

Writing the Borderlands of Desire and Distance: A Workshop in Love Letters as Research Method

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Abstract

This article explores the intricate dance between desire and distance in ethnographic research and creative practice, advocating for the inclusion of love letters as a methodological tool for critically articulating individual and collective desires. Grounded in the authors' experiences at a workshop held during the 2023 PARSE conference, the text delves into the genealogy of desire in research, situating love letters within a framework of intimacy and vulnerability. Drawing on diverse academic backgrounds, the authors reflect on the intersections of personal and professional realms, emphasizing the ethical imperative of acknowledging researchers' subjective experiences. Through a deep dive into the workshop's planning process and its enactment, the article elucidates the transformative potential of love letters as a means of fostering connection and understanding within academic and creative communities. This article invites readers to reconsider traditional research methodologies and embrace the tender work of love letter writing in their own practice.

Part I: Opening Up to Tenderness

Ethnographers often grapple with the desirous boundaries of research. What does it mean to be intimately involved in a community while also producing research about it? How does one walk the borderland between desire and distance? In what follows, we argue for the inclusion of love letters as a means of critically articulating individual and collective desires in the research/creative context. In a workshop offered at the PARSE conference in November 2023, we attended to the dialectic of desire and distance, where desire constitutes a striving that is not necessarily romantic/erotic, but may be nostalgic, familial, ecological, political, etc. We situate this intervention in relation to previous research on the connections forged and maintained or lost through ethnographic fieldwork, outline the format

of the workshop, and use our own letters as empirical material to illuminate the tender work of love letter writing and what it can unveil. We conclude with reflections about how others might use this method in their research and pedagogy, and what work remains to be done. The text includes slides used during the workshop as prompts for participants. We invite you to take them, change them, and incorporate whatever may be of use in your own research and creative practice.

Situating Love letters: A Desirous Genealogy

The workshop convenors and writers of this text grew into a group that affectionately dubbed itself the Love Letters Crew. We come from different academic backgrounds ethnic studies, media and communication, urban studies, and leadership studies but have all used creative practices as part of our research, and research as part of our creative practices. These intersections have found expression in methods like autoethnography, walking, podcasting, painting, and DJing. Although we began this intervention from the point of view of ethnographic methods and texts,^[1] in different constellations we had over the years discussed the relationships made possible, and also ruptured, in ethnographic and creative work. We wondered about the politics and ethics of desire in fieldwork and artistic practice, and while we had no easy pathways for how to grapple with these dynamics, they continued to underpin our work as we moved into academic positions. So, while this text is primarily concerned with detailing the workshop, and offering readers possible inspirations for taking love letters into their own practice, we feel it is important to also offer a short exegesis of the thinking that inspired the workshop in the first place.

At the heart of many texts on social/cultural ethnography is a concern with such connections, and what is at stake in forming bonds with interlocutors. Ethnographers learn early on that research is built on trust, which takes time to cultivate, and is again spotlighted in the texts resulting from fieldwork, as the ethnographer bears the responsibility of ethical representation.^[2] And yet, in the context of participant observation, researchers also become part of the ethnographic field, bringing to it their personal histories, positions, and biases. The question therefore becomes how to represent both the field and one's relationship to it.

Researchers do indeed produce myriad kinds of texts when working out the

intersections of the personal and the professional. Most instrumental among these are field notes and research diaries, and since the 1970s self-reflexive fieldwork accounts have become part and parcel of published ethnographies as practitioners attempt to hold themselves accountable for the effect of their presence on the field.^[3] While these accounts may detail researcher subjectivity and how it aligns with or departs from the positionalities, histories, and needs of the communities in question, they rarely grapple with the experience of desire, of love whether that be for a place, a time, an object, or a person.

Still, desire continues to seep into ethnographic narratives. As Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang remind us, accounting for researcher subjectivity does not evacuate the research of symbolic violence; a tendency toward objectification still exists in the social sciences and humanities.^[4] To be sure, walking the borderlands of any research that requires intimacy is no easy task: How does one negotiate desire and distance? What does commitment and co-creation look like if it is distributed between research and the communities one involves in it? For Tuck, desire-based research, which centers communities' desires over those of the researcher, presents an important refocusing of ethics and politics.^[5]

And yet, we may still wonder, if researchers are fundamentally part of their field, perhaps the inverse is required as well. What can we learn from the desires, affections, and love experienced by researchers? What would happen if we took love as care, as connection, as creation, as an aspect of desire seriously in the research process? For bell hooks, love is a practice in vulnerability, a charge to openly communicate with others.^[6] James Baldwin understood love as an unmasking, and heartbreak as a method of connection.^[7] Judith Butler argues that giving a holistic account of oneself is an ethical act.^[8] So, how can researchers and practitioners account for the love and desire we experience in our work? Can we do this in a way that does not objectify the communities we engage? What might giving an honest account of this desire mean for keeping ourselves accountable? And must love always be about other *people*? Where do the places, objects, and passing moments knitted into research and creative practice factor in?

Since the turn of the century, contemporary art has undergone an ethnographic turn, and ethnography has increasingly embraced artistic co-production as not only a research output, but also a way of documenting the often messy process of *doing* ethnography. Public forms of expression, including artwork, performance, and blogs have been utilized toward this end.^[9] To these, we add love letters as a means of

critically articulating individual and collective desires in research and creative practice.

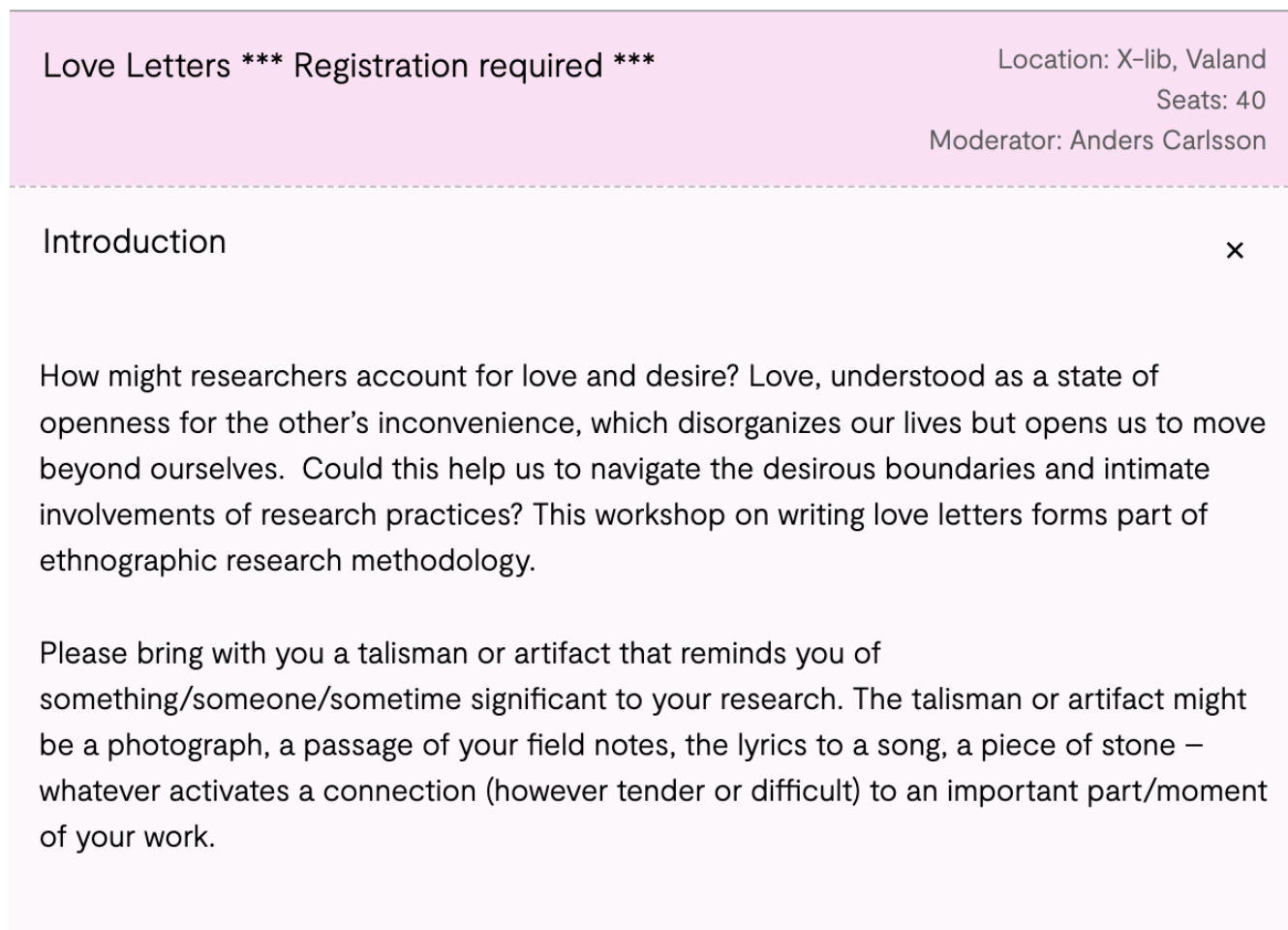


Image 1. Description of Love Letters workshop, screenshot from PARSE conference site

Desirous Interventions: Love Letters as a Method

As a genre, the love letter has been the object of considerable academic interest, with researchers in fields like history and literature analyzing corpi of letters exchanged between writers, artists, and other historical figures.^[10] Although the definition of a love letter is perhaps difficult to pin down, we can begin with sociologist Michelle Janning's definition: "words written down and exchanged with someone else where the intent of the written message is, at least in part, to convey romantic love, intimacy, affection, or sexual desire."^[11]

Janning is careful to note that this definition is not exhaustive, and should stay open to other possibilities. We may start with the issue of address and response. That is, many examples of love letters exist in the forms of books, poems, blogs,

etc. written to addressees other than humans, including cities, artworks, and objects. Addressees may also include people who have passed on, and therefore cannot respond. Including non-human things as recipients of a love letter and excluding the imperative of an exchange, or a response, opens up the possibility for the love letter to address any number of points of desire a researcher may encounter.

We argue, then, for the inclusion of love letters as a method, as a means of critically articulating individual and collective desires in the research context.^[12] As a genre, love letters are useful research exercises, as they open up the possibility to hold both the immediacy of desire and the necessity of distance. In preparing for the PARSE workshop, and in its unfolding, we saw love letters engaged in many different ways, toward many different ends. In the next section, we explain how we conceptualized the workshop, how it played out, and we offer our own vignettes as a window into what the workshop opened up for us, and for others who participated.

Part 2: The Love Letters Workshop

Planning for Love

Planning for this session started with a Facebook post, in which a member of the Crew asked if anyone would be interested in participating in the PARSE conference, with a focus on love letters. Subsequent discussions led us into the idea of love letters as a method. The need to anchor the workshop and our process in something concrete generated creative thinking. How could we “activate” those attending this potential workshop? Was it possible to tether affection to something tangible, a hinge of some kind on which the multi-faceted experience of research and creative practice would somehow hang? We talked about the past inspirations, mentors, and experiences we were drawing upon as we envisioned our work in the session, and how we could carry the world around us and our past experiences into the space we hoped to create. Someone landed on the idea of an artifact or talisman as a repository for these things, and we decided to ask workshop participants to bring theirs with them to Gothenburg.

Love in the Room

In Gothenburg, where the average amount of sunshine in November is 1.5 hours per day, the sky is the color of sidewalks, of down, or the exhale of breath making

contact with cold. It was a Thursday when we convened to share our workshop on Love Letters. We arrived early at the university to take in the space of the classroom: a large seminar table, various soft couches, folding chairs, a projector to share our powerpoint, and a whiteboard to take live notes. Floor-to-ceiling windows let in a muted winter light. We had no idea how many would attend, but slowly the room filled with the warmth of bodies and voices as participants extracted notebooks and laptops and talisman from their backpacks a rock the size of a human heart, a rust-colored leather-bound notebook, a plastic toy horse.



Image 2. Slide from workshop presentation

As the workshop got underway, it was impossible to anticipate the emotion of our intentional and unintentional unclosings, or the ways that the visceral and vulnerable could merge to mark our desires and becomings. During the first 20 minutes, we presented the premise for the workshop, and offered stories of our own talismans and what they represented to us. The subsequent segments of the workshop were dedicated to letter writing, to sharing in small groups, and finally to a full-group discussion. The feeling of risk and rawness and catharsis of exchanging love letters with the person sitting next to us colored the atmosphere in the room over the next two hours. That afternoon 40 or so of us from all over the world graduate students, faculty, curators, artists, and researchers sat side by side, heat radiating from our bodies, as we leaned in to the intimacy of discovery and release.

Vignettes

As many of the letters written during the workshop were quite personal to the authors, we did not ask participants to leave them behind or send them to us. For the purposes of this article, we have instead included our own love letters, which have been edited to include some of the post-workshop theorizing we have done as a group. Like any love letter writers, we came at our texts from different angles, with different hang ups and heartaches, different disciplines and desires. We hope that what follows offers readers a glimpse into our own tender places and how writing these letters opened up space for connection and catharsis across disciplinary boundaries, a phenomenon that extended in different shapes beyond the time-space of the workshop and into the writing of this article.

One might ask (as we ask ourselves): What do we feel we need to explain/explain away? What im/possibilities do we run up against or into? What gets opened up in the writing of these letters, and what may be lost in re-visiting and re-shaping them for the purposes of an academic text?

Conor

“Leadership is what happens when we meet at the boundaries.”^[13] My friend Erin posted on Facebook an ask for anyone interested in putting together an abstract for a session at PARSE on love letters as an ethnographic method. I found myself to be very excited and a bit scared. It was an opportunity to present at a new conference in a new country. I needed to put together quality work outside my discipline and in front of a room of people who all know far more than I do.

I remember being equally scared and excited when I started my current job. I offer equity-minded and justice-focused professional development to roughly 5,000 staff members at a large, public, research intensive university in the United States on land never ceded to the US by its indigenous caretakers, the Kumeyaay people. I often need to push against the hubris of assuming I can tell anyone across this large organization I know how to do their job better than they are doing it and resist the temptation to think that my degrees and social identities entitle me to people’s trust and deference. I often need to embrace cultural and professional humility and work to build relationships of trust and care.

Conor	
Research: Unemployment, belonging, allyship, leadership Connection: family history, experiencing social mobility, reconnecting to roots, responsibility Animating quote: In that field of possibility we have the opportunity to labor for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. – bell hooks Object: A <u>Kené</u> cloth gifted by a mentor	

Image 3. Slide from workshop presentation

I also felt anxious coming into the PARSE conference. I also was deeply engaged by the content and the discussions. The experience brought into focus the person(s) to whom I wanted to address my love letter. The custodian who cleans the building in which I work is named Josephina. Like I suspect is the case on most campuses, the custodians on my campus work long, hard hours and are paid very little to do work many people would rather not think about, much less do. Like most of the custodians on my campus, Josephina shows up every day earlier than the rest of the people who work in the building, smiles and greets everyone who crosses her path each morning, and leaves our spaces better for us than they were when we went home the night before.

I decided to write to Josephina not because I feel bad for her or to commit to walking in her shoes.^[14] I wrote to her because she deserves the same care and compassion, the same support, and the same opportunities for connection and community as any other of our employees. She, like me and my colleagues and our co-workers, deserves to see her fullest potential realized, and is entitled to live a happy life. As I wrote, I also realized that she doesn't need me projecting assumptions or desires or projections onto her.

Throughout my letter I wonder and feel a want to connect with the person she wants to be and sees herself to be. I want to be the colleague she wants and needs,

not who I assume she wants me to be or who I expect her to want. I want her to feel that in our shared space she can be more than her role and her labor, and that she has as much space to dream and imagine as I do and we can share that together. When I do my work, which I do with a greater sense of clarity since PARSE, I work to ensure that our policies and the people enacting them do so with a mind for their impact on the most disaffected and least enfranchised by them. It means taking more risks, transgressing boundaries, and most importantly, being humble.

I brought a Kené cloth, a Peruvian prayer cloth given to me by a mentor, Sr. Theresa Monroe. I was reflecting on lessons she taught me about the ways love can shape organizations, how any person can use love as a conduit for practicing leadership for positive change in the world, and the ways those things happen in brave,^[15] often uncomfortable spaces of possibility and growth. It seemed to me relevant to a new conference, outside my discipline, with a new methodological approach, with a group of people I didn't know well, on the topic of love and boundary spanning.

Laleh

I come from the discipline of architectural research and urban studies, where engaging with creative methods in research is not new. Combining various methods from social sciences, humanities, and art has been a common tool to engage with the complexities of urban conditions and their human and non-human inhabitants. So, I asked myself, is *writing a love letter as a method* something different from other methods? What did I experience when I wrote my letter to a marginalized street (NGBG in Malmö Sweden), and its inhabitants, about which I wrote my PhD?^[16] When I chose as my talisman for this workshop a “place,” I thought that I was going to write *to* this place. But while writing the letter, I noticed that I was writing/thinking *with* and *from* the place. I was not a researcher standing outside the field of study and bringing out some affection, but with a deeper involvement I engaged myself with the feelings that I have never been able to bring out in the form of autoethnography. Through such a liberatory way of writing, I was able to free myself from the worries of failure, and of not complying with the academic genre of writing. The love letter allowed me to be vulnerable and embrace my vulnerability with liberty. This was the liberty of love.

laleh	
Research: Urban marginality, <i>otherwise</i> urbanism, socio-spatial (in)justice, migrants' city/place/home-making, hegemonic planningparticipatory art Connection: migration, otherness, spaces of intimacy, resistance, homing Animating quote: This is an intervention. A message from that space in the margin that is a site of creativity and power, that inclusive space where we recover ourselves, where we move in solidarity to erase the category colonised/coloniser. Marginality as site of resistance. Enter that space. Let us meet there. Enter that space. We greet you as liberators . – bell hooks Object: a photo from the fieldwork (votive food distributed during Muharram commemoration in Malmö)	

Image 4. Slide from workshop presentation

dear NGBG,

I am writing this letter to you to express my anger, frustration, and rage. To not let it go down, sink, or melt into politically correct and academically sound tones, but be ignited, this letter is also a safe space where it can liberate my thoughts, words, and language... or what I aspire to. A space where I can speak out loud without fear the fear of being vulnerable. A space in which, as a researcher, I can be vulnerable and talk about the vulnerability of a place and its inhabitants. I express this vulnerability through love a practice in vulnerability, a charge to communicate with others openly.^[17]

I am writing this love letter to you, the street of NGBG in Malmö, Sweden. A migrant space inhabited by social and economic livelihoods. A place of makeshift dwelling, shaped in the interstices of the growing post-industrial city. You are a crack where possibilities can emerge despite limitations and obstacles. A space made and remade constantly with multiple histories and stories, which are coming together and shaping this space today. Histories of colonization, forced migration, displacement, and exploitative labor. You are also a place of refuge, representing many other people and geographies, and also interconnecting them locally and translocally. Being an in-between space, at once one thing and another, dwelling in there is at once a risk and a chance to be covered and exposed, to be exposed and

exploited, to feel at home and simultaneously at the edge, to feel intimacy and being othered, to be visible and invisible. You are a place of negotiation of such in-between spaces, positions, and situations.

But why a love letter to a street (space)? Because space matters. Space matters to be able to make sense of social, economic, and political issues taking “place.” In their theorization of blues epistemology, Mia White discusses spatial love, granted in feelings, dreams, motivations, and imaginations about a place, enabling transformative and radical actions through and within a place.^[18] And this spatial love is revolutionary and tangled up with resistance and dissent. White also writes about spatial resistance against epistemic oppression. And how can I not write about the spatial love of the inhabitants drenched in sweat and labor of temporal dwellings built on their agency, which is constantly misrecognized, devalued, and stigmatized in the white gaze of the city?

You bear witness to temporal domination and hegemonic/racial time in the multiple temporalities you embody. You bear witness to how the white clock dominates the non-white time. The former becomes part of the formal calendar, and the latter remains unrecognized. In the white spatial imaginary, you are perceived as disposed spatially and temporally because it is easier to dominate an empty land. An empty street.

You also exist to remind us about our historical amnesia^[19] of our forgetfulness of history, of making the same mistakes, of not questioning the “institutionalised rejection of difference” that relies on making certain people outsiders.^[20] This is where my anger is rooted, and I aspire to keep it ignited. We agree that learning to express our anger “can be used for growth.”^[21]

Erin

The workshop happened about a month and a half after Israel invaded Gaza and the ethnic cleansing that has taken place in Occupied Palestine for nearly 80 years ramped up to fever pitch. I had been thinking about my connections to places and people, particularly those I came to know while living in Beirut during PhD fieldwork. And I was in conversation with Palestinian friends who grew up in camps in Lebanon, and who had welcomed me into those spaces despite my background as a researcher from the United States, which has continued to fund the apartheid keeping them from their homeland. I was also thinking about my family in Lebanon,

with its roots in the Kataeb Party, a branch of which committed atrocities against Palestinians during the Lebanese civil war. How does one hold affection and love alongside politics and history? What does commitment mean in moments of connection, especially when one walks the line of what Lila Abu-Lughod calls a “halfie” researcher?^[22]

My talisman was a keffiyeh gifted to me by my friend Ahmad. In my letter, I addressed my family, attempting to explain all I wished to share openly. I wrote about my tongue, sore from all the times I bit it when the subject of Palestine came up in conversation. I wrote about the strangeness of being an insider-outsider, with family and in the field, the challenge presented by the multiple accountabilities that comes with this split selfhood.^[23] My family was my opening to Lebanon, their generosity deep and real. They also came to represent part of the structure against which I posed parts of my argument. How does hospitality invite a decorum that can silence history?

erin	
Research: Beirut, memory, migration, voice, embodiment, community, participatory art Connection: family, diaspora, history, complicity Animating quote: If you aren't here, your heart won't break in the same way. –Etel Adnan Object: Keffiyeh gifted by Ahmad	

Image 5. Slide from workshop presentation

After writing our love letters in the workshop, we broke into small groups to talk about what had happened for us in the writing. One of my conversation partners, Anders, began to cry as he recounted the relationships that had been forged and then torn apart during his fieldwork. In writing the letter, he found a way of articulating conversations he wished he could mediate between collaborators. I felt

this deeply; I too had been imagining conversations that will likely never happen, their absence forestalling a deeper connection with people I love. Our letters documented regret and catharsis, an externalizing of the love and disaffection that makes research bittersweet.

In some ways I wonder if my letter was a cop-out, as I know in my bones that I will never broach these things with my family face to face. Instead the letter allowed me to face the slippage between subjectivities and commitments that could not exist in my previous ethnographic writing, which although necessarily messy, still demands a coherent narrative.^[24] The letter held space as a wild companion where the flux of feeling love, desire, conflict, remorse can exist, bloom, and stay loud, a reminder of the dynamic, sometimes unresolvable underpinnings of ethnographic work.

Michaela

When I sat down to write my love letter, I thought at first of writing to my graduate school advisor who I am certain never read my dissertation. But it felt forced in a way that seemed anathema to how I imagine writing a love letter should feel, which, if I could name it, would be something like one of Bach's cello suites, all swollen and low and bordering on breathless. Having recently been taken to task on a journal article by reviewers who critiqued me for my attempt to write an ethnographic piece in the second-person voice, I decided to write a letter that challenges dominant epistemologies, or what Dwight Conquergood calls the "visual/verbal bias of Western regimes of knowledge" that "blinds researchers to meanings that are expressed forcefully through intonation, silence, body tension, arched eyebrows... and other protective arts of disguise and secrecy."^[25]

I began with the sensual: "I feel you when I clutch my ribs, when my throat is at the threshold of articulating words from sound." And it surprised me, though perhaps it shouldn't have, how my writing slid into the vulnerable. "I feel your head on my chest, in the crook of my neck, the two of us listening to the eucalyptus weep in the predawn light, half asleep together on my grad-office couch where we lived undercover because grad school in San Diego is expensive, and because I never had money to begin with." My letter became intimate, and in the public space of this university building where I sat penning words with others, I felt self-conscious as I tried not to cry. "We lived in sand and salt, in perpetual thirst. We lived late nights, black coffee chased by red wine, trying to write a dissertation about borders, while

living in between them.” The presumed recipient of such feeling might be a lover, not a gray Weimaraner with whom I shared a clandestine existence living in my graduate school office for five years. My love letter to my dog turned to elegy, and I wondered about the boundary between those two styles, and wondered how and whether the workshop would shift if the subject was sorrow: “Diego, even after your death, I feel you primally. An ache, a longing, a heat radiating from my shoulder blades and throughout my chest. I think about that quote by Elaine Scarry, about beauty being like ‘a fugitive bird unable to fly, unable to land.’”^[26]

Michaela	
Research: US/Mexico border, cultural production of resistance, migrant desire and agency, Mexico’s resource sovereignty, Huachicultura Connections: Family, commitment to immigrant justice and solidarity Animating quote: I love you without knowing how, or when, or from where. I love you straightforwardly, without complexities or pride; So I love you because I know no other way than this: where I does not exist, nor you, so close that your hand on my chest is my hand, so close that your eyes close as I fall asleep. – Pablo Neruda Object: Lime & Big Spirit	

Image 6. Slide from workshop presentation

As I continued to write, I thought about Conquergood’s critique of textual hegemony, and questioned what a methodology for pushing against this form would yield. To Diego, I continued: “I write this love letter to you, knowing that it will always be incomplete, wondering if the paradox of the letter is how it is bound by inscription and yet by its nature, exceeds language.” The experience of trying to write this piece for Diego challenged me to consider what it would be like to write a love letter that was “embodied, tacit, intoned, gestured, improvised, coexperienced, covert and all the more deeply meaningful because of its refusal to be spelled out?”^[27] In a reflexive move, I wondered what Diego’s love letter to me would sound like. What would be the motions, the smells, the taste? Where would he feel me? I think about these things, and by extension, I try to fathom the sensuousness and fury of subjugated voices, and where in our bodies the sounds

would pool, reverberate, spill over.

Pille

Dear Writing,

I do love you. But, as with all love, it is easier to love you when you are easy. When you flow from the tips of my fingers, when the ideas align, and words make sense. I love you, when you are light and touch my soul in self-expression and presence. You, my writing, will never read this love letter. But in writing it, I practice love as vulnerability, as writing makes me vulnerable.^[28] This love letter, like many others in this world, will never be delivered. But the practice of loving, being vulnerable, being visible and being seen is there.

Dear Writing,

It is harder to love you when it gets challenging. When the things I need to say are difficult. When my mind is blank and my days are rushed. But I have not abandoned you. For I will not abandon you. In this commitment, I am alone. You, my writing, will not be able to commit back, as there is no you. I am not writing about writing, but rather, I am writing to the writing within me. In my quest for writing, I am unpacking conventions of how we write, I am challenging the thinking about writing in weird and wonderful ways, I am building on rules, as well as defying them.

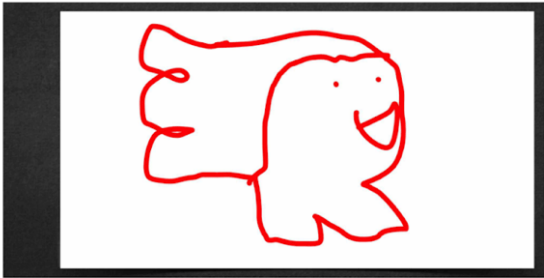
Pille	
Research: Museums, audiences, cultural citizenship museum professionals, media professionals, data, writing Connection: Creativity, curiosity, writing Animating quote: I alone cannot change the world, but I can cast a stone across the waters to create many ripples. – Mother Teresa Object: Monster drawing by Riivo	

Image 7. Slide from workshop presentation

Dear Writing,

A lot about you is invisible; we only see the product, not the process, we see the outcome, not the pain or the joy or the indifference. Could academia write more about the light, the shadows, the air, and the space of writing?^[29]

As an animating quote, I picked one from Mother Teresa: “I alone cannot change the world, but I can cast a stone across the waters to create many ripples.” My heart feels the ripples when my own ideas are thrown out to the world. I need to make space for writing, for otherwise, I am mute, without language, without expression. Writing, you are my stone to cast across the waters, the stone that ripples the world and is one way to bring about change in the world. While I have never before worked with animating quotes, this one spoke to me while writing my letter, so I weave it into my love.

I am a writer it is part of my identity, even if I would have never thought to identify myself as a writer. I thought that I was a speaker, a connector, a helping hand. But I am also a writer. I have had to learn to write in multiple languages, in multiple modes, at different times and in different spaces. And now, I am learning to love you, writing, and I am learning to love myself as a writer.

Dear Writing,

While sometimes hard to love, you are mine to cherish. I am learning to make space for you, to push the boundaries, to ensure that you have space in my life. Love does require work and commitment. But it helps that I see you loving me back. The reciprocity is not always self-evident, but still, I see. Sometimes I see the ripples that casting you off to the world has created, the change that you have enabled me to bring about. This letter has helped me to see you, my writing, and helped me to see the way you see me. The love letters brought light and warmth to the November me, to the shared room, and I still carry some of the light with me.

I see my love in writing, and I see myself in you.

Reflections on Love

In many ways, the session mirrored the conference proposal and planning process. The conference opened up an invitation, we came together and made something that was both our own and more than just ours individually; our attendees did the same with the space we set up to hold our work together. As we interpreted the call for proposals sometimes excited to meet, and at other times bouncing off it or projecting onto it our own expectations, experiences, assumptions, or anxieties the participants in our session brought the same for us. And just as the conference held space for that, the conveners and participants held space for one another together. Even now we are holding space for what they brought with them and how it added to the learning and engagement of the conference.

Part two: Love letters as reflection(s) <i>To begin:</i> Talisman or artifact Addressee(s) Love letter: whole or passage or summarize <i>Further:</i> What part of the body was ignited while writing? (Throat, heart, toes, etc.) What opened for you? Were there places where you encountered an impasse, a block? What do we do at the point of impasse?	

Image 8. Slide from workshop presentation

During the second part of the workshop, participants broke into groups of three to four people, and used the slide above as a prompt for their conversations. We were not privy to all of these discussions, as we were located in different groups, but can attest to the charged feeling in the room. Writing a love letter is an act of vulnerability in itself, and sharing it with others even more so. We hoped, with the prompt, to offer participants the opportunity to share in whatever way felt more comfortable to them, and also to ground themselves in the physical space of the room and their bodies, as a way of connecting with the critical emotional material of the writing. It was important to us, too, to acknowledge that love letter writing is not only about an opening up, but that the vulnerability it accesses can also cause an impasse or a blockage. These difficult moments can also be telling.

When we came back together, Pille moderated a discussion with the whole group. We asked participants to share something of the conversations they had and the letters they wrote. As noted, we did not record any of the workshop, but some moments stood out. A tenured professor commented on how writing a letter is both a looking backward and perhaps a looking forward in grappling with the difficulties of the past, one might also consider what one would like to repair with one's interlocutors or community or dream forward to future research and creative projects. One PhD student talked about how useful the activity of writing a love

letter was for her own work, to tap into the emotional infrastructure of her research. She saw letter writing in general as a potentially productive intervention into the challenges of graduate work, and said she was going to facilitate a similar workshop for her PhD cohort at her university. We had expected, perhaps because of our own experiences of writing love letters, that participants would find the activity emotional. We were delighted by how they also found it useful.

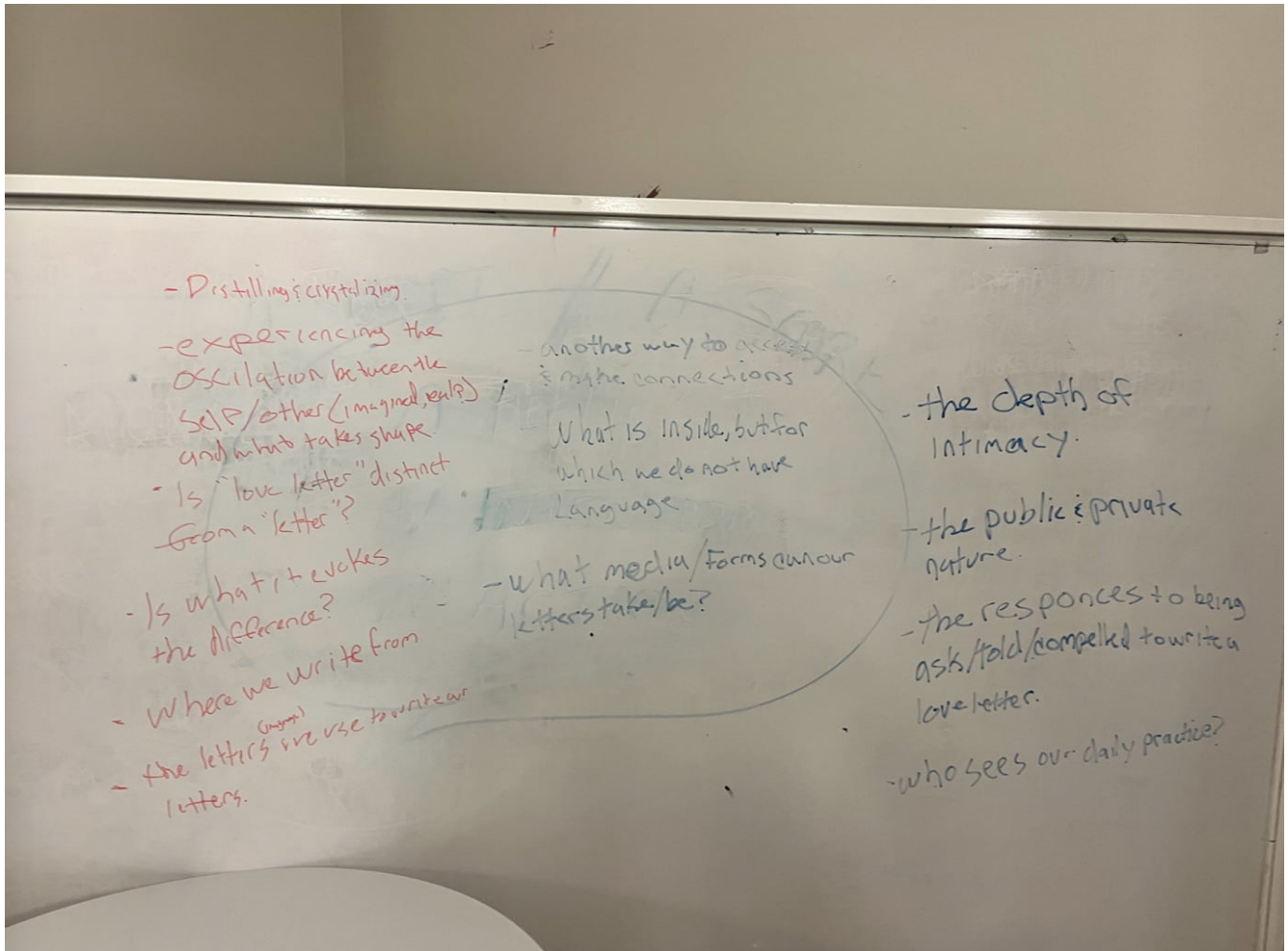


Image 9. Picture of white board used during discussion at workshop, Gothenburg, November 2023

Part 3: In Lieu of a Conclusion, an Invitation...

Love letters as instruments and exercises of vulnerability and unmasking have helped us as a group to shed light on the parts of our work as researchers, artists, and practitioners that are inevitably tough. However, during conversations about this article, we noticed the painfully familiar impulse we all had to wrap up our findings in an academically legible way, to try to “prove” that love letters are a methodological intervention that can upend some of the strictures and structures of academic research and writing. In all honesty, we cannot prove that. Rather, this

piece and the workshop it relates to is a provocation, more a question mark than a declaration, what Kathleen Stewart, writing about affect, might call “something that feels like *something*.”^[30]

In our workshop, the love letters showed that some distant experiences, some from the past or from futures that are yet to happen, can be brought closer by writing them a love letter. Some desirable experiences that burn too brightly at the time of experiencing can get some distance through being addressed with a love letter. The desires that emerged from the love letters were both desires of being closer as well as desires of being further away. And while no desires land in the perfect place during the writing, exploring the closeness and distance of them via love letters, the explorations validate the negotiation for the researchers and practitioners in tenderness.

We might not yet know how much trust was built or what sustaining it may take. We experienced the desires of our participants and our own group of presenters, opportunities to present the field and (all of) our relationship(s) to it. We saw the ways love letters could but do not need to be about other people, the ways we carry people and objects and ideas and moments into the field, what it looks like to co-produce in real time. In our workshop, we encountered people interested in their own practices, seeking community, interested in opportunities for connections across boundaries, wondering about and sometimes longing for a deeper sense of intimacy in their work, looking to acknowledge what they were carrying and how it does or does not serve them, looking for the language to describe what they feel and, who they are, and the meaning they make. We encountered these people in ourselves as well.

Footnotes

1. While we take ethnography as our point of departure, we hope that what we propose in this workshop might be useful to researchers and practitioners working across any number of fields. [↑](#)

2. There is a vast body of research on research ethics, and particularly the politics of representation. See for example: Hammersley, Martyn & Atkinson, Paul. *Ethnography: Principles in practice*. Routledge 2019; Leavy, Patricia. *Research design: Quantitative, qualitative, mixed methods, arts-based, and community-based participatory research approaches*. Guilford Publications. 2022; Kovach, Margaret. *Indigenous methodologies: Characteristics, conversations, and contexts*. University of Toronto Press. 2021. [↑](#)
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4. Tuck, Eve., & Yang, K. Wayne. "R-words: Refusing Research." *Humanizing Research: Decolonizing Qualitative Inquiry with Youth and Communities*, Django Paris and Maisha T. Winn, eds. Sage Publications, 2014. pp. 223-247. [↑](#)
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6. hooks, b. *All About Love: New Visions*. William Morrow Paperbacks. 2000. [↑](#)
7. Baldwin, James. *The Fire Next Time*. Vintage. 1963/2013. [↑](#)
8. Butler, Judith. *Giving an Account of Oneself*. Fordham Univ Press. 2009. [↑](#)
9. See Hjorth, Larissa., & Sharp, Kristen. (2014). "The Art of Ethnography: The Aesthetics or Ethics of Participation?." *Visual Studies* 29. no. 2. pp.128-135; Siegenthaler, Fiona. "Towards an Ethnographic Turn in Contemporary Art Scholarship." *Critical Arts* 27. no. 6. 2013. pp. 737-752.; Radice, Martha. "Putting the Public in Public Art: An Ehnographic Approach to Two Temporary Art Installations." *City & Society* 30. no.1. 2018. pp. 45-67. [↑](#)
10. See for example Person, Leland S. Hawthorne's "Love Letters: Writing and Relationship." *American Literature* 59. no. 2. 1987. pp. 211-227; Behn, Aphra. *Love-Letters Between a Nobleman and His Sister*. The Floating Press. 2014; Sackville-West, Vita & Woolf, Virginia. *Love Letters: Vita and Virginia*. Random House. 2021; Tours, Hugh. *The Life and Letters of Emma Hamilton: The Story of Admiral Nelson and the Most Famous Woman of the Georgian Age*. Frontline Books. 2020. [↑](#)
11. Janning, Michelle. *Love letters: Saving Romance in the Digital Age*. Routledge. 2018. [↑](#)
12. We are aware of one other text utilizing love letters as part of research: during the pandemic, two academics were inspired by an art exhibition to write love letter poems to each other in an effort to sustain their international collaboration. Although these poems were geared towards supporting an ongoing friendship, the authors' observation that 'shared vulnerabilities contribute to our capacities for intellectual risk-taking, and to the support we can offer each other as we lightly tread toward research topics with emotional resonance for us personally' rings true. See Metcalfe, Amy Scott & Blanco, Gerardo L. "Love is calling: Academic Friendship and International Research Collaboration Amid a

- Global Pandemic." *Emotion, Space and Society* 38. 2021. [↑](#)
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 21. Ibid., 117. [↑](#)
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 28. hooks, bell. *remembered rapture: the writer at work*. New York: Henry Holt and Company. 1999. [↑](#)
 29. Sword, Helen. *Air & Light & Time & Space: How Successful Academics Write*. Cambridge, MA and

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