kristeva, Carol Mavor, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Joseph Litvak—is nourishing, intimate, and political.[169] She remembers the queer adolescent energies, desires, and temporalities of her past and turns them into lifelines in her sick present, staking her claim that freedom for her, as a woman writer with AIDS, is also unfinished.

The triangular orbit of this book's loving beat is echoed in the book's tripartite shape. In the third chapter, "The Letter Piece: Around Valentine's Day, 1980, or, Lovesick Perversions in Correspondence," my beloveds come into closer contact across three scrolling parts. This extended chapter is drawn from association across selves, lives, texts, companions, collaborators, characters, dreams, and intimate reoccurrences; the slippery appearances of masturbator, masochist, kleptomaniac, and hospitalized "hysteric" that feature in chapters 1 and 2 return in a choral fashion in chapter 3, extending the book's interrelated examinations—in and through the epistolary—of sickness, adolescence, pleasure, and care: the vitalities and precarities of life and death. From chapter 2's focus on Cookie's AIDS writing to the coupled assessment of both writers' animations of lovesickness in close writing amid HIV/AIDS contexts that is the form and content of chapter 3, the mortal shroud of chronic, incurable illness cloaks the writing most intensely across these chapters, before the postscript turns to the ghostly envelopes of their afterlives.

Chapter 3, "The Letter Piece: Around Valentine's Day, 1980, or, Lovesick Perversions in Correspondence," begins with a portrait of Cookie, dressed as a writer-friend's ex-boyfriend, from an epistolary performance at New York's Mudd Club on February 14, 1980. Kathy Acker and Gary Indiana played love-letter writers and Cookie was the love-letter object. Departing from José Esteban Muñoz's understanding of "ephemera *as* evidence," I propose that this part-object picture of Cookie is an invitation to dream, gossip, and speculate new possibilities about, but also for, with, and especially *around* the original event, in a way that dates it and also departs from it, circling it, stretching ideas and texts and events beyond it, which have an affinity with one another.[170] This stance makes it possible to reconsider the Mudd Club performance as an entry point into

recognizing the critical effects of the love letter in both of my beloveds' close-writing archives, *singularly together*. I write between, across, and toward them, to show how both writers transformed the tradition of the love letter etched into histories of women's writing—they let it be *perverse*; they let it be *sick*—to transform and repair our narratives of love and the affective relations of affinity. The private-blurring-with-public form of the letter piece makes such transformations possible; it is where love, sickness, perversion, and writing coalesce. Together but apart, my beloveds cared for the often-hidden, always-plural perversities and pleasures of lovesickness (meaning *loving*, and *writing*, *in* and *with* sickness) in its multiple, complex iterations, encompassing delirium, disorder, and disease: voices of the vulnerable, the masochistic, the pathologized (from erotomaniac to kleptomaniac), the chronically, incurably ill. The figure of the love/sick woman writer channels the pleasures of perversion as a critical tool, a means to alleviate or subvert the haunting repetition of hystericizing, pathologizing discourse against sick, gendered, and racialized bodies in the 1980s. I write beside the lovesick; I unravel a secretive and reparative love plot that lies beyond the intimate public's coupled normative shape; its lines have already begun to be drawn.

I give you the pieces of this writer's love.

P.S. I feel on the edge when I write you letters, as if my skin has been etched with a needle, oozing particles of almost pink. I feel weak. And then I feel powerful, as the incantation of *I love you* blushes the page.

Notes

PROLOGUE. BELOVED, SO BITTERSWEET

1 Pethers, "Dead Letters," 136–37.

2 "Postal Women in the Late 19th Century," Smithsonian National Postal Museum, https://postalmuseum.si.edu/research-articles/women-in-the-us-postal-system-chapter-1-women-in-postal-history/postal-women-in-0#:~:text=The%20Civil%20War%20opened%20career,temporarily%20fill%20in%20the%20vacancies.

3 Kraus, *After Kathy Acker*, 39.

4 Acker, "Seeing Gender," in *Bodies of Work*, 158–59.

5 Kathy Acker, "Colette," 1985, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Duke University, Kathy Acker Papers (cited hereafter as KAP), B22, F11.

6 Acker, "Colette," KAP.

7 Cited in Kraus, *After Kathy Acker*, 42.

8 Mueller, "My Bio—Notes on an American Childhood," in *Walking Through Clear Water in a Pool Painted Black* (1990), 137.

9 Mueller, "Alien," in "Garden of Ashes," in *Ask Dr. Mueller*, 201.

10 Roberta Blattau cited in Griffin, *Edgewise*, 164.

11 For example, both Acker's and Mueller's work was published by Anne Turyn's prose periodical *Top Stories* (Acker's "New York City in 1979" was issue 9 [1981]; Mueller's "How to Get Rid of Pimples" was a double issue, 19–20 [1984]). Later, Chris Kraus's Native Agents series would also unite them under the same imprint, with Mueller's *Walking Through Clear Water in a Pool Painted Black* launching the series in 1990, and Acker's *Hannibal Lecter, My Father* following in 1991.

12 Chris Kraus, "The New Universal," *Sydney Review of Books*, October 17, 2014, https://sydneyreviewofbooks.com/new-universal/.

13 Kraus, "The New Universal."

14 Jonathan Mandell, "Die Young, Stay Pretty," *New York Newsday*, January 4, 1990, Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries, Ron Kolm Papers (cited hereafter as RKP), B18, F32.

15 Arnett, "Review: Eve's Body/Of Work," 166.

16 Sedgwick, "Memorial for Craig Owens," 104.

17 Cookie Mueller, postcard to Richard Hell, undated (ca. 1981), Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries, Richard Hell Papers (cited hereafter as RHP), B6, F399.

18 Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*, 10–11.

19 Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*, 26, 29.

20 Kathy Acker, "you are on the enemy list of the Black Tarantula," undated label, KAP, B31, F10.

21 Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*, 30.

22 Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*, 3, 30.

23 Goldberg, *Sappho:]Fragments*, 22.

24 Goldberg, *Sappho:]Fragments*, 22.

25 Goldberg, *Sappho:]Fragments*, 23.

26 Kathy Acker, postcard to Terence Sellers, undated (ca. 1981), Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries, Terence Sellers Papers (cited hereafter as TSP), B1, F13.

27 See Mueller, "Tattooed Friends," in "Garden of Ashes," in *Ask Dr. Mueller*, 212–16.

28 DuBois, *Sappho Is Burning*, 52, 70.

29 DuBois, *Sappho Is Burning*, 3, 13.

30 DuBois, *Sappho Is Burning*, 3.

31 DuBois, *Sappho Is Burning*, 3, 20–21.

32 DuBois, *Sappho Is Burning*, 35.

33 DuBois, *Sappho Is Burning*, 19–20.

34 DuBois, *Sappho Is Burning*, 28, 64.

35 Cixous, "Coming to Writing," 42.

36 I am also departing from Meridith Kruse's analysis of Sedgwick's "perverse close reading" in the essay "Sedgwick's Perverse Close Reading and the Question of an Erotic Ethics."

37 Sedgwick, "Memorial for Craig Owens," 104.

38 Patton, "Heterosexual AIDS Panic," 3, 6.

39 Geary, *Antiblack Racism and the AIDS Epidemic*, 2.

40 Sedgwick, "Memorial for Craig Owens," 105.

41 See Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading" (2003), 123–51. In "Memorial for Craig Owens," while Sedgwick's attention is focused on the sexually queer subject, when she refers to the society that "hated and hates so much," we could take this to refer to a more capacious configuration, encompassing all those suffering under the social weight of marginalization (105).

42 Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading" (2003), 128, 150.

43 Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading" (2003), 128, 137, 149.

44 Phelan, *Mourning Sex*, 4.

45 Phelan, *Mourning Sex*, 4, 3.

46 Sedgwick, "Memorial for Craig Owens," 105.

47 Sedgwick, "Memorial for Craig Owens," 105.

48 Sedgwick, "Memorial for Craig Owens," 106.

49 Gallop, *The Deaths of the Author*, 11–12.

50 Gallop, *The Deaths of the Author*, 11.

51 Johanna Hedva, "Sick Woman Theory," *Topical Cream*, March 12, 2022, https://topicalcream.org/features/sick-woman-theory/. Hedva's essay was originally published in *Mask Magazine* 24, January 2016; I cite from the 2022 version published on *Topical Cream*.

52 Sedgwick, "White Glasses," 252–66; Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading" (2003), 148.

1 Gallop, "Annie Leclerc Writing a Letter, with Vermeer," 104.

2 Gallop, "Annie Leclerc Writing a Letter, with Vermeer," 104.

3 Bellamy, "Barbie's Dream House," in *Pink Steam*, 17.

4 Bellamy, "Barbie's Dream House," in *Pink Steam*, 19.

5 Bellamy, "Barbie's Dream House," in *Pink Steam*, 17; Rand, *Barbie's Queer Accessories*, 9.

6 "Female Trouble" is also the title of a short piece by Mueller that re-enacts her stay in a hospital for infected fallopian tubes. It was first collected in the 1990 Hanuman Books chapbook *Garden of Ashes*, before the chapbook's contents were included in an edited collection of the author's fiction and criticism in 1997 (217–19).

7 Gallop, "Annie Leclerc Writing a Letter, with Vermeer," 104.

8 Bellamy, *the buddhist*, 34.

9 Bellamy, *the buddhist*, 35.

10 Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading" (2003), 145. Italics mine.

11 Bellamy, *Pink Steam*, back-cover blurb.

12 Gallop, "Annie Leclerc Writing a Letter, with Vermeer," 108.

13 Gallop, "Annie Leclerc Writing a Letter, with Vermeer," 107, 108.

14 Bellamy, "Delinquent," in *Pink Steam* 135, 141 (italics mine in the second quotation).

15 Acker, "Epitaph: Kathy Acker on Robert Mapplethorpe," 36.

16 While I quote the essay from the 2004 edition of *Pink Steam*, "Delinquent" was previously published in *A Poetics of Criticism*, edited by Juliana Spahr et al., in 1994 (293–99). See Bellamy, "Delinquent."

17 Acker, *My Mother: Demonology*, 20.

18 Joseph Litvak cited in Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading" (2003), 147.

19 Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, 3.

20 Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, 3, 21.

21 Kruse, "Sedgwick's Perverse Close Reading," 132.

22 Kruse, "Sedgwick's Perverse Close Reading," 132.

23 Gallop, "The Ethics of Reading," 7.

24 Gallop, "The Ethics of Reading," 8, 13.

25 Gallop, "The Ethics of Reading," 13.

26 Gallop, "The Ethics of Reading," 16; Kruse, "Sedgwick's Perverse Close Reading," 134.

27 Nelson, *The Argonauts*, 39.

28 Nelson, *The Argonauts*, 41.

29 Nelson, *The Argonauts*, 41.

30 Nelson, *The Argonauts*, 30.

31 Kruse, "Sedgwick's Perverse Close Reading," 135.

32 Sedgwick, "Queer and Now," 3.

33 Sedgwick, "Queer and Now," 4.

34 Sedgwick, "Queer and Now," 4; Sedgwick, "Memorial for Craig Owens," 104.

35 Gallop, *The Deaths of the Author*, 19.

36 Gallop, *The Deaths of the Author*, 19. For the *differences* article, see Gallop, "Reading Derrida's Adieu."

37 Gallop, *The Deaths of the Author*, 19.

38 Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, 1.

39 Levinas cited in Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, 6. See Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* (first published in French in 1961).

40 Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, 13.

41 Gallop, *The Deaths of the Author*, 22.

42 Derrida, in Derrida and Dufourmantelle, *Of Hospitality*, 77.

43 Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, 19, 23.

44 Gallop, *The Deaths of the Author*, 19.

45 Gallop, *The Deaths of the Author*, 26. Italics mine.

46 Gallop, *The Deaths of the Author*, 30.

47 Barthes cited in Gallop, *The Deaths of the Author*, 30.

48 Barthes cited in Gallop, *The Deaths of the Author*, 31.

49 Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, 56. This work was originally published in French as *Le plaisir du texte* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1973).

50 Mavor, *Becoming*, xix.

51 Mavor, *Becoming*, xviii–xix.

52 Mavor, *Becoming*, xix.

53 Mavor, *Becoming*, xxv.

54 Mavor, *Becoming*, xxii and 102, respectively.

55 Mavor, *Becoming*, 16.

56 See Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading" (1997), 2–3.

57 Mavor's in-depth examination of Hawarden's photographic archives (in *Becoming*) is almost contemporaneous with Sedgwick's use of the image (on the cover of *Novel Gazing*). They were both "Victorianists," fascinated by queer childhood and adolescence, and performative strategies of writing. In this spirit of shared rethinking, in April 1993—at a conference at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill organized by Mavor—Sedgwick read aloud in performative fashion her unfinished poem "The Warm Decembers" (about a Julia Margaret Cameron–inspired photographer named Beatrix) to coincide with the exhibition of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's 1871–72 painting *Beata Beatrix* (from the Art Institute of Chicago). Sedgwick's poem of "writerly writing and thinkerly thinking" was later published in *Fat Art, Thin Art* (160). See also Edwards, *Queer and Bookish*, for more on Sedgwick's engagement with photography.

58 See Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual."

59 Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading" (1997), 1–3.

60 See Litvak, "Strange Gourmet"; Bora, "Outing Texture"; and Stockton, "Prophylactics and Brains."

61 Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading" (1997), 3–4 and 26–28, respectively.

62 My theorization differs from existing uses of the phrase *close writing*. In his book *Jane Austen and the Secret Style*, the literary scholar D. A. Miller refers to the "free indirect style" crafted by Austen as a narrational mode of "close writing," which "comes as near to a character's psychic and linguistic reality as it can get without collapsing into it" (58–59). Miller's use of the term indicates an ambivalent merging between character and narrator, which is reframed from a Black feminist perspective by Saidiya Hartman in her influential rendering of "close narration" (see *Wayward Lives Beautiful Experiments*, xiii).

63 Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 12.

64 Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 3.

65 Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 11, 3.

66 Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 11.

67 Hartman, *Wayward Lives Beautiful Experiments*, xiii.

68 Hartman, *Wayward Lives Beautiful Experiments*, xiv.

69 Hartman, *Wayward Lives Beautiful Experiments*, xiv; Saidiya Hartman and Fred Moten in conversation, "Fugitivity and Waywardness," *Make a Way Out of No Way*, Tramway, Glasgow, September 27, 2014, https://

vimeo.com/151775530; Rizvana Bradley, "Regard for One Another: A Conversation Between Rizvana Bradley and Saidiya Hartman," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, October 8, 2019, https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/regard-for-one-another-a-conversation-between-rizvana-bradley-and-saidiya-hartman/.

70 Hartman quoted in Bradley, "Regard for One Another."

71 Hartman, *Wayward Lives Beautiful Experiments*, xiv; Hartman quoted in Bradley, "Regard for One Another."

72 Saidiya Hartman, "Full Notes," in *Wayward Lives Beautiful Experiments*, 364, https://serpentstail.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2021/12/wayward-full-notes.pdf; Hartman, *Wayward Lives Beautiful Experiments*, 72.

73 Hartman, *Wayward Lives Beautiful Experiments*, 34, 24.

74 Hartman, *Wayward Lives Beautiful Experiments*, 73–74.

75 Hartman, *Wayward Lives Beautiful Experiments*, 30, 75.

76 Hartman, *Wayward Lives Beautiful Experiments*, 75.

77 Hartman, *Wayward Lives Beautiful Experiments*, 280.

78 Campt, "The Loop of Retreat."

79 Crawley, "Harriet Jacobs Gets a Hearing," 51, 35.

80 Hartman, *Wayward Lives Beautiful Experiments*, 31.

81 Nyong'o, *Afro-Fabulations*; see also Fawaz, "'An Open Mesh of Possibilities," 28.

82 Nyong'o, *Afro-Fabulations*: The quote is from "Repairing the Incommensurable."

83 Muñoz, "Race, Sex, and the Incommensurate," 153–154.

84 Muñoz, "Race, Sex, and the Incommensurate," 155.

85 Muñoz, "Race, Sex, and the Incommensurate," 156.

86 Muñoz, "Race, Sex, and the Incommensurate," 161.

87 Muñoz, "Race, Sex, and the Incommensurate," 157.

88 Muñoz, "Race, Sex, and the Incommensurate," 158.

89 Muñoz, "Race, Sex, and the Incommensurate," 161 and 163, respectively.

90 Ahmed, "A Phenomenology of Whiteness," 150.

91 Ahmed, "A Phenomenology of Whiteness," 154. See also Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 121.

92 Ahmed, "A Phenomenology of Whiteness," 154–55.

93 Sedgwick, "Queer and Now," 4.

94 Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*, 157.

95 Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*, 157.

96 Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*, 158.

97 Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*, 158.

98 Preciado, "The Losers Conspiracy."

99 Preciado, "The Losers Conspiracy."

100 Preciado, "The Losers Conspiracy."

101 Vuong, "A Letter to My Mother That She Will Never Read."

102 Vuong, "A Letter to My Mother That She Will Never Read."

103 Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*, 91.

104 Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*, 117.

2 105 Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*, 3.

1 106 DuBois, *Sappho Is Burning*, 62, 70.

2 107 Pu, "Decapitated Forms," 35; Cha quoted in Pu, "Decapitated Forms," 35.

108 Limón and Diaz, "Envelopes of Air."

109 Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, dedication page.

110 Sedgwick, "White Glasses," 257.

111 Jan Bervin, "Studies in Scale: Excerpts from *The Gorgeous Nothings*," *Poetry Foundation*, November 1, 2013, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/articles/70065/studies-in-scale.

112 Bervin, "Studies in Scale."

113 Susan Howe cited in Bervin, "Studies in Scale."

114 See Mavor, "Making Poems Out of What Is Not There." I am grateful to Carol Mavor for first introducing me to Dickinson's envelope poems and for energizing this work by leading a writing masterclass at the Courtauld Institute of Art, which I convened as part of the events series inspired by Dickinson, "'What a Hazard a Letter Is': Correspondence in Feminist Art, Art Writing, and Art History." The masterclass began with a mail-art action, as we sent out copies of Mavor's chapbook *A Magpie and an Envelope* (2021) to the artist/writer/scholar participants.

115 Martha Ackmann, "Emily Dickinson's White Dress," *Paris Review*, February 25, 2020, https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2020/02/25/emily-dickinsons-white-dress/.

116 A. Butler, "Fan Letters of Love," 154.

117 Kathy Acker, "Poems/Diary," notebook, undated (ca. 1971), Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries, Kathy Acker Notebooks (cited hereafter as KAN), B3, F14.

118 Mavor, *Becoming*, 132.

119 Eichhorn, *The Archival Turn in Feminism*, 8, 9.

120 Nancy, *Corpus*, 11.

121 I am inspired by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's exposition of touch and affect in the introduction to *Touching Feeling*, in which she recognizes the "intimacy" that "subsists between textures and emotions" (17). Daisy Lafarge, "Metaphor as Parasite: On Ecologies of Love, Language and Disease," *The Drouth*, 2021, https://www.thedrouth.org/metaphor-as-parasite-on-ecologies-of-love-language-and-disease-by-daisy-lafarge/.

122 Bellamy, "Complicity," in *Pink Steam*, 35.

123 Nelson, *The Argonauts*, 3.

124 Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*, 148.

125 See Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (originally published in French, 1975; first translated into English, 1977). Nelson explains Barthes's idea (which gives *The Argonauts* its title): "Just as the *Argo*'s parts may be replaced over time but the boat is still called the *Argo*, whenever the lover utters the phrase 'I love you,' its meaning must be renewed by each use, as 'the very task of love and of language is to give to one and the same phrase inflections which will be forever new'" (5).

126 For Sedgwick's discussion, see Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 8–9.

127 Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 8.

128 Nelson, *The Argonauts*, 123.

129 Sedgwick, "A Poem Is Being Written," 178; Nelson, *The Argonauts*, 85.

130 Nelson, *The Argonauts*, 105.

131 *Wild theory* is Nelson's term for "writing that is within a particular, often academic, discipline, but also belongs to something else by virtue of its creativity and recklessness." See Sarah Nicole Prickett, "*Bookforum* Talks with Maggie Nelson," *Bookforum*, May 29, 2015, http://www.bookforum.com/interview/14663. It has since also been taken up by Jack Halberstam in *Wild Things: The Disorder of Desire*.

132 Nelson, *The Argonauts*, 7.

133 Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading" (2003), 146.

134 Many writers, artists, theorists, and curators have turned to letter writing as a critical practice during COVID time. See Blackshaw and Butler, "Sick Women Correspondents"; Paul, *Letters to Gwen John*; Zambreno, *To Write as If Already Dead*; and the mail-art exhibition *Queer Correspondence*, curated by Eliel Jones, Cell Project Space,

London, June 1, 2020–February 13, 2021, https://www.cellprojects.org/queer-correspondence.

135 Bojarska and Berlant, "The Hundreds," 297.

136 Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 241.

137 See Colby, *Kathy Acker*; Kraus, *After Kathy Acker*; M. Wark, *Philosophy for Spiders*; and McBride, *Eat Your Mind*.

138 M. Wark, *Philosophy for Spiders*, 56.

139 Foster, "Repetition and Embodiment," 131.

140 *Lust for Life* features contributions from theorists such as Peter Wollen and Avital Ronell, and novelists such as Lynne Tillman and Robert Glück, who all knew Acker personally. See Harryman, Ronell, and Scholder, *Lust for Life*.

141 The definition of autoplagiarism comes from Sciolino, "Confessions of a Kleptoparasite," 63. For allobiography, see Houen, "Novel Biopolitics."

142 I further examine what Chris Kraus points to in an interview with Matias Viegener (the executor of Acker's estate): "Kathy lived most intensely through her work, so it was through the close readings of her texts that I felt the most contact. She used autobiographical writings as material." See Matias Viegener, "The Life, Death, and Afterlife of Kathy Acker," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, September 11, 2017, https://www.lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-life-death-and-afterlife-of-kathy-acker/.

143 Mueller, "John Waters and the Blessed Profession—1969," in *Walking Through Clear Water in a Pool Painted Black* (2022), 63.

144 As well as this trilogy by John Waters, Mueller also had parts in underground films directed by Rachid Kerdouche (*Final Reward*, 1978), Eric Mitchell (*Underground U.S.A*, 1980), Amos Poe (*Subway Riders*, 1981), and Michael Auder / Gary Indiana (*A Couple of White Faggots Sitting Around Talking*, 1981), among others.

145 For example, Chris Kraus, "The New Universal," *Sydney Review of Books*, October 17, 2014, https://sydneyreviewofbooks.com/new-universal/; and Anne Turyn, *Top Stories*, Kunstverein, Amsterdam, April 2–June 26, 2021 (exhibition).

146 See Cooke, *Contemporary Feminist Life-Writing*; Mitchell, *Writing Shame*.

147 This book builds on a shorter critical essay on Mueller's life and work published in *Cabinet* magazine: A. Butler, "With Love, a Letter to Cookie, and Her Stories."

148 Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*, 16.

149 M. Wark, *Philosophy for Spiders*, 5.

150 McBride, *Eat Your Mind*, xvii.

151 Griffin, *Edgewise*, 18. While primarily biographical in approach, Griffin's oral history is the only substantial study available on Mueller.

152 Paul, *Letters to Gwen John*, 3.

153 A. Butler, "'Have You Tried It with Three? Have You?,'" 90.

154 Campt, "The Afterlives of Images."

155 M. Wark, *Philosophy for Spiders*, 5.

156 A. Butler, "'Have You Tried It with Three? Have You?,'" 97.

157 "Close (adj.)," *Online Etymology Dictionary*, https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=close.

158 Halberstam, *Wild Things*, xii.

159 Halberstam, *Wild Things*, 15.

160 Kathy Acker, typed letter signed to Alan Sondheim, undated (ca. 1974), KAP, B30, F11.

161 See Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*.

162 M. Wark, *Philosophy for Spiders*, 54.

163 I am inspired by Gavin Butt's theorization of flirting as a queer methodology in "Afterword: Flirting with an Ending," in *Between You and Me*, 163–65.

164 Berlant and Stewart, *The Hundreds*, 28.

165 Laurence A. Rickels, "Body Bildung: Laurence A. Rickels Talks with Kathy Acker," originally published in *Artforum*, February 1994, in Acker, *Kathy Acker*, 163.

166 See Doyle, *Sex Objects*.

167 For Woodman's photograph, see "Self-Portrait Talking to Vince," SCAD Museum of Art, https://www.scadmoa.org/permanent-collections/pieces/self-portrait-talking-to-vince.

168 See Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*.

169 Kristeva, "The Adolescent Novel," 11. Originally published 1990.

170 See Muñoz, "Ephemera as Evidence."

CHAPTER ONE. THE DIARY PIECE: THE LINE, THE CUT, THE BLUR OF TWO LIVES, OR, KATHY ACKER'S BAD SEX BLUR

1 As Acker describes in the sixth part of *The Childlike Life*, called "story of my life," which was sent out in September 1973: "I move to New York