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# STUDYING

## WHEN WORDS ARE GOOD ENOUGH

Ella Finer

How do you struggle over/against reproductive work? It is not the same as struggling in the traditional factory setting, against for instance the speed of an assembly line, because at the other end of your struggle there are people not things. Once we say that reproductive work is a terrain of struggle, we have to first immediately confront the question of how we struggle on this terrain without destroying the people you care for. This is a problem mothers as well as teachers and nurses, know very well. (Federici 2006)

This writing, falling somewhere between a letter and an essay, was written for a strike disrupted class on Feminisms at Queen Mary, University of London, in the Winter of 2022. I had previously taught at this university in 2018 when significant waves of industrial action, initially in protest at pension cuts, brought formal teaching to a halt. This was to be only the beginning of a UK-wide dispute between the University and College Union (UCU) and university employers, a dispute which would continue through the subsequent years and into 2022 when additional demands had been brought into a call for reforms to working conditions, including around casual employment practices and fair pay. In October 2023, UCU members voted to end the dispute, with the reductions to pensions benefits reversed; the parallel dispute on pay and working conditions remains unsettled.

I am more than aware as I write this how I reduce what was, and is, an extraordinarily complex, nuanced ongoing dispute to a few descriptive lines. This is a part of what I hoped to address by writing an invitation to the Feminisms class; an essay, a letter, an invitation to open up what we receive in the written word as language always chosen and composed by a body with their own political-personal persuasions. Writing as always contingent, always a cipher to a far wider field.

The volatile landscape of Higher Education in the UK, particularly in the arts, continues. I will not attempt to draw a picture of the modern ruins, but this is/was the backdrop to which I wrote, and am writing now in 2024. Study happens, continues, adapts, in times of protest and crisis, and this is part of what I was

hoping to communicate to the students who were already fearing what would happen when more strike action was about to affect their classes.

The class struck by industrial action was on Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts*; in many ways what follows is also a reading of this work through the conditions in which we all were finding ourselves, all with our own stakes in what it meant to 'miss a class'.

For me, as someone whose relationship with universities is adjacent, and always as strange as illuminating, I wanted the students who were already fatigued by so much disruption to have a chance to discuss the complexities of what it means to strike. As you will read, at the time of writing this piece in 2022, I had not been issued with a contract and hadn't been paid for months of teaching. When I went on strike and marched and joined the call for fairer pensions in 2018, I was on a fixed term contract and couldn't afford to pay into a pension. I believe in the immediacy of strike action for how it rips open the present tense and occupies it; how it resists the pervasive, excessively damaging politics of the enclosed present tense which successive conservative governments in the UK have thrived on. In their hands there is no future, just terms of leadership. One attempt through this writing then, among a few, is to communicate my strong belief in the power and importance of withdrawing labour, while also showing that strike action is no simple withdrawal – strike action relies for its effectiveness on producing other forms of labour, often emotional and imaginative; often about inventing ways to 'struggl[e]' on this terrain without destroying the people you care for' (Federeci 2006).

Those from the Feminisms class who wanted to join met in a coffee shop under the bridge on Mile End Road. We read the letter and the students who gathered talked about what they wanted to create in the future, what their degree in English would move into: poetry, law, sports journalism, scholarship .... The great diversity of desires and dreams shared was a privilege to listen to, to share in – not as a teacher, as a fellow human being with a few more years on earth, still working stuff out.

The piece of writing that follows does not commit to the letter form with a greeting and sign-off; it exists in the continuous, as a moment in a much larger and incomplete conversation. When you hear me addressing 'you' or 'we' please hear me in conversation with James Cardy, Sabirin Osoble, Mekha Periakaruppan, and Adea Xhema as well as whatever part of you wants to be addressed, or brought into the expanded, exploded Feminisms class of 24 November 2022.

### // *Words are good enough*

When the 'I' seeks to give an account of itself, it can start with itself, but it will find that this self is already implicated in a social temporality that exceeds its own capacities for narration; indeed, when the 'I' seeks to give an account of itself, an account that must include the conditions of its own emergence, it must, as a matter of necessity, become a social theorist. (Butler 2005: 7–8)

My faith in words is not simple, or blind to their transformative and contradictory powers: words can enclose as well as open, they can obscure as they illuminate. And I love this: 'their most striking peculiarity – their need of change' (Woolf 1937). This is why I write, because every word holds many histories, many references, so many after effects of its uses through time and we might even say they hold an anticipatory energy – where they will next move, where and *how they will compel us to move*. Take any word and you can travel with it. No word is without its sway to definition and yet every word exceeds it.

So my faith in words is, paradoxically, in their unfaithfulness to a fixed position. They move, they circle, they produce effects. I feel them, do you? One of the first feminist writers I became aware of was Lucy Lippard through my mother – and both of their insistence on the importance of being a moving target. I have never forgotten this, through all these years, the agency of resisting any fast or easy definition which can fix you in place. But sometimes definition is important, there are moments we might need or want to define ourselves, for personal and political reasons, we are compelled to add our 'I' to a 'we', and sometimes words are all we have left to help us do this work.

My instinct is to resist this definition, to say we have our bodies before and after words, and definitely through them, but what if the options for where you place your body aren't good enough, what if the choice is bad and your body will be enclosed and defined in ways reducing you to category, holding you to a set of parameters and politics that trap you while disturbing your deeply held personal ethics, your own idea of who you are, who and what you feel responsible for, accountable to, and where you want to place your efforts and desires?

In many ways we have been discussing how we are always confronted with this kind of perpetual definition through a mix of what we say, how we present ourselves, and how others read us. Every writer we have read positions themselves in words, they place their body in their argument however subtle, however bold, however contingent, ambivalent, awkward.

They place themselves. This is key. This is a particular agency granted by writing, an agency desirous for the 'I' to find its conditions of emergence and name them. For self-definition. And this is a kind of placing we can do ourselves, for ourselves, using the unfaithful tools we can at least trust to be as subversive as our bodies. Words. ***Words are good enough.***

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These last words are Maggie Nelson's words, the final words on page one of *The Argonauts* (2016). Their placement – these words both introducing the book and closing its first page – invites a mode of reading urging us to hold the complexity of the simultaneous opening-closing writing does with thought. In this way 'words are good enough' is both definitive and open to the contingency of what is to come. A reminder we can do this as a way of being, we can fall down on an idea, a feeling, an argument, and simultaneously leave enough space for it to move.

And this is the care that takes place in our study together; we give each other the generosity of space to figure our thoughts, our moods and tonalities, as if we were writing the first page. Full of possibilities, of provocations, of plenitude. If one of us speaks with passionate certainty we can also hear the edges blurring, the words as porous, because we are making this study together, we are in discussion, we are holding space for each other and what we voice into the room. This is a practice of attention, of listening, which is always a practice of reciprocity.

How does one get across the fact that the best way to find out how people feel about their gender or their sexuality – or anything else, really – is to listen to what they tell you, and to try to treat them accordingly, without shellacking over their version of reality with yours? (Nelson 2016: 66)

Resisting a practice of shellacking realities, we find ourselves with an abundance of others' feelings and thoughts. We start to hold a lot of accumulated knowledge, enriched by diversity of experience even while maybe conflicting, at odds, divergent in thought and action. Recently you have said, collectively but in different ways, the more we know the less we know, the more we *do the reading* (and I hear the action of *do* here) the further from definition feminism moves. That together we have created the space to unknow as much as come into new awareness is something that enables deep critical work to happen around how you want to live, want to work, what kind of change you want to have a stake in. How you might account for the 'I' in relation to each other and the many 'we's of the world.

Thank you for really listening to each other, for trusting yourselves to speak even when the words don't feel sufficient, or when the thought runs away too fast to find the words that rush to meet it. This is no failure of critical and creative capacity, this is what happens when we are ignited by the desire to respond, to enter into vibrant relations. This is what happens when we lay parts of ourselves bare, inevitable when we take the leap into thinking out loud.

Writing gives us more time to translate thought than speech, and so here I attempt to speak through my writing, to hold that immediacy of ignition and burn to communicate with you, imperfect as sometimes this hot thought can be. I have put some of what has fuelled my thinking-feeling recently into words so that I can give these to you, and together we can think alongside Nelson's own provocations in *The Argonauts* about what it means to write from one's own personal experience, the self 'implicated in a social temporality' (Butler 2005: 7–8), drawing 'her story into history' (Cixous 1976: 881).

*// Bear what she brings*

this is study as a speculative practice, when the situated practice of a seminar room or squatted space moves out to encounter study in general. (Harney and Moten 2013: 117)

Why am I writing to you now? These words are what I offer you in place of our scheduled seminar, our seminar that takes place once a week in a small room with many adjoining doors (sporadically opening and closing) in a building for Business and Management. Now I describe it in writing I can't help but feel the affective dissonance of our meeting in the context of business and management, in a building containing evermore containers. Is this really where our seminar, our *study*, takes place though?

Study is what you do with other people. It's talking and walking around with other people, working, dancing, suffering, some irreducible convergence of all three, held under the name of speculative practice. The notion of a rehearsal – being in a kind of workshop, playing in a band, in a jam session, or old men sitting on a porch, or people working together in a factory – there are these various modes of activity. The point of calling it 'study' is to mark that the incessant and irreversible intellectuality of these activities was already there. These activities aren't ennobled by the fact that we now say, 'oh, if you did these things in a certain way, you could be said to have been studying.' To do these things is to be involved in a kind of common intellectual practice. What's important is to recognize that that has been the case – because that recognition allows you to access a whole, varied, alternative history of thought. (Harney and Moten 2013: 110)

The work we do together does not just take place in the classroom – as we have talked about, this work is happening before we meet and long after. How much do we need the classroom for our work, *our study*, to happen? One of my favourite lines from *The Undercommons* – a book which, in the Black radical tradition, expanded the possibilities of study, as a praxis beyond containment in the institution when it was released in 2013 – is about the nurses' smoking room as a site of study: 'Of course the smoking room is an incredible gathering of resources too' (Harney and Moten 2013: 112). It blew my mind, it blew the classrooms I was moving through apart.

Because, as we have been discussing across all these weeks, categories are not always what they seem – words seeking to contain and discipline subject areas, *like* Business and Management, *like* English and Drama too, are also holding subversive bodies and their energies. Like the blurry edges of the definitive statement, a discipline's boundaries are only as hard or soft as the bodies within them make them. Bodies that move will move ideas and definitions with them, and Moten and Harney's 'subversive intellectual' who is 'in but not of' the university is a body in motion. She is a reminder the university *can* be used in different ways by those who resist its negligence, gather (or steal) its resources, and go underground.

The subversive intellectual came under false pretenses, with bad documents, out of love. Her labor is as necessary as it is unwelcome. The university needs what she bears but cannot bear what she brings. And on top of all that, she disappears. She disappears into the underground, the downlow lowdown

maroon community of the university, into the *undercommons of enlightenment*, where the work gets done, where the work gets subverted, where the revolution is still black, still strong. (Harney and Moten 2013: 26)

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At the time of writing this I have received no contract and no pay from the university, with more weeks behind us than ahead. While I am administratively forgotten as a worker, invisible, I am neither legally nor economically bound to the university as of this moment (*She came with bad documents, out of love*). So my commitment is to you, and my solidarity with the strikers – enabled more than I by the conditions of their jobs to strike – not to the administrations of the university or of the union. Neither represents me. Sometimes we have agency over our invisibility (*She disappears*) and sometimes we do not.

Silvia Federici's work reminds us that invisible labour sustains the infrastructure of the university, and this labour, like women's reproductive work, is undertaken by a multiplicity of subjects, mostly doing the ghost maintenance and infrastructural work.

We must also change our conception of what knowledge is and who can be considered a knowledge producer. Currently, knowledge production on the campuses is insulated from the broad infrastructural work that sustains academic life, which requires a multiplicity of subjects (cleaners, cafeteria workers, groundkeepers, etc.) making it possible for students and teachers to return to the classroom every day. Yet, like women's reproductive work, this work too is mostly invisible. Every day 'those who work by the hands' (Brecht) make it possible for 'those who work with the head' and for the megamachine to start off again, but at best they are only recognized when they refuse to work. (Federici in Bhandar and Ziadah 2020: 101)

Federici's work pointedly asks us to think about *who* produces knowledge in the university, and *how* knowledge is produced; she shows us that refusal produces knowledge and recognition of previously invisible workers. In the university I am one of 'those who work with the head', while I am also, as I wrote above, rendered invisible through negligence.

So I am caught between an invisibility imposed and a subversive disappearance I myself find it necessary to do: an 'active vanishing' in relation to the university, to go underground where the work gets done.<sup>1</sup> I do not think these are incompatible, and I am interested in how the invisibility imposed (by the university) has ignited my need to name the terms of my own disappearance for myself as much as for you. I asked a professor from another London university if he was striking and he said luckily it wasn't a teaching day and he could hide. In other words, he could choose the terms of his invisibility and by doing so conceal his relationship to the strike action. Had I not been teaching I could have hidden my self away, my body

would not have had to wrestle with the real pain of even imagining crossing a picket, I could have given my attentions elsewhere. If our class had been yesterday.

But somewhere along the line, from my heroes, whose souls were forged in fires infinitely hotter than mine, I gained an outsized faith in articulation itself as its own form of protection. (Nelson 2016: 154)

I can neither hide what I feel, nor hide how my body responds to conditions that appear ruinous. *We are standing in the ruins looking at things being ruined.*<sup>2</sup> My writing can only go to the feeling running hot inside of me, I cannot escape this impulse, and not now when together in Winter 2022 we are moving through a history of feminist thought that at every turn takes us back to theory as activist practice, activist practice as theory, through subversive intellectuals whose words seek to rearrange academic space – to make space in institutions built to accommodate only some bodies. ‘For the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house’ (Lorde [1979] 1985: 112).

A feminist ethics of working with others’ words honours the words quoted as action; action that she will not squander; action she will not dull to the level of characters on a page. We are not drawing pictures. The author hears the voice in the writing and feels the beats in their own pulse. Come on. If you feel it when you cite her then you know it, if you feel her energy emboldens your powers of communication then you have a duty to act on the words, to acknowledge the ways she has strengthened your own. To know, or bring yourself to know, and name the differences that bring you both to an acoustic commons. A space I have been writing about for my book which must follow a feminist ethics of ‘use’ in order to survive, to sustain, to produce in collaboration for generations. (Finer 2020)

### // *In the sayable*

What exactly is lost to us when words are wasted? Can it be that words comprise one of the few economies left on earth in which plenitude – surfeit, even – comes at no cost?

Recently I received in the mail a literary magazine that featured an interview with Anne Carson in which she answers certain questions – the boring ones? the too personal ones? – with empty brackets [[ ]]. There is something to learn here; I probably would have written a dissertation on each query, prompting the reply I’ve heard countless times in my life: ‘Really, it’s terrific – it’s just the people upstairs who say we’ve got to trim it back a little.’ The sight of Carson’s brackets made me feel instantly ashamed of my compulsion to put my cards more decidedly on the table. But the more I thought about the brackets, the more they bugged me. They seemed to make a fetish of the unsaid, rather than simply letting it be contained in the sayable. (Nelson 2016: 60–1)

Nelson's story about Anne Carson's use of empty brackets [[]] to answer, by not answering, interview questions opens up a conversation about the politics of the said and unsaid: what is lost when words that could be used are wasted, left as unsaid. Unspoken, are they simply wasted? Why? When we don't say, when we don't express, do we waste the potential to give something: plenitude at no cost? Is there no cost in producing plenitude?

The alternative to laying to waste is to use. In using words, we open what we have used to being used by others. This can of course create wonderful correspondences of thought, exciting citational practice. But, this using of one's words in the hope of making useful to others can also risk reductive categorization, especially if we lay parts of ourselves bare. So some of us, sometimes, might choose less transparency, or alternative modes of expression that ask for engagement without immediate or settled understanding. Then, of course, we might risk being categorized as something else, something relating more to form than content: weird, obscure, difficult, ungraspable.

So if there is always a risk in expression, there *is* an economy here: what is the cost of being plentiful with words? And who bears this cost? Words require time to write them, to think them, to write-think-feel them. 'Attention is an important resource', bell hooks (2000: 163) wrote in *All About Love*. When we give our attention to how we express ourselves in words, we are giving time – the more plentiful the words, the more surfeit, the more time we may have spent (and look at the metaphors we use for talking about time).

Carson's brackets are not an absence of thought, she just won't make that thought available, *she won't reveal it by composing it*. I might read the wasted words as wasted here, because they are *potentially* useful, but with her cards not laid, their usefulness – which is their usefulness to others – is reserved. The right to not say or disclose, to keep one's 'right to opacity' as articulated by Édouard Glissant ([1990] 1997) is also a feminist issue: why do we have to make ourselves legible? My provisional answer here is no one has to, we can empty bracket as is our agency to do so, but there are times when not giving an account of oneself (to return to Butler's words) will not serve the greater work we want to do in the world.

Anne Carson's writing has taught me so much about silenced women; she knows about silence. I trust her empty brackets as ethical response, even while I love Nelson's hopeful commitment to returning to the brackets, to read them differently, as markers of a magic evening...

...but some revelations do not stand. (Nelson 2016: 61)

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So many scenes played out in the night when I tried to figure what I would do for our class in the midst of strike action. Scenes of the strike I was part of in 2018, memories of standing in extraordinary snowfall at the gates of the university, and specifically of the thrill that this was the place where interdisciplinary practice was breathed into being by the sociality of protest – wrested, like *diversity* and *inclusion*,

like *listening*, from the deadened language of university mission statements. I remembered talking about bat communication, experimental poetry, and the size of the computer that arrived in lorries to the engineering department in the 1970s. All in one conversation, a conversation about sound and subversion where we could see our breath as we spoke in the freezing air. This was one beginning of the book I have been writing ever since, about the inherent power in/of that which falls outside of administrative control – how sound resists categorization; how sound makes and disperses knowledge beyond the bounds of the institutional building.

How knowledge travels through publication is another story, but my night thoughts went there also, thinking of you as writers with so much to say, and of my book still hovering for something like completion while I make time among all else I do for love or money. Where do we want our writing to travel? For whom are we writing? To whom do we hold ourselves accountable through writing? If I spoke this to you out loud how would its value shift, and for whom does this hold value, as thought, as feeling, as sound, as words, *if any*?

I have brought value into the mix, this is the way ignited thought works – unfolding our subjective experience into the vast interrelationships with politics, philosophies, ecologies. In this way ignited thought creates our own imaginative universe – the word from which university gets its name – the cosmos where all turns into one, the sum of everything and always brilliantly incomplete. In the night, the only way to provisionally still myself with – by exploring – the vastness created in the mix of my too fast thoughts was to write to and for what I care about. And for me, *this* is the social and political value of writing; that it is oriented to care, another word which has a use-value for institutions. That writing reaches out as call, that it is collaborative, collective, that in writing I hold multiple voices within my own, resisting co-option or assumptions of easy access to positionality through the extract of another's deep thought.

And for me, as well as the voices explicitly already cited in the writing, there are also *yours*. This is writing that could only have happened through our conversations, and how each of you uniquely bear what you bring. I do not presume you will feel or hear this writing as yours – while in theory I have proposed this anticipatory citation of the audience or the reader, I can only ever hope to try, however imperfect the result; I can only hope for this to happen in practice.

what if we began writing positioning the audience as the already cited body? So that those who receive the work can hear their own truths anticipated within the words, can feel there is advocacy, can hear how the words seek to do more than spell. (Finer 2020)

## Notes

- 1 Peggy Phelan's understanding of an 'active vanishing' through which one may attempt to escape the trappings of representational visibility (Phelan 1993: 19).
- 2 A voice line from P. A. Skantze on a phone call, 17 November 2022. P. A. was my teacher when I was your age, and later the supervisor of my PhD. She gave me *The Undercommons* in 2013 and so much more besides.

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