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Fan Letters of Love

Alice Butler

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

– *Maggie Nelson*¹

Part 1: Beloved

Etched into my right arm is a tattoo of an envelope, around the size of a fifty pence piece. The graphic glowed bright pink after it was drawn. Rather than give me a birthday card, a friend sent me a letter as a tribute to this symbol, within which she prized herself open, told me things she'd struggled to say in person about the closeness of our relationship. I sent a missive back, with the news that I also loved her. In the moment of writing this letter, I blushed: my cheeks burned pink.

To write a friend a love letter is to feel the effects of what Dodie Bellamy calls her 2004 collection of essays, *Pink Steam*. As an attitude and mode of address that is open, hot and intimate, pink steam is the substance of the love letter. To write pink steam is to blush without caring; it's to sprinkle particles of emotion, eroticism and desire across epistolary writing. Sent out into the atmosphere, pink steam moves through time, space and bodies, holding distant writers together. Bellamy's essay, "Delinquent," which takes the form of a letter written by Bellamy to the writer, 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"² and "I wish you *had* met her"³ – rather than her occasional use of the present. I fell for the life narrative, immediately assumed that Bellamy's epistolary essay had

been written in the aftermath of Acker's death from cancer in November 1997. This is in spite of the fact that the letter was *originally* published in 1994, and quotes freely from the unpublished manuscript of Acker's novel-in-progress at the time, *My Mother: Demonology*.⁴ Acker's novel also features abject letters of love, as she reimagines the correspondence sent between Colette Peignot (penname: Laure) and Georges Bataille.

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 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in a "personal communication," which she later draws upon in her essay on reparative reading?⁵ Inspired by my error, in this chapter I travel through an archive of love letters sent by and between feminist writers, before sending my own: to Kathy Acker and Cookie Mueller. These *fan letters of love* flirt with the fantasy of attachment; they close the gap between life and death, with their deliberate *close writing*.

Jane Gallop is a feminist scholar of "close reading," which she describes as a practice of "active learning" that challenges "timeless universals" by paying close attention to the surprises of the text.⁶ Following Gallop, I offer the term "close writing" as another means of feminist creative-critical practice, which actively rejects what is thought to be given, by risking the writing of love. To write close to Acker and Mueller is to cross time and space through the desiring reach of the letter. Close writing is tactile, steamy and uncomfortable: it makes contact with their bodies and texts, through a mode of writing that is relational and performative. As Della Pollock writes in the essay "Performing Writing," "Performative writing is *evocative*. It operates metaphorically to render absence present – to bring the reader into contact with 'other-worlds,' to those aspects and dimensions of our world that are other to the text as such be re-marking them."⁷ Working from Pollock and Gallop, I re-mark the worlds and words of my absent *beloved* through the letters that sustain my close writing. Within this space of attachment, I have the freedom to address them as I did my friend: *Dear Kathy; Dear Cookie ...*

Similarly, as her "love letter waits for an answer,"⁸ Bellamy's missive forces an imaginary conversation across the pause of an absence: she forces proximity between her and Acker by plagiarising manuscript

pieces and eating them up (“to etch” is to eat, says etymology) – just like Acker: the fangirl of literary history who claimed the canon, and the avant-garde, as her own. Bellamy calls to her in correspondence:

Writing is an eating disorder – you/it gulp(s) down the Brontës, Argento, Dickens, Leduc, Faulkner, Laure, von Sternberg, de Sade and spit(s) them back up. What comes out comes *from* the self but is *not* the self. *Beauty will be CONVULSIVE or will not be at all.*

*Gulp.*⁹

And *gulp* again. Who is swallowing whom? I’ve eaten Bellamy eating Acker, who ate pulp, canon and pornography, in wild, bodily sentences.

When devoured in the 2004 collection *Pink Steam*, “Delinquent” doubles up as an epitaph, which gains affective power from its defunct utility as a working missive. Instead, however specific the friendship, it becomes larger than a singular expression of love with its cross-temporal, cross-spatial reach. Her re-published letter of swallowed words incorporates Acker’s absent body, in a way that speaks to Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok’s idea that the pain of loss can be avoided through the fantasy of possession. “In order to not have to ‘swallow’ a loss,” they write, “we fantasize swallowing or (having swallowed) that which has been lost, as if it were some kind of thing.”¹⁰ When applied to the “performative possibilities of writing,”¹¹ this act of swallowing sustains the absent writer through active and relational correspondence. The direct address is a summoning.

Acker tried to work similar epistolary contact back in 1989, as she begins her obituary to Robert Mapplethorpe, who died of AIDS-related complications in March of that year:

I started writing this as a private letter to Robert Mapplethorpe. For it is as impossible for a living human to write a letter to a dead one as it is to place anything true in a commercial magazine. Then I became embarrassed at my emotion. Is embarrassment a sign of love and so not allowable in commercial magazines?¹²

To broaden Acker’s question: what about art and literary criticism? How does the embarrassment of openly loving an object, or writing a letter to someone dead, fare here?

To write *with love* runs counter to the calm logic one might expect to encounter in traditional critical discourse, where obsession is thought to be perverse, a guilty kind of pleasure. But, as Gavin Butt suggests in his introduction to *After Criticism: New Responses to Art and Performance*, there has been a turn away in the postmodern era from the “Enlightenment idea of the critic as a discriminating authority on matters of art and culture,”¹³ towards an alternative position of address, whereby the critic does more than observe or discriminate: she participates, writes “*Beside*” the object, as Sedgwick proposes in her introduction to *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*.¹⁴ “*Beside*,” writes Sedgwick, “permits a spacious antagonism about several of the linear logics that enforce dualistic thinking: noncontradiction or the law of the excluded middle, cause versus effect, subject versus object.”¹⁵ My close writing of fan letters distorts the boundaries between subject and object: our voices blur. Sedgwick’s provocation is from the same book of essays that contains her thoughts on reparative reading, which she theorises as an alternative critical mode that embraces affect, love and surprise, in contrast to the “future-oriented vigilance” of paranoid criticism.¹⁶ With its reparative impulse to relate and correspond, between bodies and texts, the love letter mines the powers of “beside-led” writing: multi-vocal, multi-genre, multi-spatial, the love letter is a form in movement that conjoins writer *and* beloved.

How could it be anything but? In her essay of fragments, *Eros the Bittersweet*, Anne Carson recognises the movement of desire: “Eros is a verb,”¹⁷ she writes: it’s defined by extension, and “infinite hunger.”¹⁸ She pictures an outstretched arm: “The reach of desire is defined in action: beautiful (in its object), foiled (in its attempt), endless (in time).”¹⁹ This confers the erotic condition with a particular kind of mania that is driven by the obsession (and failures) of its interminable reach: the attachment of the writer/lover to her beloved. When I speak of *fan love*, it’s Carson’s understanding of love – as risk, edge, pleasure and pain – that I’m indebted to: an alternative (feminist) kind of critical rigour that reads and writes closely *with care*.

Cookie Mueller, for example, embraced fan love as care with the art criticism she contributed to New York’s *Details* magazine from

1982 until her death in 1989. AIDS was a brutal fact of life for her, and so many of her friends: the artists and writers of her downtown scene. To write with love, anecdote and candour, about the art getting made within and against the epidemic, became a vital means of speaking out in a political climate of “Silence = Death.”²⁰ Responding to the photographic work of her friend, Peter Hujar, Mueller wrote in 1986 (a year before his death from AIDS-related illness): “It is very difficult for me to write about ... and certainly not because I find fault with it. The opposite is true – I am in awe.”²¹ To write with fan love is to face the ambiguity of this edge, and perform the difficulty of writing pleasure, of finding the words. But the fan will always find them, eventually – as Maggie Nelson forces us to recognise in her own eros writing: “How can the words not be good enough?”²²

Her question stresses the importance of specificity in relation to the pronouns we use to and for people, of varying sexual and gender identities, so we can “become alert to ... the wings with which each word can fly.”²³ But it’s also a question that echoes throughout all of *The Argonauts*, as Nelson over and over again confronts the inexpressibility of love, her reason to “to keep writing.”²⁴ Love flies in *The Argonauts*; it has multiple wings: romantic, familial, political, *creative*. Reading meshes with experience, as swatches of quotation (a method taken from Roland Barthes’ *A Lover’s Discourse*) get closely woven into her personal writing.

The Argonauts lies in a productive zone between autofiction and queer theory, but it’s also – most simply, most brutally – a 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.”²⁵ Nelson speaks directly to her 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.”²⁶ Nelson creates the closest of spaces for her love projection: subject, object and reader, become entangled, as one body.

While Barthes' 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 (a writer's love) to talk about love, queerness and writing.²⁷ Sara Ahmed, Anne Carson, Eileen Myles and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick are just some of the names she gets close to (their names listed casually in the margins – spatially and emotionally *close*). When she calls upon Sedgwick's work on reparative reading, it generates the effect of an echo, two writers in epistolary contact. *The Argonauts*, with its affectionate desire to write with those that 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 potential of reading reparatively:

No less acute than a paranoid position, no less realistic, no less attached to a project of survival, and neither less nor more delusional or fantasmatic, the reparative reading position undertakes a different range of affects, ambitions, and risks. What we can best learn from such practices are, perhaps, the many ways selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture – even of a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them.²⁸

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.²⁹ To write like a fan-in-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 essay, "A Poem Is Being Written," which links poetry with spanking with "female anal eroticism"),³⁰ an incantation as naked as: "I am not interested in a hermeneutics, or an erotics, or a metaphoric of my anus, I am interested in ass-fucking."³¹ It's as if she's emotionally involved with "Eve," *and* Harry – the person that fucks her. Thus, *The Argonauts* not

only opens up the complexities of sexual desire and the ways we write it; it also shows the complex emotional involvement it's possible to have with the people that we love and read, the figures she calls "the many gendered-mothers of my heart."³² 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.³³

Such relations do a lot of reparative good for feminist criticism: they point to "bad ideas" and embarrassing acts of love, as tactics of what Bellamy calls in her book of blog-posts, *the buddhist*: "oppositional weakness."³⁴ She muses on its 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."³⁵ To perform the fucked-up weakness felt in being a fan, lover and writer represents a radical mode of feminist authorship, where vulnerability is worked through and owned in the process of writing. It is weaker *and* wilder than what Sedgwick calls, via affect theorist Silvan Tomkins, the paranoid scene of "strong theory."³⁶ Rather than smooth out the chaos, close writing holds the crazed process of how we come to understand our love objects, and our own desire for them, in the manic flow of its devouring paragraphs. "Who tells you to be bad in writing?" Bellamy asks Acker, before she has an answer.³⁷ Close writing like this holds the hesitations, influences and vulnerabilities, inherent to our thoughts and sentences. Through this approach, directly accessed in epistolary modes, critical analysis is freely mixed with personal anecdote and quotation, in a way that disrupts the boundaries of genre.

Writing this way recognises the emotion of the work it's addressing, the desire that made it, by re-enacting more emotion, more weakness, more love: an unapologetic and powerful mode of reading and writing. Such feminine monstrousness might scare academic audiences steeped in strong theory, but that is how writing opens itself up to affective possibilities and empowers all kinds of desiring subjects to speak and love.

Close writing offers a way of reading and writing differently that helps to uncover (and get inside) what is emotional, risky, sexual and surprising, about the works and lives of our beloved.

From Nelson's incantations, to Bellamy's delinquent letter, epistolary communications – of a particularly personal nature – circulate within close writing. Their cause is one of dislocation, to move the risky closeness of love into a critical space. This develops the work done by Annie Leclerc in 1977, whose text "La Lettre d'amour" ("The Love Letter"), is discussed by Jane Gallop in an essay that highlights how letter writing can reap transformative bonds and modes of expression, between women and for women, in cultural production. "Love letters have always been written from the body, in connection with love," she writes, "Leclerc wants all writing to have that connection; she wants love to enter into general circulation, inscribed knowledge, rather than remaining private and secret. ... Leclerc brings the love letter out of the closet and into the public domain."³⁸ What Gallop is drawn to, and that is suggested by the metaphor of the closet, is Leclerc's desire for the maid in Vermeer's painting, *Lady Writing a Letter, with her Maid* (1670–1671) – a desire that is projected fiercely (and freely) within the intimate space of the letter. Gallop writes with Leclerc to show how feminists can re-enact and transform the history of women's letter writing. As a potential object of perverse desire, the love letter can challenge the privacy and politeness of the erotic utterance, when transported, shamelessly, into the space of feminist critical writing.³⁹

In my own work, I write love letters to Kathy Acker and Cookie Mueller as a subversive means through which to create careful discussions about their works and lives. I risk the embarrassment of such a gesture in order to get close to the nakedness of their writing: to care for the boldness and braveness with which they put their emotional, sexual, bodily lives to paper. They provocatively wrote what was personal: how could I *not* write them letters in response?

Mueller's short stories, and art criticism, documented weird and wonderful life events (from burning a friend's house down in British Columbia, to faking sex with a chicken on the set of *Pink Flamingos*),⁴⁰

which 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), after her death from AIDS-related illness on 10 November 1989. Acker 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?"⁴¹ It's an intellectual question, and an erotic seduction, where desire, identification and writing get messy and confused – just like they do in my own fan letters of love. Inasmuch as Acker and Mueller's writing flirts with the autobiographical, in unfinished novels, chapbooks, and epistolary pieces – their own close writing – it demands this kind of contact.⁴²

It's so difficult to find the words to explain why we love the writers that we do. But when I so boldly exhibit my love for them in letters, most publicly in the epistolary chapbooks that I contributed to the Whitstable Biennale in 2016; I think I have a responsibility to try, even if the words get tied in knots. I found Acker first, nearly ten years ago, when I too was a writer of great expectations. Through her I ate up all the colourful books published by Chris Kraus' Native Agents Series, of which Mueller's *Walking Through Clear Water in a Pool Painted Black* was the first, published with Ann Rower's *If You're A Girl* in 1990. Reading Acker gave me permission to open up completely, to flirt with what might seem like a bad idea: that is to write my narratives of love. Her words are so direct, but vulnerable, an edge that I love; as she writes to Sylvère (Lotringer) in the letter section of *Great Expectations*: "Now that I've spent last night fucking you, I'm in love with you."⁴³ Mueller's short stories made me think about freedom in a different way (less sexual): a way of looking at and being in the

world. Her words make me laugh and cry from one sentence to the next, a voice so violent and tender. Could she be the perfect storyteller? I think of her playing mad while attempting to escape a rapist in one particular story:

I have always been an astute observer of sexy women and unsexy women, and in all my years I've never seen a crazy woman get chased by a man. Look at bag ladies on the street. They rarely get raped, I surmised. ... So I decided that I would simply act crazy. I would turn the tables. I would scare him.⁴⁴

Writing love letters is a way to keep "Cookie" and "Kathy" alive in fantasy correspondence. I love them because they helped me come to writing, to feel free in writing, in the way that Hélène Cixous understands it: "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*."⁴⁵ This is the thing about their close writing: it calls for more close writing, with its personal directness. I get loose in my replies; flirt with the risk of making my love known. There's critical value to be gained from this: to write a love letter is to get so close that it's possible to read, feel and guess, what others cannot from a distance. As I get close to Mueller and Acker through the form of the letter, I open up the possibilities of close writing: the ways it fearlessly mixes emotion, critical analysis and genre; the ways it reveals itself.

The correspondence that I write crosses temporalities, and hovers "across the ontological crack between the living and the dead," as Sedgwick wrote in the essay-obituary, "White Glasses."⁴⁶ An imagined proximity between writer and correspondent is hereby invoked, within the peripatetic and affective space of the letter. But how do these letters help Mueller and Acker? Two writers that have only recently begun to achieve lasting recognition decades after their deaths, for so long bracketed within the notorious frame, on account of their gender, sexuality, image and disease?⁴⁷ Following Elizabeth Freeman's work on queer temporalities, my close writing opens up "possibilities for moving through and with time, encountering pasts, speculating

futures, and interpenetrating the two in ways that counter the common sense of the present tense."⁴⁸ It's an act of mourning that gives shape to their physical and institutional absence: a shape of words (heart-shaped), which looks forward as well as back to give us hope for the future of feminist writing.

Hope is what keeps the reparative reader *writing*, as Sedgwick teases out: "Hope, often a fracturing, even a traumatic thing to experience, is among the energies by which the reparatively positioned reader tries to organize the fragments and part-objects she encounters or creates."⁴⁹ It's an energy I try to harness as I touch Mueller's written fragments. The AIDS epidemic in America left so many lives unfinished as it swept through a country gripped by systematic stigma, hatred and fear.⁵⁰ And while close writing cannot reverse the tragedy of her death, nor the thousands of others, it's with hope and love that I repair the future of her writing. Indeed, while the letters that I write to Mueller might be undeliverable to her person, I hope they touch her in other ways, and bring more readers closer to her words not her image, through the erotic, fantasy proximity that can occur through reading and writing.

The memorial that Sedgwick wrote for the art critic Craig Owens, who died of AIDS-related illness on 4 July 1990, is spun from similar affects. Theirs, like mine for Mueller and Acker, was a love (a writer's love) that occurred across "part-objects, snatches of print" - it was a "projective space of desire euphemistically named friendship, love at a distance, or even just reading and writing."⁵¹ Amidst this space of words, Sedgwick is haunted by what she describes as a "nauseatingly familiar blankness: that someone whom so many of us saw as so self-evidently treasurable, could be in a society that so failed to treasure him."⁵² On account of this history, mirrored in Mueller, I treasure her and Acker in love letters and don't hold back.

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

Part 2: Dead Letter Office

Dear Cookie,

Your frayed manuscript is all I can think about. It's stuck in my heart; comes out in my writing. Those unbound pages: expecting, wanting, waiting, desiring, to give birth to a book that would be read, devoured and loved. Was it a novel? Or a novel-in-pieces? You called it unfinished in the cover letter you sent out to all the publishers of the downtown scene, with a clear promise that you would complete it, however much that proved difficult. Sick time: it's so vicious and unfair. And yet, reading your tracks, loving you, feels like being sixteen again playing my favourite mix-tape.

First I knew your face, with its hard, blushed angles and that beatnik nest of bottle-bleach hair. (Memory: I'm sitting on a stool in the kitchen; my mother behind me. She's dyeing my hair, using one of those do-it-yourself caps. I wanted to be blonde so badly, but it fucking hurt, and not in a good way. I scream. Then my hair turned green. I screamed again.) "Whenever you're depressed, just change your hair color," I remember your mother used to say.⁵³ I wonder if you were always sad when you smothered it into your roots, or if maybe you just liked the way it looked. I guess it was probably both; adolescence works that way.

I devour your style, Cookie. I want to eat your handmade silk dresses. I love you for being a forever adolescent. You in your safety-pinned short skirts, spring-o-later heels, and gold bangles that made your wrists go green. When I look up at the night sky, I often see your moon tattoo, a bright shape in a pool painted black. I write this wearing my ripped leather jacket: the one I stole off you, in my dreams.

(Maybe I was wearing it the night of my first kiss. One of those summer nights when the air feels damp, and hungry insects munch on flushed skin. I'd waited a long time for his saliva, his way of saying yes. I wrapped my arms around his soft grey sweatshirt and savoured the smell of stale cigarettes. I brought his tongue closer to mine and felt my cheeks go red with embarrassment. That feeling of not knowing if it's right or not.)

Cookie, the way you wear adolescence is magic. Sometimes I try to imitate you, a gesture of love. I found some gold bangles at the bottom of my drawer last week. I hoarded them in my teens. They caught my eye with their scratched, sparkly surface. I wanted to know what it would feel like



Figure 7.1 Alice Butler, with Katie Rose Johnston, *Fan Letters of Love: Cookie Mueller*, 2016. Chapbook, edition 150, Whitstable Biennale 2016 (courtesy of the artists).

to write when adorned in metal, just like you did, and so I slipped them over my wrists. It's awkward and sore. That's dedication to your cause, Cookie, of writing as an adolescent.

Your stories are so small but they come alive in an instant. Open wide. Laughing. I remember that picture Nan Goldin took of you, your straggly locks dripping across your face. A pillarbox red lip. Your laugh is infectious. I feel your pleasure. This picture breathes youth, in spite of what happened, and so does your writing, those short stories that nearly became a novel and that always brought laughter to pain.

How the fuck did this happen, Cookie? How did they leave you so unfinished?

You might've left short stories; you might've died young, a forever adolescent, but in your writing you made yourself known. You laughed throughout and got your revenge on those adults that refused to help you. You are beautiful, bright and messy. I love you, Cookie. Against all odds: your writing is freedom.

Love,

A x

Dear Kathy,

I found some leather trousers in the charity shop last week, and they made me think of you. They're pitch black, like the night sky, or your bedroom walls, in which you started writing. I gazed at my reflection in the mirror, felt strong and sexy, in my new-old trousers and white t-shirt, splashed with spots of red wine. Or maybe blood. Slipping the trousers over my frame felt like a way of getting inside of you, a bit like this letter. I found them in the Oxfam on Gloucester Road, only three miles east of your place on Riverview Gardens. Let me get close to you, Kathy. My cheeks go red as I write this. The perfect match for my cherry pout; the perfect match for you.

Sometimes I have a dream in which I'm stalking your shadows in that London flat. You are the leather-clad banshee, with a gold tooth. Smiling, you beckon me through the front door. Hundreds of unopened letters swallow my feet. I try to catch you, but when I place my hand on your chest, I stumble through the blankness of air, to fall on my knees, hands in the dust. I feel your absence, in this strange world.

But at the same time it makes me laugh, as it reminds me of the games you always played in your writing, exposing yourself in all your raw multitudes, dressing like a cartoon clown in Jean-Paul Gaultier, then disappearing like a puff of smoke, as you fragmented the traces of an intimate reality.

I keep walking, looking for traces. Up the carpeted stairs reeking of cat piss. The walls feel rough; white paint falling away like snowflakes. Up high I spot the photograph Robert Mapplethorpe took of you wearing a black leotard, hiding your face with your hands. Hide-and-seek, forever. When I reach the top of the stairs, the bathroom on the right looks boring and functional, so I turn left into your bedroom. I twist the brass knob slowly: is this a horror film or a love story? The soundtrack shifts spirit and volume. Sometimes I can hear the Velvet Underground's deep and deathly "Venus and Furs." But sometimes there's deadening silence, as if I needed any more reminding that you're gone. My favourite dream is when I can hear fragments of you reading your writing aloud. You cannibalising the words stolen from others - Dickens, Cervantes, the Brontës: your reach was endless - with your deliberate, crimson mouth.



Figure 7.2 Alice Butler, with Katie Rose Johnston, *Fan Letters of Love: Kathy Acker*, 2016. Chapbook, edition 150, Whitstable Biennale 2016 (courtesy of the artists).

There are books everywhere, spread-eagled open on the floor, face down and page up, asking to be penetrated. Used notebooks show their ring-bound spines, as they stand on the shelf of past books. Yours and others. Torn pages lie scattered amidst the bed sheets. I spot ink stains, and lip stains, or maybe blood. I obsessively think of you writing in bed: before, after and during sex.

Other than the bed and books, the room is empty apart from a large mahogany wardrobe. There's a crack in the mirror; you briefly pass behind me. I open the door. Your dresses float on wooden hangers, suspended in this weird dreamscape between life and death. I can feel time passing, as if it's a malleable substance I can touch. Moth-eaten, with holes to fall through. Broken zips. Handmade hems worn thin. Elbows crushed with wear. I touch the spiky hair of fake leopard print, and the rough texture of antique lace. I think about eating it.

Touching your dresses is like touching your writing. You too were a kleptomaniac, possessing texts as if they were fabrics, rubbing them up against your own body, desire.

(Ink stains, or lips stains or maybe blood.)

I slip a dress on to my body. It's tight, black and ruched. It oozes like ink. However forbidden this feels, I think it's what you would've wanted, our lives and texts colliding. We possess each other. You gave me the licence to steal, to get dangerously close to you. Kathy, I love you.

I wake up steaming. My hair is wet and my skin is pink.

Love,

A x

- 30 Abigail Derecho, "Archontic Literature: A Definition, a History, and Several Theories of Fan Fiction," in Hellekson and Busse, *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities*, 61.
- 31 Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).
- 32 Derecho, "Archontic Literature," 64.
- 33 Ibid.
- 34 Ibid.
- 35 See fan response to *Larry!Monument*: Flourish, "Larry in the Gallery," *Fansplaining*, 2016, accessed 18 March 2018 (reblog) <http://fanriot.tumblr.com/post/139791802123/>. Flourish also invited me to discuss *Larry!Monument* with her and fellow presenter Elizabeth Minkel on their popular fandom podcast. See "Larry Is Real," *Fansplaining* 16 (23 February 2016), accessed 1 May 2018. Podcast, <https://player.fm/series/fansplaining-1745409/episode-16-larry-is-real>.
- 36 Simon O'Sullivan, "The Aesthetics of Affect: Thinking Art Beyond Representation," *Angelaki: Journal of Theoretical Humanities* 6, no. 3 (2001): 125–135; J.F. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 93.
- 37 O'Sullivan, "Aesthetics of Affect," 125.
- 38 Ibid., 126
- 39 Katie Wilson, "Red Pillers, Sad Puppies, and Gamergaters: The State of Male Privilege in Internet Fan Communities," in *A Companion to Media Fandom and Fan Studies* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2018), 446.
- 40 The Hikikomori in Japanese fandom withdraw from social life, often seeking extreme degrees of isolation and confinement.
- 41 Giulia Palladini, *The Scene of Foreplay: Theater, Labor, and Leisure in 1960s* (New York: Northwestern University Press, 2017).
- 42 Ibid., 4.
- 43 Anderson, "Still Kissing Their Posters Goodnight," 239.
- 44 owko69 (Parry), "Yoko Ono Fanfiction," 97.

7 Fan Letters of Love

- 1 Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2015), 7.
- 2 Dodie Bellamy, "Delinquent," in *Pink Steam* (San Francisco: Suspect Thoughts Press, 2004), 135.

- 3 Ibid., 141 (italics mine).
- 4 While I quote from the 2004 *Pink Steam*, "Delinquent" was previously published in Juliana Spahr, Mark Wallace, Kristin Prevallet and Pam Rehm, eds., *A Poetics of Criticism* (Buffalo, NY: Leave Books, 1994), 293-299.
- 5 Joseph Litvak cited in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, Or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You," in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 147.
- 6 Jane Gallop, "The Historicization of Literary Studies and the Fate of Close Reading," *Profession* (2007): 184-185.
- 7 Della Pollock, "Performing Writing," in *The Ends of Performance*, ed. Peggy Phelan and Jill Lane (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 80.
- 8 Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Jonathan Cape, 1979), 158.
- 9 Bellamy, "Delinquent," 136 (italics in original).
- 10 Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, "Mourning or Melancholia: Introjection versus Incorporation," in *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis*, ed. and trans. Nicholas T. Rand (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 126.
- 11 Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993), 148.
- 12 Kathy Acker, "Epitaph: Kathy Acker on Robert Mapplethorpe," *The Face* 2, no. 8 (May 1989): 36.
- 13 Gavin Butt, "Introduction: The Paradoxes of Criticism," in *After Criticism: New Responses to Art and Performance*, ed. Gavin Butt (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 2-3.
- 14 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Introduction," in *Touching Feeling*, 8.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading," 130.
- 17 Anne Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet: An Essay* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 17.
- 18 Ibid., 29.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 "Silence = Death" was the slogan used by the direct action group ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) to highlight the institutional neglect of AIDS victims.
- 21 Cookie Mueller, "Art & About," in *Details*, ed. Annie Flanders, March 1986, in *Photocopied Articles 2/2*, Serpent's Tail/High Risk Archives, MSS. 86, Box VII.1, Folder 20, Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries.
- 22 Nelson, *The Argonauts*, 7.

- 23 Ibid., 8.
- 24 Ibid., 3.
- 25 Ibid.
- 26 Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*, 148 (italics in original).
- 27 Nelson explains Barthes' idea (which gives the book 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.'" Nelson, *The Argonauts*, 5.
- 28 Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading," 150–151.
- 29 Nelson, *The Argonauts*, 123.
- 30 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "A Poem Is Being Written," in *Tendencies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 178.
- 31 Nelson, *The Argonauts*, 85.
- 32 Ibid.
- 33 "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*, 29 May 2015, accessed 15 March 2019, www.bookforum.com/interview/14663.
- 34 Dodie Bellamy, *The Buddhist* (San Francisco: Allone Co. Editions and Publication Studio, 2011), 34.
- 35 Bellamy, *The Buddhist*, 35.
- 36 Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading," 133.
- 37 Bellamy, "Delinquent," 137.
- 38 Jane Gallop, "Annie Leclerc Writing a Letter, with Vermeer," *October* 33 (Summer 1985): 108.
- 39 For more on this, see Anne L. Bower, "Dear --- : In Search of New (Old) Forms of Critical Address," in *Epistolary Histories: Letters, Fiction, Culture*, ed. Amanda Gilroy and W.M. Verhoeven (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000), 155–175. Bower is also "drawn to writing that enacts the idea of interacting *with* rather than acting *on* or reacting *to*" (156).
- 40 *Pink Flamingos* is a 1972 film by John Waters, and the title of a Cookie Mueller short story, collected in Cookie Mueller, *Walking Through Clear Water in a Pool Painted Black* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1990).
- 41 Kathy Acker, *Letters to Alan Sondheim*, undated (c.1974), Kathy Acker Papers, Box 30, Folder 11, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Duke University. Courtesy of the Kathy Acker Estate.
- 42 *Close Writing: Touching Kathy Acker and Cookie Mueller* is the title of my PhD thesis, in which I conceptualise a mode of feminist writing called

- close writing* (University of Manchester, 2019). Close writing can be found in unfinished novels, letters, diaries, art columns and stolen texts: it is the writing of one's life – sexual, emotional, domestic – as a confrontational act. Within this project, I enact a close writing methodology of my own, also shown in this chapter, to discuss the close writing of Acker and Mueller.
- 43 Kathy Acker, *Great Expectations* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, Grove Press, 1982), 26.
- 44 Cookie Mueller, "Abduction & Rape – Highway 31–1969," in *Walking Through Clear Water in a Pool Painted Black*, 49.
- 45 Hélène Cixous, "Coming to Writing," in *Coming to Writing and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 42.
- 46 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "White Glasses," in *Tendencies*, 257. "White Glasses" began as a planned memorial for Sedgwick's friend, Michael Lynch, to be presented at the CUNY Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies, 9 May 1991; but in the course of the essay's development, Lynch's health enjoys an unexpected revival, while Sedgwick is diagnosed with breast cancer. The essay anticipates death, from the perspective of author and subject. In its published form as an essay in *Tendencies*, a note accompanies "White Glasses," stating that Michael Lynch died of AIDS on 9 July 1991.
- 47 In the years I have been working on this project, biographies and novels have emerged inspired by Kathy Acker and Cookie Mueller's chaotic lives and texts, including Chloé Griffin's overwhelming oral history, *Edgewise: A Picture of Cookie Mueller* (2014), Chris Kraus' experimental biography, *After Kathy Acker: A Biography* (2017) and Olivia Laing's novel, *Crudo* (2018), which meshes the autobiography of the author with Acker's own life and writing. The influence of Acker and Mueller is clearly contagious. But never have they met in a threesome, brought together by a writer that balances experimental love letters with exploratory feminist theory. This enriches and deepens the devotional impulse by offering a theoretical methodology and writing practice that stresses the complex contributions Acker and Mueller's own close writing made to conceptions of gender, sexuality, sickness and writing.
- 48 Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), xv.
- 49 Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading," 146.
- 50 I must add that HIV/AIDS is not simply "in the past" – it is not finished.
- 51 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "A Memorial for Craig Owens," in *Tendencies*, 104–105.
- 52 *Ibid.*, 105.
- 53 Cookie Mueller, "My Bio – Notes on an American Childhood," in *Walking Through Clear Water in a Pool Painted Black*, 142.