Paper cuts, or the costs of legibility

A review of Kimberly Alidio's 'why letter ellipses'

MORGAN VÕ

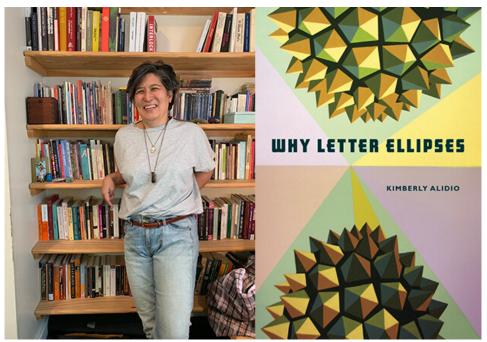


Photo of Kimberly Alidio by Stacy Szymaszek.

why letter ellipses

Kimberly Alidio

selva oscura press 2020, 118 pages, \$18.00, ISBN 978-0990945352

When we talk about literacy there cannot be / one without concessions. — Simone White

why letter ellipses begins for me in the slippery enigma of its title which, through the touch of a gerund to a gerund-esque, yields a kind of aspect perception, where shifts in emphasis can flicker ducks into rabbits. Stressing "letter" as that which can "ellipses," I hear a desire to explore how speech slides into omission, how text erodes into cracks, gaps, full-blown sinkholes. Conversely, stressing "ellipses" as that which can be "lettered," I hear a critical question about historiography and its limits: Why write or label what's been left out? In the context of the archive, is legibility something that benefits more than it degrades? The marginal is made visible how, and at what cost?

The title's dance of subject-predicate positions performs an understanding of language as a set of fundamentally mercurial systems wherein meaning fluctuates continuously between the solid and the liquid: what we say often means one thing emphatically even as it can mean something else entirely, could come to mean something different in the future, has meant something different in the past. Alidio works with this instability, particularly as it relates to our capacity to see ourselves and each other through language. Representation is a social act that demands consideration for how others do or don't, can't or won't, see what you see. why letter ellipses makes no single claim to the impacts of this complex tension. Instead we see, on the one hand, the expansive possibilities for intimacy that queerness presents in a heteronormative society, while meeting on the other the consequences of being erased beneath the expected roles of the marginalized.

The book's first section is a set of self-contained poems cast under the heading "Archive is Tousled." To tease the archive with some tousling does a few things: tousling gets your hands in there; tousling calls attention to the heads, the people inside; tousling musses up any appearance of composure, where what seems perfectly combed or sharply gelled is finally not that hard to upset, even with a

playful touch. And for Alidio, who had a prior career as an academic historian, tousling admits to a strange intimacy with the archive, even perhaps an affection for the process of historical inquiry in spite of what must be reckoned with in its wake.

In the book's opening poem, "stitch," excitement and unease attend a burgeoning relationship:

Pre-visit uncertainty was nice. Familiarity and dailiness long distance is not. She's present. Too. I'd give my dog up for her. Would I regret it. Would my new love.[1]

With any romance, but particularly something new, particularly something long-distance, how do you establish that your lover is really there with you? How do you know you're really there with them? The long-distance relationship becomes a recurring motif that raises the stakes for making contact through and across the space of language; indeed, *letters* and *ellipses* can be seen as the aesthetic artifacts of daily correspondence and conversations over text message: "Give me some mundane details of your day' / asked late-morning missives from Missoula to Tucson" (106). Such correspondence seduces us with the possibility that, should we attempt to respond, we might succeed in conveying ourselves, which would also mean grasping ourselves. But grasping ourselves for the purpose of conveying ourselves might be risking a grip too tight. "[Can] I take your name / pillowcase / lightly choke," Alidio asks (1). What does it mean to agree to the terms of engagement that would allow you to belong? What does this agreement force you to swallow?

Through poems like "Dear Archon" and "dearest, I'm writing from inside this place to you who are in a totally different place," the motif of the long-distance relationship becomes one of the book's central provocations for us to rethink how we understand the archive and the power it has in shaping our perceptions. In "dearest," Alidio writes:

I'm far away. Our bargain — settle on the lowest common denominator. Geography after all is a modernist romance, a language for how We diverged from one another. Writing is the fragment of a relation Made possible by archival preservation and document's promise. (23)

Through its assertion as document, evidence, and proof, the archive attempts to impress upon us the sense that what it renders is natural, undeniable, true. In contrasting the archive with letters between lovers, we're asked to recognize the obvious fact that the archive is *writing*. But further, Alidio opens up the implications of the archive as a writing *between people*, people who collide through the chaotic intersections of doubts and desires, motives and intentions. Without shoring up critical perspectives on how and why the archive comes to have the aura of authority, we might, to our detriment, make a blanket acceptance of the "fragment of a relation" the archive presents as the relation itself. Throughout *why letter ellipses*, Alidio encounters a deep sense of estrangement when attempting to see the world through such limited forms of prescribed relation. "a sacred heart is not immaculate," for example, describes a scene in the hospital, the speaker cared for by a night crew of Filipinx nurses. "My diaspora," as Alidio writes, morphs oddly and awkwardly into an "it" that brings both warmth and discomfort:

My diaspora took over the late-night shift and entered, one by one, to touch machines. It called me *ma'am* and said we should *baby* the IV port. It was the first to ask, *Does it hurt?* Through the door, it changed a large trash bag with a faraway smile. I was bilious, literally, itchy all over. I sent a floor nurse from the Mountain Province back with news of my parentage. It's spreading, I said to my lover as the door closed. Sure enough, the exiting nurse hugged me and said, *I didn't know! Lita had to tell me!* (14)

It locates; it establishes connection. But it also grows "itchy all over," (emphasis mine) like the stitch of a sweater that fits too tight, perhaps so tight it hurts. I'm struck by the musical modulation of it inside Lita, where the insistent it-ness of Alidio's diaspora strikes a different note, a tone clear and lifted at the center of a name, the sound of it within the particular. This upturn of pitch describes with surprising concision the complex relationship between the category and the categorized: it's not that it's not there at all — it's that that's not the start or end of it. It sounds different, person to person.

Later, this difference in pitch is sounded again in the image of a cocktail, when "[the] anesthesiologist served what he called a *margarita* and later said, *It was a pleasure*" (14). Liquids seep in and out of *why letter ellipses* as signs of "where broken-open is whole" (16). In contrast to the constrictive solidity of the *it* of Alidio's diaspora, descriptions of queer sex reverberate as scenes where liquidity — both in the sensual experience of bodily fluids and in the blur, break, bleed of identity within erotic exchange — offers a space wherein the uncontainability of the marginalized becomes a refuge from rigidly oppressive hegemonies:

sipped long nectar from your center thick ropes

•••

blood on a light switch plate

a butch hand swipe after sudden onrush

48 hrs no food feasted on rotisserie chicken dark meat only

stepped-on glasses calmly taped together

(16)

Sex becomes a means of survival, literally feeding hungry bodies. Lesbian sex is drawn in carnal detail through lines like "Will you fist me / if I beg in / a whisper" (5) and "lick my lover full circle from / roof mouth to pussy floor" (17). With "a butch hand swipe," Alidio transforms menstrual blood from a sign of fertility into a stark emblem of queer refusal. Yet, for me, this is one of several details that, despite its striking embodiment, slips into the shadows of the erotic scene. The body and the light by which the body is seen are intertwined throughout the book, often in moments where difficulty seeing enhances the gaze's erotic resonance: "My eyes held you swimming through velvet smoke two feet away" (43). It's fitting that the speaker's glasses are broken in the passage above — the calm with which they repair the frames suggests that disruptions of so-called clarity are a welcome relief. "I've stopped / being afraid," Alidio writes, "under irrelevant / illegible light" (10). Unafraid because it is within this illegibility that a profound intimacy is made possible. We find that the eyes that see us most clearly are those that allow us to be more than what can be seen, and the arms that hold us best are those that embrace the ways in which we elude their grasp.

But there's a harsher side to this illegible light. History is written around the holes in its plot, around the gaps that omit the stories it does not or will not tell. Marginalized figures can seem confined within dim silhouettes that deny their presence and obscure the plain facts of their oppression. Several stretches of *why letter ellipses* cull from numerous sources, numerous voices, often through juxtapositions that feel more like collisions than static arrangements. Alidio's sense of collage deliberately evades coherence and instead throws into relief how the power of validity is conferred upon some voices and withheld from others. One section of "Dear Archon" makes repeated use of what appear to be quotations from family advocates of a recently deceased woman engaged in a civil dispute over their right to part of the land she spent her life working and living on. We receive the woman's story in a "broken" English and, because of the nonstandard syntax of these passages, we assume the inevitable failure of the speakers' bid for compensation:

It is alright if the Lawyer sell the property, we just hope and pray that Inay Leonor even if she is gone be compensated for being a tenant for almost 55 years, even in a little way. But as far as we know, the Lawyer did not honor and acknowledge Inay as a tenant of your property. He said that she was only a caretaker and not a tenant, that's why Inay haven't compensated from other property wherein she is a tenant too. (40)

We understand the speakers to be appealing directly to the property owner. Yet the "Lawyer" looms as a metonym for authority, and, because this authority has already declared the speakers' case invalid, it is unlikely that the property owner will hear them, even in the most literal sense. The threatening presence of an official language not only undercuts the speech of the marginalized but disrupts the possibility of a shared reality between oppressed and oppressor — the time and space of almost fifty-five years disregarded as inconsequential. This inability to share in the same reality only grows starker when we turn from political disenfranchisement to state-sanctioned violence and murder:

Utterly absurd. She is very clear about the fact that she was being shot.

Bullet wounds on her body. (32)

These lines resonate with the subsequent reference to the "late summer killing of Korryn Gaines" (41), a twenty-three-year-old Black woman murdered by Baltimore County police in 2016 after they came to her home to serve a warrant for a traffic violation. Despite a standoff of several hours, no attempt to de-escalate was made; the BCPD mental health crisis team was not requested, while, on the contrary, the Baltimore SWAT team was called in immediately. Gaines, whose five-year-old son was present throughout, armed herself with a shotgun. A brief exchange of gunfire ensued, ballistics evidence showing that the first shot — the shot that killed Gaines — was fired by officer Royce Ruby. Gaines's son was also shot by police in the crossfire, though he survived.

a desire to mother a body gains transparency (46)

Here, clarity and "transparency" become literal woundings, damage inflicted to both the body and the soul. Under enforced structures of white supremacy, the subaltern goes invisibly — a Black mother lacks political power or relevance unless finally cast in a role of tragedy. Alidio suggests that, when being seen depends on the violent destruction of the body, it is not finally seeing that is taking place, but seeing through, disappearing, erasing. To maintain a hegemonic status quo, the marginalized can only be recognized when seen as victims of brutality. Such a costly form of recognition is complicated by a figure like Gaines, whose refusal to be victimized, her act of resistance in attempting to defend herself and her child, disrupts this narrative erasure and demands that we recognize the inadequacy of our political vocabulary to tell her story in full.

"Some dead do not speak in the archives," Alidio tells us, "Some living do not speak in our presence" (107). These are not statements of fact, but rather calls for us to expand the capacities of our languages. We identify the limitations so that we may begin to transcend them. Through challenging the authority of the archive — and the worlds we build in its shadows — *why letter ellipses* asks us to recognize the fundamental relation between what we can say and what we can see.

1. Kimberly Alidio, why letter ellipses (selva oscura press, 2020), 3.

August 16, 2021

RELATED:

DOCUPOETRY AND ARCHIVE DESIRE

'PRIVATE ARCHIVE'

TAGS

© 2023 Jacket2 Kelly Writers House 3805 Locust Walk Philadelphia, PA 19104-6150

Terms of Use

About Jacket2
Contact
J2 Index