

# letter to:



About six years ago, I saw this woman [REDACTED] give a lecture on the West Coast. I thought she was dynamite - a stellar speaker, strong woman, witty, funny, irreverent, relentlessly intellectual, and compassionate. [REDACTED] was my hero. When I discovered she was teaching a course at MIT, I enrolled. I was ecstatic. Her course consummated all of my academic desires. It was awesome.

As [REDACTED] is a trained Lacanian psychoanalyst, I was curious about what she would say about the letters I was writing. In her office hours, [REDACTED] pointed out to me that they were oddly erotic and s&m: "You're writing these letters, telling people what to do - do this, do that, bark like a dog, sit up, etc. . . ." were her words. This in fact incited me to run with the project and make really prurient letters. As she pointed this out to me, I wanted to honor her by writing her a letter in turn. After all, I felt that she had really helped give birth to the project. I'm not sure if it in the end this was such a good idea . . .

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**to:**

Professor [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]

March 10, 2006

Dear [REDACTED]

I'm writing to ask for your complicity.

As someone whose academic work examines the affective relations people have with objects, we share an interest in the psychic dimensions of material substrate. In your office hours the other day, we discussed this in relation to the letters I've been writing to people (such as this one). You brought to my attention a few things. First, these letters function as transitional objects: objects which I identify as part of myself and experience in a sensory dimension. Second, you brought my attention to the fact that in making demands on others ('do this, do that', 'stand up', 'bark like a dog', etc.), my propositions become erotic, and the letters function as a fetish.

In class this semester you've mentioned several times your pleasure in writing—a delight which I too share. So here's what I ask you to do: take this letter, turn it over, and use it as scratch paper; scrawl, sketch, doodle...as you wish.

If you choose to send correspondence or evidence/documentation it would bring me great pleasure.

Warm Regards,



Marisa

After I sent [REDACTED] the letter, things started getting a little strange. To keep track of what was real, I began keeping a [REDACTED] log...

3/7/06: I go to [REDACTED]'s office hours. I tell her a few ideas for my final mid-term and final paper that I've been considering. I mention that I have written a letter to Erik Demaine, the computation origami expert at MIT, where I ask him to transform the letter into origami. [REDACTED] picks up on this and tells me that there is an erotic dimension to the letter: "This is a weird thing you are doing. You are asking someone to stand up, bark like a dog, do this, do that, etc." I had not until that point really considered the s&m undertones of the project. Sure, I'd considered the dimensions of power. I really had not considered the erotic dimensions of my work. That day, I went back to my studio and decided that I would explore this further, without censoring myself and fearing consequence. I started drafting a letter to [REDACTED] in which the letter itself carried out the s&m undertones that she had in fact suggested to me. I felt I was actualizing a kind of counter-transference. This seemed to be the most dangerous or destructive of the letters I could imagine writing.

3/14/06: I write and send my letter to [REDACTED], accompanied by a disposable camera. I do not want the letter returned; what I want is to see or imagine seeing its transformation.

3/21/06: I go to class. I fear that [REDACTED] will take my letter, turn it over in class, and write on its back; I would be its only witness for the others do not know. [REDACTED] does not mention a thing, nor in the subsequent emails she sends me regarding class-related projects.

3/28/06: I turn in my first draft of my paper to [REDACTED]. The paper is about the letters I have been writing. In this paper I mention every letter I have written at that point in time except the letter I have written to [REDACTED]. When I turn in the essay, I do not include the letters, I only hint at them.

4/4/06: [REDACTED] suggests I do a book report on Victor Turner, her mentor at the [REDACTED] whose contribution to the field of [REDACTED] is the investigation of [REDACTED]. It seems that she is specifically assigning it to me...

4/6/06: I read [redacted]'s writings about [redacted]. It's fascinating. Mind-blowing. I try to get someone else to read it too. I give it to Oliver, my studio-mate, to read it. Oliver is about to go climb a mountain and remove its top with his twin brother; it seems really relevant. Later I talk about liminality in the class I share with my six other studio mates and professors, with whom I feel quite close. They are also charting my progress with this [redacted]-letter.

4/11/06: in class, I discuss [redacted]. The class discussion turns to a conversation about writing. In class I have previously discussed my own pleasure in writing, in reading, and in reading those who share this pleasure as well. *A desire through refraction.* somehow I got to discussing that as a kid, I was a pretty good writer, and would help my mother with organizing her life, filling out forms and writing her 'official' correspondence. I am having some kind of revelation in class. It takes form as an outburst. At the same time, decontextualized, it feels a bit histrionic. I don't think it is that extreme. I also know I feel this self-censure because, well, my family doesn't talk about assimilation.

[redacted] mentions in class that she too would fill out forms, write letters, and fill out forms for her mother. she uses both examples to illustrate Lacan's theory of the phallus and the lack: the child is weaned from the mother at the under and through the father's 'no', the law. The child attempts to fill the mother's lack through adopting the name and the law of the father. For Lacan, the child attempts to fulfill this lack through the symbolic (language). [redacted] sees that my interest in language is perhaps a means to fill this lack. If you buy all that.

At this point, I am still in the process of my quirky self-revelation. Talking aloud I mention that this interest in language and order is played out professionally, that I make my money from organizing other people's lives. [redacted] says to me, in class, "Really? Do you really do all that kind of stuff?"

I said, "yes. You wouldn't believe how good I am. Quick and efficient - you should see my databases. "

she responds, half-talking to herself, "well I just can't help thinking that I have all kinds of work that I could hire you to do. But I won't ask you until you are finished being my student."

Towards the end of class, [REDACTED] suggests that I should write my paper about this filling out forms for my mother. I'm amused. Being a Lacanian trained psychoanalyst I guess natural that she would want me to write about my mother and about language.

5/09/06: I go to [REDACTED]'s office hours to talk about my paper. I have it in mind that I am going to write a paper about the letter-writing project I am working on. I start to explain that I am going to write it as if it were an interview between her ([REDACTED]) and myself. In other words, my paper would involve two dissociated voices - the first person-singular voice (my own voice) and a third person objective perspective (which would be the voice of the psychoanalyst, or her).

[REDACTED] interrupts. She touches my arm and tells me, sternly but gently, "Marisa, This is just a paper. A 30 page paper. It's not that difficult. Get a grip." She looks me in the eye and repeats, "Get a grip." I realize [REDACTED] does not want to play my game: no means no.

5/16/06: I present my final paper in class today. She loves the topic and tells me to keep in touch.