

“Between-ness”

184. Writing is, in fact, an astonishing equalizer. I could have written half of these propositions drunk or high, for instance, and half sober; I could have written half in agonized tears, and half in a state of clinical detachment. But now that they have been shuffled around countless times—now that they have been made to appear, at long last, running forward as one river—how could either of us tell the difference?

-Maggie Nelson, *Bluets*¹

1. “Something”² happens between two people thinking about different things in the same space. Perhaps I’m finding what this “something” is. Perhaps I’m finding how to approach this “something”: how to get closer to you without emptying the space between us of its valuable emptiness.
2. I share a classroom with another student. Me reading; her writing. She listens to music, which she offers to turn off. I tell her it’s fine. I don’t notice the music as I read.
3. I’m reading Fredric Jameson’s *The Political Unconscious*. It’s a library copy, so I don’t annotate it. A previous borrower allowed himself this luxury; his annotations are scrunched and messy, written in faded pencil. I only read some of them.
4. The other student packs her things to leave. As she nears me, I look up, gauging if this situation requires parting words. We don’t make eye contact, but I cannot re-start reading until she leaves. Opening the door, she says “goodbye”; I say, “Have a good night.” This situation required parting words. I begin reading, again. After she leaves, I make my first annotation. I write the word ‘Affect’ next to Jameson’s words: “The increasing abstraction of visual art ... constitutes a Utopian compensation for everything lost in the process of the development of capitalism—the place of quality in an increasingly quantified world, the place of the archaic and of feeling...”³
5. While reading in a library, I often look up from my book to the others around me. Looking away from a book enhances its qualitative material presence. Seldom do I return to the page and pick up exactly where I left. My thoughts admit other people, parting words, scrunched pencil lines, drawing me towards or away from the printed words. I fixate on the others around me, but I also fixate on the words on the page.
6. I annotated in miniscule letters. As I find them just now, to cite Jameson here, my handwriting blends into text and other annotations. But my annotation felt like human contact.
7. We annotate in the past tense.

¹ Nelson, Maggie. *Bluets*. 74.

² Stewart, Kathleen. *Ordinary Affects*. 2.

³ Jameson, Fredric. *The Political Unconscious*. 236.

8. Two people sit at the same table reading the same books. There is a relationship between the content of these two books.
9. Two people sit at the same table reading different books. There is a relationship between the content of these two books.
10. We say “the same,” as in “the same books,” but we don’t say “the different,” as in “the different books.” “The different books” means “the different” thing.
11. As a young child, I lie in bed with my mother. I’m reading, but I sneak glances at her book. This is the first time I remember reading a swear word in a printed book. In her book, one character calls another a “bastard.” Several pages later, one character calls another (the same? the different?) a “son of a bitch.” I do not remember anything in particular about the book I read at the time.
12. I write this alone in bed. In the next room, a roommate watches a movie. I hear a woman’s voice, her French accent, ominous music, movement, but I don’t know what’s happening. Writing this in that room, I might know what she’s doing.
13. Libraries are places where people do serious academic work. They are also places where people go for free wifi. Free wifi allows people to do serious academic work.
14. Writing this in a library, I might have written the same things, or I might have written the different things. “[H]ow could either of us tell the differen[ts]?”
15. The materiality of a printed book establishes a shared space for readers in libraries and used bookstores. They may find the leftover annotations of previous readers, faded or legible; they may leave their own annotations for future readers.
16. I bought a used copy of Claudia Rankine’s *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely* because a previous user boxed these lines:

Define loneliness?
Yes
It’s what we can’t do for each other. ⁴

I felt emptiness—but not loneliness—as I read those lines. I wanted to fill this emptiness I bought the book. The previous owner boxed those words, and I read her box. (Was the box empty?) Weeks later, I showed the book to a friend. He pointed out that she excluded the page’s other stanza from her box:

What do we mean to each other?
What does a life mean?
Why are we here if not for each other?

⁴ Rankine, Claudia. *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely*. 62.

17. In a library, I imagine the different people often think the same thoughts about the different books. Some of these thoughts may be: “This is an interesting book”; “This is a boring book”; or “Thank God for this free wifi.”
18. Is a library a lonely place? How many people feel lonely in a library? If loneliness is “what we can’t do for each other,” what do we “do for each other” in a library?
19. To Rankine, what occurs between each other? Is it love? Does love inhabit the library? Am I in love with the people in the room with me as I read? Do I imagine meeting a soul mate, partner, or hook-up in a library? How do these differ from reading a book in the same room as someone?
20. If I cite Fredric Jameson in an essay, should I also cite the previous borrower who annotated the copy I read? Am I in love with this previous borrower?
21. I’m in the same classroom. The same student is here. Now, I write. She does math problems. She doesn’t know I’m writing about her. If I did math problems, would I do math problems about her? Do we always write about somebody when we are in the same room as them?
22. I direct these questions towards the intimacy inherent in sharing a table, room, or library with an other. The material presence of a human body shares space like the material presence of a book. When the free wifi breaks down, we turn away from our loneliness and do something for each other.
23. Claudia Rankine writes in an interview with Lauren Berlant: “What happens when I stand close to you? What’s your body going to do? What’s my body going to do? On myriad levels, we are both going to fail, fail, fail each other and ourselves.”⁵ They conducted this interview via email; presumably at least one of them used free wifi. Between them, the space, opened by the interview, causes Rankine’s ‘you’ to engorge itself on their readers. Who fails, fails, fails? The tripled action encompasses both Rankine and Berlant, but the third failure invites readers into their intimate failure. Two people fail to fail sufficiently for Rankine’s fail, fail, failure. In *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely*, her ‘We’ feels more intimate than her interviewed ‘You.’ She exists in the same space with ‘We,’ yet ‘You’ expands in the published interview.
24. In *Bluets*, Nelson explores eroticism between lovers, but that’s not what primarily concerns Rankine. I think they explore some of the same thing, though.
25. Hoping for conclusions, I return to that classroom, seeking that other student. After I open the door, I see that she’s not there.
26. To Nelson, “Writing is, in fact, an astonishing equalizer.” Nelson realizes this after recalling Goethe’s worries about “the destructive effects of writing.”⁶ As I write this,

⁵ <http://bombmagazine.org/article/10096/claudia-rankine>

⁶ Nelson, Maggie. *Bluets*. 74.

maybe I'm "equalizing" me and that other student: to show that *something* happened between me and her, but also between her and me.

27. I can write down certain events of significance, but I can also leave others out. I create a coherent narrative, destroying memories that don't fit.
28. Writing creates intimacy, but intimacy does not only result from writing. Instead, this written intimacy illuminates the intimacy we feel when we don't write, read, or leave space between us.
29. Inevitably, we turn back to our books (when did we turn to them in the first place?). We begin reading, again. This 'we' only accumulates specific plurals I've shared with you. I only remember the times I, I, I fail, fail, fail you, you, you. We are always the different you. We always fail the different way. We always turn back to the different place in the different book, our cumulative failures weighing the pages down.