

Article

We Continue Each Other

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Abstract: Three female voices with different cultural backgrounds and practices explore the concept and possibilities of the we-narrative. Starting from a position of critical reflection, we dive into the question of how to speak as a female WE. WE is used to differentiate the particular collective dynamic that operates throughout this text from a more general use of the word ‘we’. Our framework is to work with the personal and vulnerable, but at the same time remain open to a dialogue that invites the other, through the concept of empathy. Our overarching aim is to look at what it means when we speak together collectively: whether it brings strength or dilution, and how speaking poly-vocally from a position of lived first person collective experience impacts current ideas around authorship. Is it possible to speak as a WE and write subjectively in a way that does not become a generalisation or a compromise? Guided by Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*, our text uses the format of autotheoretical writing, drawing on our creative–critical writing practices in the context of visual art. We seek to encompass our female ancestors in visual art. The text generates a dialogue that creates room for the articulation of one’s own voice and hand, whilst intending to leave space or gaps for the other to insert themselves. Appearing in seemingly disparate fragments, the text weaves together to form a tapestry, sometimes performative, sometimes narrative, incorporating both visual and language-based elements.

Keywords: autotheory; memory; visual art; art practice; contemporary art; social history; we narrative



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1. Introduction

This is a hobbling attempt to write as a “we”. It began as a proposed exercise in the hope that a “we” may give rise to a new process within our practices, with the desire to challenge our own methods of writing authentically and with vulnerability, which we identified as characteristics within the genre of autotheory.

Writing as a “we” means talking as if we have never met. It is not actively searching for similarities between three lives—that would be the easy part—instead, it is subjectively stumbling upon recognition in the details. We align our thinking with Audre Lorde, who said “You do not have to be me in order for us to fight alongside each other. I do not have to be you to recognize that our wars are the same. What we must do is commit ourselves to some future that can include each other . . . we must allow each other our differences at the same time as we recognize our sameness” (Lorde 1984, p. 142).

Our particular “we” begins as a triangle with shifting interrupted sides:

Two out of three corners are visual artists.

Only one has English as a native language (but not their mother tongue).

One lives in their native country.

Two are mothers, both with brown hair.

One has met both of the others in person.

Two met for the first time in person when the writing was finished.



WE is ME turned upside down in English, whilst the “I” stays the same. WE use this as a device in the hope that this collective exercise allows us a shift in our position as an “I”, when thinking about how WE can collectively speak together and what it may mean to blur the nuances with which WE speak, i.e., cadence, accent, subjective experience. WE begin by evoking the spirit of Karin Murriss “... by deploying an awkward plural first person pronoun ...” to construct our WE.¹ For the purpose of this exercise, our WE is a three, encompassing the above traits and a myriad of others, which are not shared and which we do not quite understand. We hope that the use of WE makes it clear that we are not trying to put words in the mouths of others but to explore what it may mean to think and write together in this moment and with this intention.

What does it mean to think together? Separate entities, separate bodies with different agendas, separate reference points and experiences. How can WE create a voice that honours our shared experience? That welcomes in the others who WE are yet to meet? How can WE protect each other’s fragility of thinking yet remain strong as a group who identify not only with the needs WE share but the ones WE are not currently grappling with? How can WE hold a space for each other to think and feel heard?

At first sight a common concept within our WE might seem to be femininity. All three corners of our triangle check the F-box on official documents. However, how to be sure that our concept of femininity matches that of the other? What is it, for example, to think femininely? Not taking into consideration the gender of the thinker, but a way of thinking that includes emotion, sensitivity, care, empathy, gracefulness, humility, emotional labour, softness, feelings, the traits we have been conditioned to think of, by society, as “female”.

To begin, our writing position on this subject is slightly uncomfortable. WE know that speaking of the feminine creates polarity. A conflict of sorts. Feminine = not masculine. There are times when WE feel more one than the other. To ascribe gender to a body feels very outdated and judgmental.

The Estonian language has a non-gendered, third-person singular pronoun. This simplifies the conversation. Avoiding gendered pronouns in a language that usually uses them brings tension to the sentences. The gender becomes a secret you are not willing to reveal. Estonians speaking English constantly deal with revealed secrets. Could feminine thinking adopt a position akin to how gender exists in some languages, where words are seen as masculine, feminine or neutral, not being dependent on the real-world qualities of a human body but as used for the sake of classification?

Let us appropriate the idea that to think “femininely” = to think emotionally, sensitively, carefully, empathetically, gracefully, humbly, emotionally laboured, softly, with feeling. To think in a way that feels out a position in an embodied, experiential way. A language our body learned to remember, like our vocal apparatus learned how to bend in certain ways to form the sounds of our mother tongue. Let us assume that the language we learn with our eyes and hands shapes the form of our body, skull, soul.

Let our WE operate with all these complicated thoughts. Bare with us as WE walk down this path, stumbling over ourselves as WE progress.

2. Materials and Methods

WE agreed that WE would write about the meeting WE had together on Zoom. Maybe it is the 3rd or 4th WE have had since starting to write together. WE feel like WE are constantly seeking out a beginning, trying to find the end of a tangled ball of wool.

WE agree to write about the meeting and instantly WE try to recall what was said in the previous 40 min of talking together. WE plan to write about it as soon as WE log off, but in a rush to pick up our 1-year-old, it gets added to the long list of tasks of “to do’s” for when WE get the headspace to think.

WE agree WE will write about our chat and WE suggest writing as if WE are making a script. WE are a filmmaker and are in the thick of making a new piece of work. WE are trying to grab something solid that will act as a touchstone so that WE can remember the story WE told about our first visit to plan the filming of a new project. In the moment after agreeing the layout as a script, WE get a knock at the front door. In our absence, WE visualise our absence in the layout of the script.

[She exits the scene/screen]

The narrative stating that “She exits the screen”. On our return, WE say it was a parcel of cat litter. WE told them that it will be written into the script. WE wonder about the leak between our domestic worlds and professional selves and how Zoom creates a mashup of the two.

WE agree to write about our conversation and instantly WE start writing notes. WE are sitting in the studio. WE are sitting on the sofa and WE are exhausted, so much so that WE cannot even stand up to get our notebook and pen from the desk opposite. WE know WE want to remember the conversation about what WE said, and this would help us massively as a tool. WE think WE remember making a few notes on our phone.

[She stands up to get her phone. There’s nothing there.
She flicks back through her notebook, the one she is using
to write this text in. No notes there either]

Our memories feel like they are written in sand. A small breeze erases the traces of them.

[She decides maybe making a cup of coffee might sharpen her thinking. She waits till she hears another studio holder leave the kitchen before going to fill their kettle. This is to avoid unnecessary interruption in her headspace. In the meantime, she tends to some plants.

Coffee is made.

She sits back down and wonders how to begin writing again.
She eats some stale sugary biscuits. It’s a bit
distracting]

WE agreed to write about the conversation WE had. The intention of the chat is to figure out how WE can write together, to turn fragments into a whole.

[She puts on her ear defenders. She is sitting in her studio. In the gallery next door, they are installing a new exhibition. The technicians are doing some heavy drilling of the walls.

She sips more coffee]

In the last zoom WE agreed to read the book *A Room of One’s Own* by Virginia Woolf. Additionally, WE said WE’d read the intro to Lauren Fournier’s book *Autotheory* ...

[She looks up the title on her phone]

... 'As Feminist Practice in Art, Writing and Criticism' (Fournier 2021).

WE read the Woolf book years ago and WE know WE have a copy of it somewhere. WE spend weeks searching for it on the bookshelf at home. It would have been quicker to buy a new copy, but WE have the habit of buying second copies of books WE have forgotten WE own and are determined not to add to the pile. WE have no luck finding it and convince ourselves that somewhere on the internet there must be some notes on it. WE will read these so as to jog our memory and feel like WE can add to the next conversation held on Zoom.

The same day, WE recommended this book to a friend, as she mentions she is struggling to work and maybe a new studio space would enable new thinking. WE instantly feel like a fraud in suggesting it as WE really do not remember the nuances of the text.

WE agree to write a memory of our conversation and a few days later, WE find our copy of *A Room of "WE's" Own* in a stack of books WE had on our studio table that had some significance on our last exhibition. It was hidden there, sandwiched between some bigger books so thick they hid its spine. WE found it after grabbing a handful of books to use as a prop for supporting a small ladder WE are building for our toddler. After drilling, WE look down and it is right there. WE laugh and take a picture on our phone.

[She picks up her phone to flick through the photos and remembers she sent it to the WhatsApp chat]

After looking at the photo again, WE are reminded of a quote by Barthes, referenced by Kate Briggs in her book *This Little Art* (Briggs 2017), which speaks about the texts we are endeared to, the ones we lean on for support. WE wonder if the pile of books on the studio table could actually physically support our weight?

[She stops thinking about writing and places the pile of books in the centre of the studio floor. She puts her iPhone on video record and stands it against a tin of white emulsion paint. She takes off her shoes and climbs onto the books. The books are unbalanced. They fall to the floor, along with herself]

WE agree to write about our memories from our conversation on Zoom.



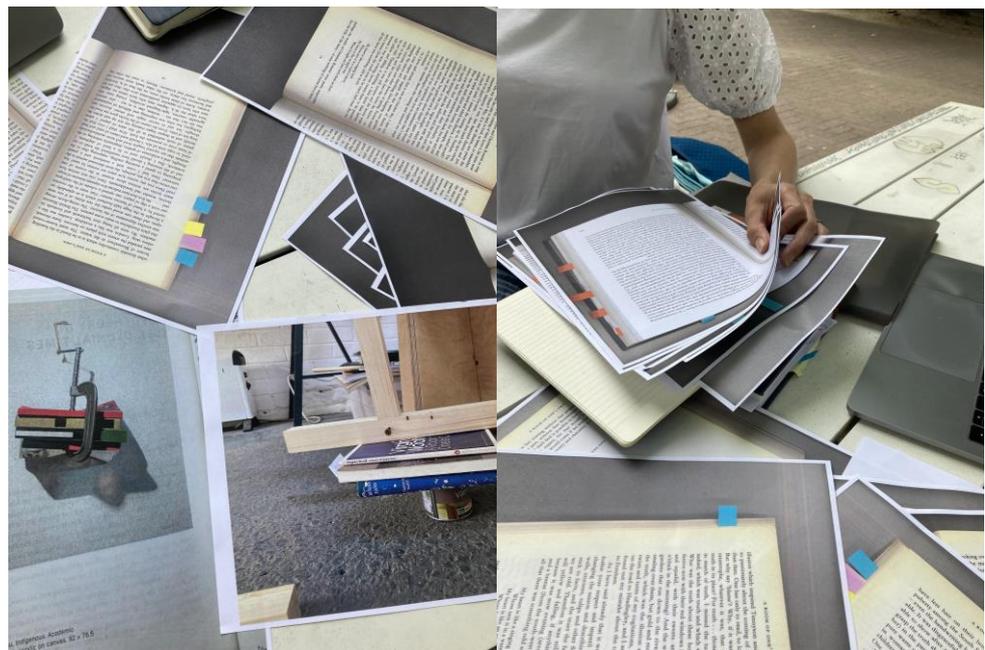
3. Discussion—Turning from I to WE

Turning from I to WE makes us think of an artist WE met on a residency. WE told her WE wanted to think more about the poly-vocal. The idea of the Greek chorus, where the group comment on the development of the story as a collective witness. WE speak about her tendencies to do this with her film works. She mentions that she thinks it comes from being brought up Catholic. She says she never mentions this to anyone when she speaks about her work. WE wonder if she is sharing it with us as WE have spoken about her Irish heritage and the church. WE wonder how WE have not noticed this before. How it is embedded in our upbringing, the idea of a collective voice speaking out loud. The congregation in unison professing and claiming our position/devotion.

Turning from I to WE speaks of our uncomfortable feeling of never being able to speak up. Not being comfortable telling someone else about our personal life or inner thoughts. They never feel thought-through enough. They never feel weighty and without holes. WE cannot seem to trust our voice, that it will not betray us with some misplaced emotion in the emphasis of a word².

Turning from I to WE might feel like WE are trying to project our position or opinion on everyone. That making the same might create or do the exact opposite of our intention, which is to create a safe place for identification. To create a place to speak up.

Turning from I to WE could create even more polarised binaries. A place where if you have not experienced our experience, then you do not belong. That you are other. That this other is our opposition. How can WE safeguard the individual, protect each other's solitude and yet share a collective thinking? Lauren Fournier states that 'autotheoretical works most often exist somewhere in the place where the "self" comes into relation with others—be it other people, through physical and citational communities and kinship networks, or objects of study, such as works of contemporary art and literature—and these moments of brushing up range from antagonistic to loving, pleasurable, and frictive. At its worst, autotheory can become that unproductive form of narcissism—my truth is the only important truth worth listening to, which is fascistic—or solipsism cut off from the world' (Fournier 2021, p. 272). Shifting the autotheoretical space from a self-centred to a shared space is a necessary condition for turning from I to WE.



Turning from I to WE was something WE heard documentary-maker, Adam Curtis (Buxton 2017), speak about in a podcast. He mentioned, when the interviewer asked what

the future of society might look like, that he believed the only society we can create now is a collective one. That collectivism was our only possibility for survival.

Turning from I to WE was something WE stumbled upon when WE came across Julie Otsuka's novel *The Buddha in the Attic* (Otsuka 2013). It is written in the first personal plural and depicts a group of women who arrive in the US in the interwar period, as mail-order brides. There is no main protagonist: the voice of many women speaks the circumstances of multiple experiences in each chapter. This gives an anonymity to those who may have suffered but also amplifies the idea that a volume of women had these shared thoughts and stories during that period did not have anyone to share with because of language barriers and their being cultural outsiders. It is hard not to empathise and think of the vast number of women who experience manipulation, repression and feeling physically unsafe.

Turning from I to WE began after WE saw a reading by writer Joanna Walsh of her work *Seed* (Walsh 2017). It floored us, as the reading was choreographed, where a group of female voices read sections of the work, falling in and out of unison. Sometimes, two or three voices read at the same time, sometimes the group as a whole, never one singular voice. It resonated deeply with us as a device. WE have been searching for a moment in which to incorporate it as an action. There was a moment that reconnected us to this, the first time WE heard the song 'Hey Sister' by Simian Mobile Disco from the album *Murmurations* (Simian Mobile Disco 2018). This felt akin to the reading of *Seed*. Maybe it is something to do with the vibrations of performing a text together that resonate atoms in us that are somehow disposed to connectivity.

Turning from I to WE began a long time before the pandemic hit. Before the period where we all longed to be with other people. A few months before lockdown 1, WE physically turned from an I to WE as WE became pregnant. Once the baby was born, WE struggled immensely with the we in this situation. That WE did not have a physical or mental distance to process how WE would never be on our own again in the world. This we is the most incredible love affair WE have ever experienced, but also loaded with friction, frustration and constantly feeling overwhelmed.

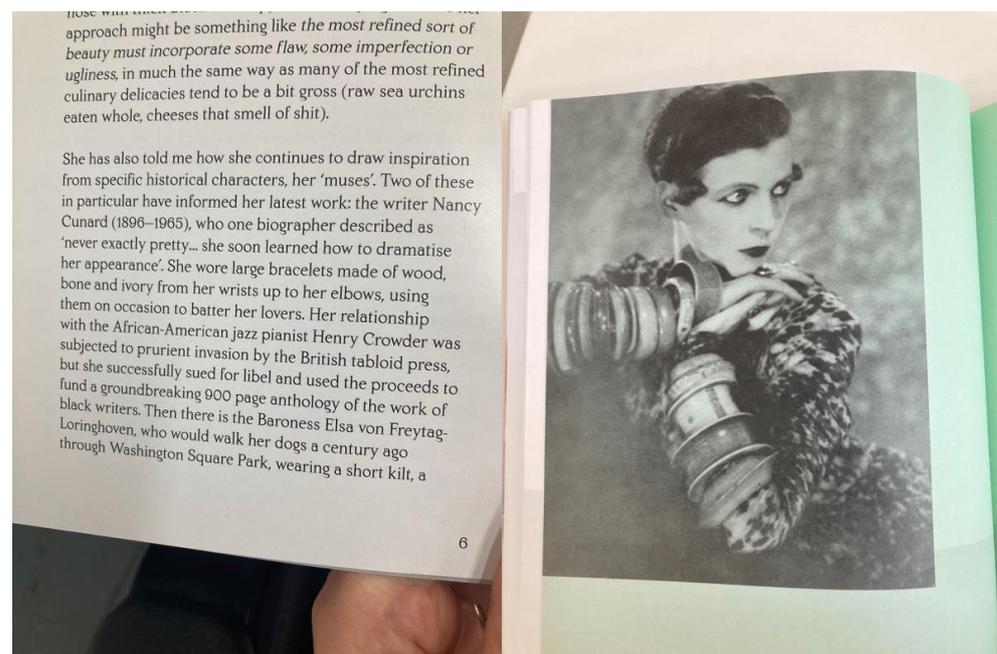
Turning from I to WE made us emotional when WE saw that the artists nominated for the 2019 Turner Prize (Lawrence Abu Hamdan, Helen Cammock, Oscar Murillo and Tai Shani) wrote a letter to the jury stating that they wished to be seen as a collective and wanted the prize fund to be split equally amongst them. They believed '... in a time of political division in Britain and conflict in much of the world, the artists wanted to use the occasion of the Turner Prize to make a statement in the name of commonality, multiplicity and solidarity ...' (Abu Hamdan et al. 2019). This moment made us intensely happy as it reflected the experiences and relationships WE have with our peers. Those who share what little resources and energy they have to enable and protect each other's practice. The art world can be quite toxic, pitting each artist against the other for the small pots of funding that may allow them to sustain a practice. It fosters a place where most artists make their work in the gaps between working a number of jobs just to pay rent and put food on the table. It is a system that perpetuates working to your physical and financial limits with very little space for reflection and recovery. It is a place where working in a collective spirit can buffer all of this and allow a sense of support.

Turning from I to WE was discussed during a book launch of Claire-Louise Bennet's *Checkout 19* (Bennett 2022), in Belgium, a few weeks ago. The moderator was wondering if the "we" in the book stands for the maternal lineage of the female protagonist. One of the readers suggested that the "we" in Bennet's newest writing could represent all the past versions of ourselves—the thinker, the maker, the creator of all our past ages. "we" as "I" in a constant state of becoming.



Turning from I to WE has us thinking about the use of citations. How WE borrow the words of others. Not necessarily using them in the intended context, but holding on and projecting onto them so WE can verbalise the things WE may not yet know how to speak. How can WE use the words of others to build a legacy in thoughtful and authentic ways? How can WE care for these words and be careful of them? How could WE create a sense of scholarly intimacy whereby these words do not feel like they exclude people or intimidate them? How can citations become an act of a collective, speaking with other voices and not about them?

Turning from I to WE happened in the good company of Virginia Woolf. WE were finally (re-)reading *A Room of One's Own* the other day. Trying to read *A Room of One's Own*, that is. Something kept coming up. Urgent work emails, sick children in desperate need of scrambled eggs, the alarming beep of the dryer, with WE being tired from dealing with all of this while trying to clear some time for thinking. When WE finally got to it, it was everything WE remembered, and more. WE were inspired, in awe of the modern touch of her 1929 voice. WE laughed and got angry.



4. Results (Aka Anger)

Angry

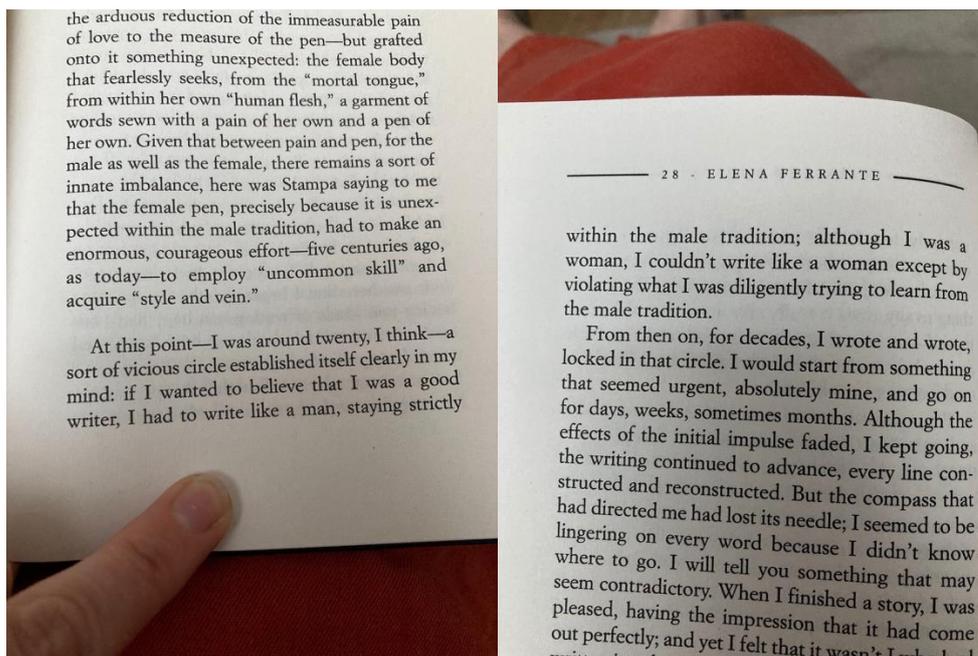
It took us a while to realise that was what the gnawing feeling at the root of our neck and the frown in between our eyebrows was: anger. Our situation resonates with that of women in the 16th century, as described by Woolf, with a noteworthy difference: instead of being asked ‘Why on earth would you write?’, WE are being asked: ‘What have you written recently?’ The loud tone of that question even drowns out the annoying *pings* of MS Outlook and appliances, nagging children and the ringing in our ears from fatigue. However, it worsens the anger.

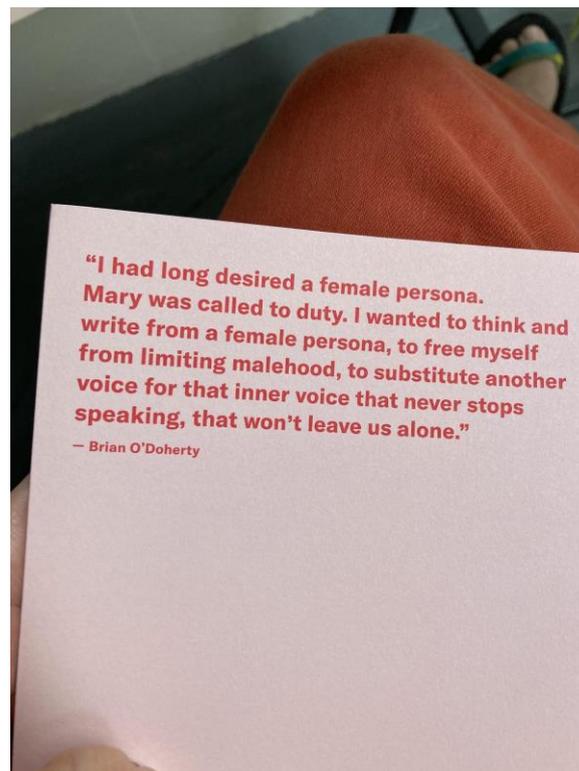
WE are exaggerating of course, for the sake of argument. However, there is some truth in this clichéd exaggeration. An unexpected WE was hiding there. For women have been able to free up their time, get an education, obtain an income and a choice over their own path in life. However, there still seem to remain some mental roadblocks. The room WE own is never completely quiet; all sorts of distractions interrupt the uninterrupted time needed to come to deep thought. Shakespeare’s imaginary equally talented sister who never published a word and lived a life of misery because of her talent, ‘lives in you and in me,’ said Woolf, addressing a room full of women, ‘and in many other women who are not here tonight, for they are washing up the dishes and putting the children to bed’ (Woolf [1929] 2000, p. 102).

WE are expected to keep track of the trivialities and practical nuisances that come with keeping a family alive and, at the same time rise, far above the trivialities in thought and output. WE have to learn to wipe noses while reading. Ignore the open tab in the back of our heads with the grocery list for tonight’s casserole while interpreting learned theories and draw up conclusions while cooking it.

WE have enough of most of ‘those desirable things’ (Woolf [1929] 2000, p. 85), such as time and money, but there seems to be a chronic lack in idleness. WE are allowed to walk on the grass now, and no Beadle will stop us from storming into libraries with our notebooks, but only rarely does it seem possible to create conditions of full concentration. WE might have a room of our own, but our head often has more similarities with crowded public transport than with a secluded cabin overlooking a soothing lake.

Therefore, the modern touch of Virginia Woolf’s 1929’s message made WE angry. Words from 1929 pointed out that WE still think in binary divisions.





5. WE as an Autotheoretical Demarcation

Therefore, here WE are. Angrily walking on the grass. However, did all of WE share the same anger, the same resonances, the same feeling of being overwhelmed while WE left the path? The truth is: WE only momentarily and fragmentarily turned to WE.

The WE is an illusion of the kind kind. It functions as a common space where concepts are not grounded from several anchor points but set afloat in altering endeavours to understand the lived experience of the other and of your self. There are moments of recognition: in a practice, in a story, in an intuitively shared feeling. Thus, the WE consists of close hitting ice floes gathered by the movement of haphazard waves. Some parts fit, like pieces of puzzles that never came out of the same box to begin with and yet seamlessly match, but the seams stay fragile and changeable. In that sense, Virginia Woolf was right to turn to a fictional voice to speak for every woman, as the shared experience is always a momentarily, fragmented truth—a fiction.

The WE is a pen name, encompassing many. It is a way to write about the parts of our personal experience that line up, intertwine. The turning from I to WE does not lie in the exact replica of a lived experience—how could it?—but in the empathy it resonates in the conversation.

WE hinders us somewhat. It slows down a process of writing. It constantly tries to find a time to work together in conflicting schedules and looks for ways of thinking collectively while at a physical distance. WE taught us not to be too precious with our own words, to lend these to become elastic and usable by the other. WE scaffolds each others experience; it gives support to the ideas that may not have surfaced if left to sit alone in a room of WE's own. WE carries each others baggage; it allows for the moments of struggle when the other WE helps share the load. WE cloaks each other in a gentle understanding and validation. It tells the WE to do everything lightly. WE becomes less of a three and realises that other voices are present, the ones we have referenced in this text, those WE have not but colour our thinking, and the ones who have taken the time to respond to the writing in order to mirror back what we are trying to achieve.

The WE pays tribute to the concepts and readings that inspired our conversations in what Lauren Fournier coined as ‘intertextual intimacy’³ by adding them to the space, bringing in the specific context in which WE have encountered them. To emphasize, as Woolf put it, that ‘books continue each other, in spite of our habit of judging them separately’ (Woolf [1929] 2000, p. 71).

The WE made sure WE remembered that WE continue each other, in spite of our habit of judging ourselves separately.



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Notes

- ¹ Referenced and used as a device by Natalie Pollard, Deborah Ashfield, and Jasmin Jelley in their essay “Unhoming Pedagogies: Collaborative Wandering And Wondering With Literature,” Murriss uses *iii* as a tool to create a new pronoun that disrupts. Pollard, Ashfield, and Jelley use it to “denaturalize the impression of unitary individual experience” (Pollard et al. 2021).
- ² Here, WE align with the points made by Helene Cixous, in her text *The Laugh of the Medusa*, where she states “Every woman has known the torment of getting up to speak. Her heart racing, at times entirely lost for words, ground and language slipping away that’s how daring a feat, how great a transgression it is for a woman to speak—even just open her mouth—in public” (Cixous et al. 1976, p. 880).
- ³ ‘It denotes a tendency for those working autotheoretically to draw parallels between their own experiences and the experiences of others, using the similarity between their lives and others’ lives as the basis for choosing the examples they cite. Often, though not always, this intertextual identification—that moment of seeing oneself in an other, or recognizing one’s experiences in a new way—coexists with the para-academic uses of citations and references as a way of acknowledging the source of knowledge or influence in one’s work’ (Fournier 2021, p. 149).

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