

# Paper cuts, or the costs of legibility

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

[MORGAN VÔ](#)

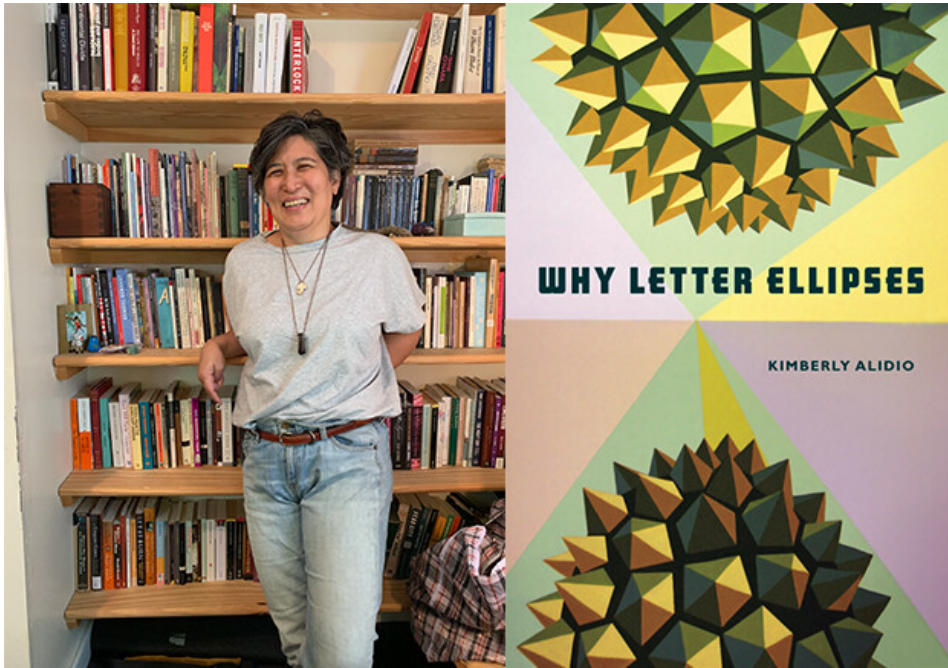


Photo of Kimberly Alidio by Stacy Szymaszek.

*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 Toused.” 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. Fa-  
miliarity 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)



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](#)

---