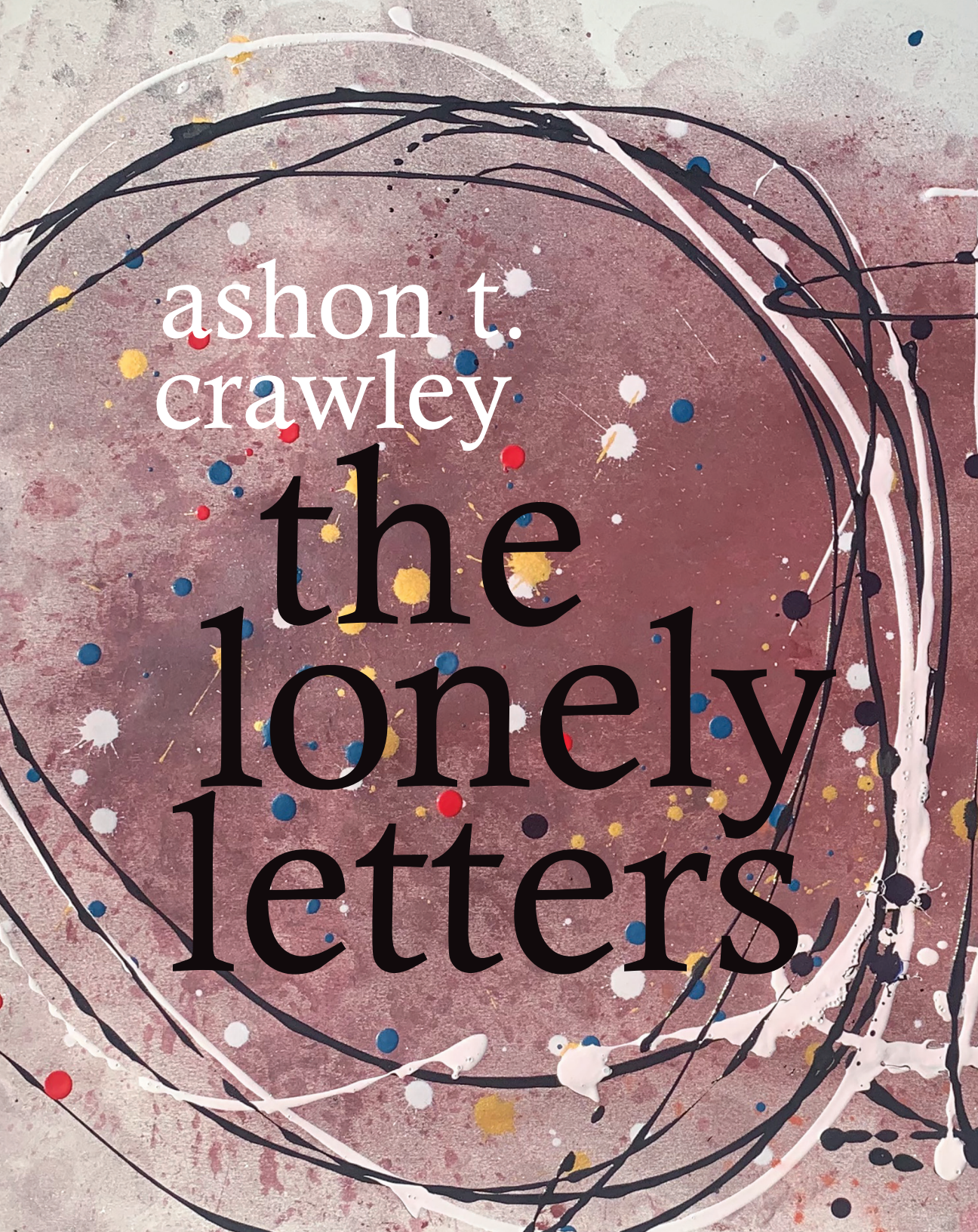


The background is a textured, reddish-brown surface covered in numerous small, colorful splatters of white, blue, yellow, and red. Overlaid on this are several large, expressive, swirling lines in black and white, creating a dynamic, abstract composition. The text is centered within this frame.

ashon t.
crawley

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letters



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Duke University Press *Durham and London* 2020



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Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper ∞
Designed by Aimee C. Harrison
Typeset in Whitman and Neuzeit S LT Std by Copperline Books

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Crawley, Ashon T., author.

Title: The lonely letters / Ashon T. Crawley.

Description: Durham : Duke University Press, [2020] | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2019033500 (print) | LCCN 2019033501 (ebook)

ISBN 9781478007760 (hardcover)

ISBN 9781478008248 (paperback)

ISBN 9781478009306 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Crawley, Ashon T. | African American Pentecostals—Biography. | Loneliness—Religious aspects—Christianity. | African American sexual minorities—Religious life. | African American Pentecostal churches—Social aspects. | Church music—African American churches. | African Americans—Race identity. | Experience (Religion)

Classification: LCC BX8762.5.z8 c73 2020 (print) |

LCC BX8762.5.z8 (ebook) | DDC 289.9/408996073—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2019033500>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2019033501>

Duke University Press gratefully acknowledges the University of Virginia, which provided funds toward the publication of this book.

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epigraph



1—" . . . some tail or trace of her voice's yet to be
bodiless thrust caught in his throat like sand,
a precise powder perhaps (as of a moth's or even
an angel's wings) cautioning breath itself."

2—"Somewhere a curtain had fallen away, a cape
of moth-eaten silk."

3—"He'd been nervous for days, weeks, months.
It thus came as no surprise that during the drive to
Burbank there had been moths, not butterflies, in
his stomach and that his stomach might as well
have been wool."

—Nathaniel Mackey, *From a Broken Bottle Traces
of Perfume Still Emanate*

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Dear Reader,

And it begins this way. I was sitting at the corner desk where I always sat in Woodruff Library at Emory University. It had to have been the summer of 2006, or maybe the early fall semester, but not much after that. I went to Woodruff almost daily for study, to read and write, to socialize and figure out who I was in this new world of academia. I was in a master's program studying theology and queer theory but was introduced to names like Hortense Spillers, Saidiya Hartman, Daphne Brooks. I began reading what they were writing and diving into their works cited to read more in Black studies, performance studies, and Black feminist studies.

As fate would have it, a friend suggested I read an essay in *Loss: The Politics of Mourning* by the then-unknown-to-me Fred Moten titled "Black Mo'nin'." This friend knew I was interested in the intersection of performance studies and sound studies and thought this essay would have something interesting to speak to me. So I found the collected volume and began to read the essay about Emmett Till and his photograph. But at the very beginning of the essay, before I could finish it, there was a passage from a book titled *Bedouin Hornbook* that was about the Black singer's voice, falsetto and the gospel moan and shout.

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... I'm especially
... One point I
... new word, new world.

I was undone. I put the essay down, searched the library's website to find this book, this *Bedouin Hornbook*. I locked my computer, left my desk, found the book in the stacks, checked it out. I returned to my desk and began reading it immediately. It changed the way I thought about music, about writing about music, about dreams, about writing about dreams. It has remained with me, all these years later, the way Mackey happened upon a poetics that could create such a rupture in the way I consider worlds. And for that I am thankful.

In some ways, I have always written letters:

I never thought that I would be tossing and turning late at night, t-shirt slightly moist from sweat, unable to sleep because you keep popping in my head. The truth is I kept trying to blame you solely for the reasons our relationship didn't become what it could have. But this night, I realize that I am partially to blame as well. You are to blame because you feared love in me. I am to blame because I allowed myself to fall in love with you without defining lines before our emotions were too attached to each other.

A year ago, in September, I never thought that I would long for you as much as I do but shit happens and I fully realize that what happened between us transcends all boundaries of ordinary love. Damn, in September 2002, I didn't even know you and now, November of 2003, the only one on my mind is you Love—and I miss you.

Dear Love, when you told me after months of interactions and flirtations and gazes and smiles that I was unequivocally crazy to think you loved me, or even liked me in any regard romantic, you crushed me. I went away believing that you lied to me but finally gave in to what seemed to be the truth—that what I felt for you wasn't reciprocal. Then we became cordial once again after a period of not speaking with each other because I was too hurt to hear your voice. Then you informed me candidly that you didn't want me to be around you

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because you didn't need any distractions and I was definitely a distraction for you. How the hell is someone that you don't have any romantic feelings for a distraction?

I've learned that we were both confused by our communion. I call you Love because that's what you are and that's what we do and that's what we have. Ours was never a physically based relationship. Not in the typical sense of the word, at least. Our physical was defined by sitting close to each other—really close, but not really touching. Our physical was found in eyes, the movement of our mouths, the scents of you and me intermingling—doing what we never did—make love to each other.

But I know dear Love that what we had and have is nothing less than the strongest love, even in our separation physically, emotionally, and mentally. You need time to figure out that you really will only be happy with me. You want my arms to hold you at night no matter how much your mind fights it, your heart knows it is truth. Our love is stronger than most because we never needed the physical to validate our feelings. We only needed location and voice and time with each other.

Love, I know now that the love I had for you was and is reciprocal but you choose to represent it differently from me, which is frustrating. I cannot understand the intricacies of what we have. Love is spiritual to me—something that meets on a plane much higher than our temporal body-physical realm.

This connection we had is how I knew you would call every Thursday at around 6 p.m. to see where I was although you knew the answer to the question. This connection is what allowed us to spend countless hours together without watching the clock—without caring about anything else in the world. This connection is what made me smile even when I was mad as hell with you. It is the reason we could walk around late at night and talk about nothing and follow up on the phone or the internet with more rambling about happiness, sadness, and love.

Although we spend no time together these days, largely because of your fear, I still know that you love me stronger and harder now than you did before because I love you all the more. Indeed, fear is what is

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keeping us apart. You feared falling so hard in love with me that you shunned the very idea. You tried to forget me but it isn't possible. We are connected so much that there is no way to forget me. I am not one of your acquaintances or friends that you have met along your life's journey. I am much more—I am the first true love you had and have. You can fight it but we both know the truth, unspoken though it may be.

As you have told me, this year has been an up-and-down ride for the both of us and we are both better people for it but we have not attained the level of what we can be because we are not finished with each other. We met in spirit and our souls are making what our bodies await. I become sick to the stomach when you are not well. My voice is ingrained in your psyche and your touch is what I taste. Instead of fighting the urge to be with me, acquiesce and find the greatest joy you've ever had.

One cannot say I did not have a sense for the dramatic, for the grand gesture and desired articulation, even in my very first moments of trying to live more fully into a blackqueer life. In 2003, I ended my letter to Love with the invitation to share in the practice of joy. He declined. I still search. Not much has changed since that time, though joy today is actually more important to me than I could have then realized. When I reread the 2003 letter, I am often stunned by how precise it was about the feelings I'd felt, but also stunned by the boldness of address, the clarity and conviction of force, and the fact of sending such a thing to its recipient. It was a questing for noncoercive communion, a questing for *consent to be otherwise than a single being*, a questing to move from *unity to multiplicity*.¹ Yet it was a questing without the necessary language or guiding ideologies gained through the years of necessary work against sexism, patriarchy, misogynoir, queer antagonism, empire, colonization, and antiblack racism. The questing was sharpened by engaging Black feminism, queer of color critique, necessary for a more robust, full, and non-coercive, reciprocal life. In 2003, I felt anomalous, that only I would write something with this searching and restive yearning, with this heartfelt but also excessive and superfluous and hyperbolic flow. Could I find refuge in writing? Could other writers help me

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practice gentleness and care? What was this desire about beyond the object of its affection?

2003. It was the year I began accepting blackqueerness as a way of life, when I began to separate myself—even if ever so slightly—from doctrine and theology that said I, and queer folks in general, were fundamentally flawed, sinful, in need of change. It's taken me a long time to figure out that the letter form allows me to reach for feeling, allows me to feel something close to what I felt in my churches as musician and choir director and preacher, as praiser and worshipper and believer. The letters are written to a composite character named Moth, and each is written in search of portraying feeling and mood and disposition.

I found Mackey's letters, *Bedouin Hornbook*, and I realized that letters can be about love—certainly—but also friendship, music, and, indeed, joy. Writing *The Lonely Letters* has been an exercise of return, of thinking again about all that was compressed in the letter to Love in 2003, compressed and thus able to be expanded, extended, and—today, happily—critiqued.

I am fundamentally a Blackpentecostal, I believe in repetition as a means for discovering something that is below and beneath and behind what appear to be flat surfaces. At church, we'd sing songs for ten to fifteen or even twenty minutes, just a verse and chorus, and the spirit would fall. And it's because the repetition allowed us to stay and linger and wait and tarry and think and imagine, repetition as limit became also possibility, delimitation the occasion for meditative opening and vulnerability. I am fundamentally a Blackpentecostal, the way I think worlds, imagine sound and music, are because of the force and verve of sound and music from within that world, a world with its own sonic epistemology.

Style.

Sound.

I am a musician of this tradition, was a Hammond B-3 musician first in my church in New Jersey growing up, then in Philadelphia and, later still, in the greater Durham area. These two words—*style*, *sound*—mark how Hammond organists in the Black gospel tradition discuss the differences in chord changes that accrue to certain cities—the Brooklyn sound, the Chicago sound, Old

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School, New School—differences that are *not*. One plays the same song in Chicago during testimony service that they play in Brooklyn but the chording might be different. This difference is not denounced, it is celebrated. It is a difference that does not necessitate categorical differentiation, a difference that announces a sonic epistemology that is not grounded in western philosophical, theological, and musicological ideals.

It occurred to me one day that my writing is like my journeying as a musician, often playing the same thing but constantly reaching for chords and arpeggios that could say that sameness with difference. Baraka's changing same. In *The Lonely Letters*, readers familiar with my first book *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility* will find that many of the same objects of analysis are used: some of the same sermons, the same music, the same concepts are worked again and with and over and through. I am still trying to discover something about the lifeworlds of Blackpentecostals and *The Lonely Letters* gives another occasion for such a thinking with. Thinking with? It is important for me to continue to underscore the idea that I am attempting to *think with* the Blackpentecostal world, that it is worth thinking about, wrestling against, engaging as if there is life there, as if the world is one of complexity. Much of Black life has been relegated by the normative register of western thought to that which is not worth thinking with. I not only resist but contend forcefully against this. And *thinking with* Blackpentecostalism means that the world continues to shape me, continues to gift me possibility against limit.

Semiautobiographical, at thirty-nine years old, I have not yet had the occasion to sit across from the table, or hold hands on the couch, or lay next to someone and have the words "I love you" uttered in the ways we call romantic. And I have never had occasion to return such words and affection. This fact could lead to embarrassment and shame if it were not for friends that practice love and care with me. Yet and still, I experience loneliness. How does one deal with disappointment? How is one to live when one feels that so much has been so heartbreaking and difficult to comprehend? To desire to feel, to desire sensuality, this is what *The Lonely Letters* explores, but in ways that are improvisational and stilted, not on but kinda under and a bit behind and also then a bit ahead and then also over—marking a different relation that is not linear to—the beat. It is an autobiography of loneliness with fictional characters A and Moth as in-

terlocutors, an exploration of heartbrokenness through a kind of Audre Lordean mythopoetics. It is an attempt to write in and through Lorde's theory, through Mackey's line and root, through Black sociality. *The Lonely Letters* is in a Black feminist and blackqueer tradition of struggling to make sense of—by producing a fundamental critique against—the normative world, and it practices a restlessness of word and phrase that seeks ways of existence otherwise.

But it would be unsatisfying, I think, to write a bunch of letters about the personal, private, individual experience of loneliness and aloneness and desires for romantic love. Though I do not shy away from this being a very real factor that animates this autobiography of loneliness, this mythopoetics approaching but shying away from “what really happened,” the letters are about so much more. I found the more these worked on me, came to me, spoke to and with and through me—these voices, these friends, these tales—the more I found the narrative, if there is one, to be about the severance from community. They are about the complexity of thought and movement and spirit that emerges from how it is to feel abandoned by communities of care and concern, about being left behind by churches and institutions that were once integral to life and love. These feelings of severance, abandonment, of being left behind, come—and are felt deeply—in nonlinear fashion, they are not given to progressive temporal measures. Rather, they are experienced repetitiously, in cycles, in fits and starts. Can one consider loneliness to not just be, or to not primarily be, an experience of the individual but of a social world? What happens when blackqueerness is what one experiences as connecting to others, but living such a life is what creates or occasions the distancing metaphorically and materially felt from family, friends, religious communities? What is *that* but loneliness of and from and in the desire for social worlds, for sociality? And can anything be made in the distance, at the border, in the margins? This distance marks limit, but limit marks occasion or, as Nahum Chandler would say, *possibility*.²

The letters attempt to stage the complexity of thinking and performing the limit and possibility, they ask about and linger over these concerns. The experiences of severance, abandonment, of being left behind are not experienced on a straight line, which is why the letters attempt a mood but not a linear narrative that has a beginning, middle, and end. The experiences of severance, abandonment, of being left behind are limit, but also occasion, each enclosure an

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opening and unfolding to what could be *imagined to be possible*. A and Moth are placeholders for desired connection. A wrestles with limit and what it means to be of possibility on the interpersonal and social levels. As much as I have met people similar to both A and Moth, and though A is based on my life, I do believe they also *are* types, they are not empty vessels—no—but they do serve as signposts for feeling. Feeling has resonance in various disciplines and allows for an approach against disciplinarity, toward and through the interdisciplinary, in the service of an alternative epistemological possibility altogether.

In *The Lonely Letters*, I attempt to think the relationship of quantum theory, mysticism, relationality, and blackness together by considering the sound and noise of Blackpentecostal spaces. Building on the work in *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility*, *The Lonely Letters* are written to think together what might seem to be disparate ways of thinking worlds—known and unknown, worlds religious and scientific, worlds noisy and musical—with hopes of considering the epistemologies of these varied worlds as Blackpentecostal. It's about love and heartbreak and hope and joy and how what is thought scientifically is part of a range of *sensual* capacities, that the scientific is a misnomer.

I began writing the letters in this project which you now hold either in 2003—the letter to Love—or in 2010—a letter to another person of interest:

if i were unafraid, i'd tell you that a chance encounter with you in
august at your church and hanging out with you later that week still
makes me smile

if i were unafraid, i'd tell you that i think what you do is amazing and
courageous, and literally has inspired me to do more

if i were unafraid, i'd tell you that even though i don't know you, i
feel you and your struggles, and care about your well-being

if i were unafraid, i'd tell you that though you are doing a lot of stuff
right now, i hope that you take time for self-care

[...]

if i were unafraid, i'd tell you that i wish i could hug you, hold your
hand and tell you everything will be all right

if i were unafraid, i'd tell you that i want to be your friend, with what-
ever possibilities exist there

if i were unafraid, i'd tell you that i simply wish to get to know you
but of course i am afraid, so i couldn't possibly tell you any of that,
though i hope that somehow you discern these things.
thinking of you,

I have been writing in the letter form for some time now, each with the hopes of establishing connection. So perhaps then, too, *The Lonely Letters* is a search for a claim to connection with you, reader, with a desire to be in conversation, to think our worlds together, to figure out a way to practice justice and care with one another in order to alleviate the suffering of the masses. So, you choose, 2003 or 2010.

Organizationally, you might perhaps notice something similar to *Blackpentecostal Breath*. The letters are organized into five sections: Breath³, Shouting³, Noise³, Tongues³, Nothing³. There is a superscript with each section, a 3, meant to mark performance. That is, I think of *The Lonely Letters* as that which was written previous to, during, and after *Blackpentecostal Breath* and I sometimes describe it as the semifictional version, a different though not categorically distinct genre, of that first book project. *Blackpentecostal Breath* is a performance studies analysis of Blackpentecostalism and, in so many ways, was already on its way to being performed, was already being performed in letter form.

People have contacted me to say that passages in *Blackpentecostal Breath* compelled them to breathe deeply, to sigh, to sing, to praise. I wanted that text to capture something of the breath of blackness, of Black *pneuma*, of the choreo-sonic force of Black performance. But *The Lonely Letters* is more intentionally about three-dimensionality, the 3 superscript is to mark the relation to movement, verve, the resistance of the object. *The Lonely Letters* has been performed, both textually, choreo-sonically, paintedly. So you can think of the sections of *The Lonely Letters* as correspondence—literally, letters to and against and in conversation—with the chapters in *Blackpentecostal Breath*. But as in the first book, the categories of sections are illusory at best, the concepts breathe into one another, they are porous, the chapters as categorical distinctions are not pure and cannot be maintained.

The Lonely Letters is about the capacity for that which we study to work on us, to transform us, to change how we inhabit the world. Not dispassionate

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nor disconnected from the fact of the flesh, *The Lonely Letters* is about detecting connection in the most disparate of ways. These letters attempt to resist the epistemology of western thought that privileges so-called critical distance, abstraction, rationality, the dispassionate, the neutral and does so by moving intentionally and intensely with and into the feeling of the flesh, the way one can be moved to tears and joy and happiness and heartbreak. It is not an escape from the social but a withdrawal into the density that Black sociality—black-queerness—provides. There is safety in that tabernacle. There is protection there. What if it were possible to resist the enclosure of emotion from thinking, to resist the enclosure of the flesh from the mind?

The letters are in epistolary form, a poetics in the tradition of and heavily influenced by Nathaniel Mackey, allowing me to explore the relationship between blackness, sound, and quantum theory, not as an analogy but a way to think epistemology. Roughly one hundred trillion neutrinos pass through each of us each second. Passing through us yet not typically the stuff, the material, of thought. Blackpentecostal believers often talk about “feeling something,” where “something” cannot necessarily be described with precision. What if what is being felt, what is being registered on and in the flesh, is the resonance of a kind of matter uninhibited by gravity, like neutrinos; what if what is being felt are vibrations that technologies like those found at the Sanford Underground Research Facility (SURF) consider the foundation for the universe, though we cannot detect these movements with our finite sense capacities? Or can we? Things that occur on the quantum level go against common knowledge regarding time and space. Actions of particles are often unaccounted for, cannot be controlled nor guessed. In quantum states, time and space do not produce causal effects between particles and, yes, it appears that particles’ behaviors in the “past” are determined by their “future” behavior, counterintuitive claims for temporality. Just what is history, and the relation of blackness to history, in such a world?

“I want a consensuality with you,” A says to Moth. And this is important. Given the world of sexism, patriarchy, misogynoir, queer antagonism, and femme-phobia, and the inequitable practices of power that produce harm and coercion, what is most grounded in the letters is a desire for noncoercive relationality, a friendship that sometimes spills into—because it always is—eroticism, a relationality they must recommit to over and over again. It is important to seek

consensuality, a “continued consent to be together,” A says, because the letters cannot be about trying to convince Moth, cannot be about attempting to convince anyone, of value and nobility and honor in the service of inequitable practices of sex and relation. The letters are about the attempt at consensuality, a sensuality of mutuality that is continually being inflected, changed, opened, closed. Frustrating, at times, but also necessary.

The kind of love A seeks with Moth is about the celebration of the antagonism to and renunciation of sovereignty, an antagonism to and renunciation of an individual, individuated, modern liberal subjectivity. No cartesian dualisms here. And similar to how one must attempt to touch a moth delicately lest it disintegrate away into a kind of powder, A’s ruminations on love and mysticism and renunciation of the one for the social, his ruminations on the renunciation of the subject for the entangled folds of blackness, a being together with others as the grounds for experience, are in the service of a delicate grasp of the other that withstands the risk of disintegration. A ruminates in the service of holding while being held within Moth. He wants an experience wherein they both are changed. And perhaps as you read and hold the words, the words will read and hold you. A reciprocity of a being held way of life. A consent for the words to work on you, for the worlds interior to allow withdrawal into them. A non-coercive way to be together with others. In text and sound and song and dance and paint. The choreosonic, centrifugitive motive. The choreosonic, centrifugitive movement. Hold this while you are held in it. A holding of sociality, density, love. And breathe. And breathe. And be.

This is the desire for friendship as a way of life,

Ashon

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notes

and³

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