

being, thinking,
writing **'with'**

NIKKI SULLIVAN

— I

I want to begin with a story, a true story—it happened to a friend of a friend of mine.

Once upon a time there were three women: they were known as ‘the woman in black’, ‘the grey-haired woman with the well-developed sense of humor’ and ‘the rather quiet woman with the capacity to shock’. These women, who had known each other for quite some time, were all physicists. They were also friends. As physicists, the woman in black, the grey-haired woman with the well-developed sense of humour and the rather quiet woman with the capacity to shock had learned, and now shared, ‘a specific vocabulary, grammar and rhetoric’.¹ They knew what could count as a scientific observation, ‘what standards of accuracy in determining observations [were] possible, how the words of common language [were] restricted and refined for use in [their particular] scientific discipline’.² They knew how to tell the ‘truth’. Rational knowledge and empirical evidence were no strangers to these women who were well versed in what could count as an argument. Consequently, it was said by some that these women constituted a microcosmic rational community.

However, on weekends, and even once in a while on a weeknight if they were feeling unusually free from the burdensome pressures that went with the job, the women would meet in a café, a restaurant, perhaps even a bar. It goes without saying that at these times empirical evidence, rational statements, and professional standards of accuracy and repeatability flew out the window quicker than an uncaged gallah. The woman in black, the grey-haired woman with the well-developed sense of humour and the rather quiet woman with the capacity to shock would laugh, weep, bless, tease, gesticulate wildly, curse, break

bread and argue until it was time to go their separate ways. They would also gossip about who was fucking who, or at least who wanted to; who had said what to whom and what that could possibly mean; who, since they last met, had earned a place on their list of sworn enemies, or their list of fantasy objects; who had been removed from the aforesaid lists, and why; what they had recently bought, wanted to buy, or couldn't afford to buy; what of late had made them feel good, or bad, or indifferent; the state of the weather, the price of cigarettes versus the price of nicotine patches; the sorry state of their aging bodies; and so on and so forth. And in and through this laughing and cursing, gossiping and becoming inebriated, smiling and weeping, touching and being touched, repeating of commonly held stock concepts and statements, there formed, some would say, what you might call a non-serious community.

Now most people, and one rather staid man in particular who went by the name of Martin Heidegger, were of the opinion that what the woman in black, the grey-haired woman with the well-developed sense of humour and the rather quiet woman with the capacity to shock got up to on the weekends was rather banal, that it in fact was the epitome of 'idle talk': that is, a sort of 'essential erring, [a] wandering' from one thing to another 'that picks up the general lines of things and situations', that repeats 'what anyone can see'. In short, their 'idle talk' 'consisted of generalities'.³ This 'idle talk', declared Martin and his followers (who, in case you haven't heard this story before, liked to be known as philosophers), was 'inauthentic' and opposed to the singular, to one's own (authentic) possibilities for existence: it was nothing more than the anonymous babble of the rabble, or, as Heidegger put it, the 'they'.⁴ But then what can you expect from a bunch of women, who, try as they might, will never, or so it's said, escape from their ontology—and there are those who will go to unbelievable lengths to make sure that this particular myth is never interrupted.

Now, as you can no doubt imagine, these sorts of accusations didn't sit well with the woman in black, the grey-haired woman with the well-developed sense of humour and the rather quiet woman with the capacity to shock, all of whom were familiar with morbid Martin's tendency to set up hierarchies between those things that begin with capital letters and those that are more modest. These were not the kind of women who were prepared to accept that they were simply an anonymous part of the madding crowd—an overly emotional and irrational part at that! But, *nor* were they followers of the infamous Jacko, the footy hero whose anthem 'I'm an Individual' outsold, or so I'm told, anything Madonna ever did, and has forever lodged itself in the sporting consciousness of this sunburnt, but nevertheless lucky, country. In a nutshell, the woman in black, the grey-haired woman with the well-developed sense of humour and the rather quiet woman with the capacity to shock knew only too well that they spoke with the tongues of others, but they also knew that this didn't simply make them ventriloquist dummies.

Time passed and their shared conviction that they were neither Gods nor lemmings, unique individuals nor anonymous parts of a seething (and somewhat unseemly) mass, grew stronger and stronger until one day the rather quiet woman with the capacity to shock suggested getting together with a few other people she knew who also seemed to be stuck on the horns of this particular dilemma. The woman in black and the grey-haired woman with the well-developed sense of humour thought that this was a great idea and straight away each of them set to work thinking about singular ways in which to present their shared conundrum. But it wasn't too long before each of the women who were writing and thinking together began to feel that writing/thinking/being 'in-common' might not be such a good thing after all. Each heard their singular insights lose their singularity as they rolled around and were repeated by the voice of the other. The trouble was that the woman in black, the grey-haired woman with the well-developed sense of humour and the rather quiet woman with the capacity to shock could no longer tell which ideas belonged to whom, whose lips were uttering which words or where these words originated. To put it rather bluntly each of them felt like a ventriloquist dummy but none of them could tell whose hand was up whose arse and whether or not they liked it. What were they to do?

Well, as I said, as well as being good-time girls on the weekend these women had been well-trained in the language and methods of institutionally legitimised problem-solving—they were physicists after all! So, after much rational discussion and, of course, the odd bit of groaning and beating of breasts, the woman in black, the grey-haired woman with the well-developed sense of humour and the rather quiet woman with the capacity to shock came to the conclusion that even if each of them were to make the statement 'A+B=C' and even if their friends and colleagues were to interpret the three utterances as a simple repetition of the same message, this would, in fact, not be the case—particularly given that only one of them had a strange accent that no one seemed quite able to place, whereas another spoke in a nicotine timbre punctuated with dry wit and the third barely hid an impishness that infused even the most serious statement with the possibility of something else. Similarly, the good-time girl in each of them agreed that even in the unlikely event that they were all to wear the same outfit (accessories included) to the get-together that the rather quiet woman with the capacity to shock had organised, they'd be something other than clones, because you don't have to be a nuclear physicist to know that no two women look the same in an identical frock, which is why haute couture remains exclusive to those with more money than sense.

To cut a very long story short each decided that in her own way she would refuse the choice that others like Martin H. had posited between the authentic and the inauthentic, the individual and the mass, and immerse herself instead in the experience of the impossible, of the limit—a choice not uncommonly made by the heroine of fairytales as well as by the unconventional woman of science.

In short, each set off to explore, in her own way and in her own time, what it could possibly mean to experience community without communion, without commonality; what it could possibly mean to be inextricably bound up with others and yet at the same time to remain irreducible to a sort of generalisable state or common-being. Because, you see, each of them knew, in their hearts and in their bones, that everything that exists ‘co-exists because it exists’, that the ‘co-implication of existing is the sharing of the world’,⁵ but this didn’t stop them stressing about the fact that they couldn’t seem to draw a nice neat line around the thoughts, the words, the being, which they were becoming less and less sure belonged uniquely to each of them. The woman in black, the grey-haired woman with the well-developed sense of humour and the rather quiet woman with the capacity to shock had heard it said that ‘a single being is a contradiction in terms’, that ‘[b]eing is singularly plural and plurally singular’,⁶ and each felt this to be so, even though their attempts to intellectualise the affective dimension of their being-in-the-world—the simple fact that they were drawn to, moved by, repelled by, marked by, bound up with, others—seemed to be necessarily obstructed by the rules of rational thought. And so, despite the lack of a marriage of true minds, a sensational severance and sworn sedition, or some other such neatly packaged happy ending, this is where my story ends (but of course, it isn’t really the end of the story since, as you know, there can be no end).

— II

It seems to me that in many ways this story encapsulates the tension of being singular–plural, the generativity and the frustration of being, thinking, writing, ‘with’ that has so concerned theorists such as Emmanuel Levinas, Alphonso Lingis, Jean-Luc Nancy, Luce Irigaray and even Martin Heidegger. Let me explain.

As I said, the story that I’ve told is a story of three women: three women who are, in one sense at least, identifiable (by the colour of their hair, the clothes that they wear, the characteristics that we ascribe to them, the academic positions they hold, the names that adorn their birth certificates and so on). But in another sense, making an association between a fairytale figure, or a list of descriptors, and a particular subject doesn’t really enable one to pin the other down, to circumscribe her, to know her in her entirety (whatever that might mean), to define where she ends and I begin. In effect then, at the same time that each of these women might be identifiable, they are also unknowable, at least in any absolute sense: at the same time that they are singular, they are also in-relation. The other woman is not reducible to an epistemological object. She is not ‘one’, as Irigaray has so (in)famously noted, and as a result she isn’t containable within the logic of the ‘one’, which, as we know, nevertheless continues to tell ‘the same old stories’, to enact ‘the same discussions, the same arguments, the same scenes. The same ... Same ... Always the same.’⁷ What this story, which is not a myth, seems to suggest, what it makes me *feel*, is that each of these women is integral to the sense

of self, the bodily being-in-the-world of the others, and yet, these women are not reducible to a single being or to an anonymous mass. Ultimately, 'one cannot be distinguished from the other; which does not mean that they are indistinct'.⁸

When they speak to one another, whether of (meta)physics or fucking, whether rationally or nonsensically, the women repeat the words, the gestures, the concepts, the taxonomies of their social world because 'no conversation starts from zero'. Whenever they speak they speak 'with', whenever they think they think 'with', whenever they write they write 'with'. But this does not mean to say that these women, their thoughts, their writings, are simply interchangeable or that their 'exchanges' are transactions. Rather, each 'one' is singular (which isn't the same as saying that each 'one' is an individual) while simultaneously being in-relation. Singularity, in the sense that I, following Nancy, am using it here, does not refer to something that I can define, but rather to 'what can only remain untheorizable, yet which demands to be thought'.⁹

Nevertheless, these women are constantly called forth to speak for themselves, as themselves, to author works that are signed with a single name and to be answerable for the thoughts these works are assumed to contain. As Alphonso Lingis explains in a paper entitled 'Cues, Watchwords, Passwords', 'this standing forth as a subject, as one who speaks in [her] own name, occurs when it is called forth by juridic or quasi-juridic acts which assign to individuals the right to speak ... When one speaks in one's own name, it is because one has a duty to speak'.¹⁰ But while this call, this duty, to speak as oneself can and does inscribe the embodied subject as an 'individual', an autonomous being who is (thought to be) the origin of actions, words, thoughts, and is thus able to be held responsible and accountable for them, this is not all there is to the story. What I want to suggest is that this calling forth is not something that is simply imposed from the outside onto a self-contained and fully formed individual, who must then choose whether or not to respond. I do not simply speak, write, think, because the law demands that I do. We do not (and let's not) simply lay down the law to each other, nor simply respond to its demands by 'speaking well'. Our words, which are never ours alone, are always already 'appeals to move, to be moved, together'.¹¹

What each of the women in the story felt, in their hearts and in their bones and in their blood, was that she was somehow different from and yet inextricably bound to others. Each felt that her 'self' was engendered, or 'inspired' as Emmanuel Levinas puts it, in and through alterity, in and through the encounter(s) with, and exposure(s) to, the Other(ness) that would forever elude her, and yet, was never entirely external to her: each had the other in her skin.¹² 'I carry you with me everywhere. Not like a child, a burden, a weight. I do not contain you or retain you in my stomach, my arms, my head. Nor in my memory, my mind, my language. You are there, like my skin.'¹³ Each was marked, as you are too dear reader, as all subjects are. Or to put it otherwise, you could say that self and other are mutually constitutive and

simultaneously incommensurable: one cannot exist without the other, but nor are the two (which are never 'two') reducible to one another. In and through exposure, in touching, in being touched, 'one' encounters that which it cannot encounter: that is, alterity, the limit. '[I]t comes upon that which it cannot touch, and thereby it touches *itself* ... it feels *itself* (powerless) there where it touches (tangentially) what it cannot attain'.¹⁴

Thus being-with is a matter of tact in all senses of the word. And perhaps, following Nancy, we can say that this is also the case with thinking, with writing, that these too are matters of tact, of touching and being touched, moving and being moved, calls from/to, and responses to, the other: that being, thinking, writing, are sites of exposure, of becoming and unbecoming-*with*. If we return to the three women for a moment what is apparent is that each was/is moved, touched, inspired, angered, comforted, called forth, by the thoughts, the words, the very being-there of the others. And these thoughts, these words, bore the trace of other encounters, other exposures, other touches, not only too numerous to mention but never present, although, of course, never absent either. Touch, as Zsuzsa Baross puts it, is 'the in-between *par excellence*' since 'to touch another may be in one's power ... but it is not anyone's property; always shared in-between ... touch is never mine or mine alone. ... Touch is always already reciprocal, returned simultaneously, in the same instant'.¹⁵ And insofar as being, thinking, writing, could be said to be matters of tact, they have at their heart the 'with' that the three women experienced as at once generative and limiting.

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I want now to say something more about the story with which this paper began. In a sense the story could be read or heard as a myth, that is, as a narrative that functions to gather together people and ideas. In myth, as Nancy puts it, 'the world makes itself known, and it makes itself known through declaration ... Myth is very precisely the *incantation* that gives rise to a world and brings forth a language, that gives rise to a world in the advent of a language.'¹⁶ Myth, then, is always the myth of community and of communion, of being-in-common, and of becoming one in and through knowledge (of one's self, of others and of the world, the being, we share). But I want to suggest that there is another way to think about the story with which this paper opened and, in particular, to (re)imagine the ways in which it could be said to function.

Rather than according the story the status of myth as that which constitutes origins and knowledge, I want to think about it as a writing, a sharing that moves to the tune of something other than a functional logics. I want to suggest that this is not so much a story *about* sharing, but rather a story *as* sharing: it constitutes an enactment rather than an illustration of the 'with' which 'as such is not presentable'.¹⁷ As Nancy notes in a discussion of sharing:

One cannot tell its story [that is, the story of sharing], nor determine its essence: there is no myth of it, nor is there a philosophy of it. But it is [writing] that does the sharing. It does it, or is it, precisely to the extent that it interrupts myth.¹⁸

What Nancy means by this is that community, as it is conventionally understood, consists of a project, a communion, a coming together, a merging with others like oneself and that community negates or covers over the generativity, the unpredictability, the essentially open-endedness, the alterity, of sharing. Community fixes things, ideas, essences, identities: it ‘imprison[s] us in enclosed spaces where we cannot keep on moving’.¹⁹ In effect, community inaugurates the closure of the art of being-with, or of the political as Nancy sometimes calls it.²⁰ Community, in this sense, reduces the three women of whom I spoke earlier to exchangeable pawns in a game of oneness, to a list of shared characteristics or shared occupations, by which we can name them and know them, so that despite the fact that these three women never wear the same frocks to the same functions, they are nevertheless clones: end of story. Same old story. There is no sharing, since there is nothing to share.

But, as we’ve seen, the text that recounts its own story recounts an unfinished story, a story that cannot be finished since it is always already inscribed with the trace of the other, of ‘what is inordinate’;²¹ it essentially interrupts its own telling. The telling of the story with which this paper began may have, in one sense, brought us together,²² it may have consisted of a reiteration of shared concepts, grammar, and so on, but at the same time, the story constituted, I would argue, a sharing which touched each of you in different ways and took each of you on different journeys.²³ We may understand ourselves and the world by sharing this story, but what the relations between the three women, and our own encounters with these women and the relations between them, shows is ‘that sharing does not constitute an understanding (or a concept ... or a schema), that it does not constitute a knowledge, and that it gives no-one ... mastery over being-in-common’.²⁴ Thus we find ourselves not so much in the mythic scene of community, but at its edges, at the limit where myth is interrupted by a writing-with that is sharing, that opens up rather than forecloses community.

To return to the story: sharing, then, is not something that three always already constituted women do, ‘but an experience that makes them be’.²⁵ [I]t is not the case that the “with” is an addition to some prior Being; instead, the “with” is at the heart of Being’.²⁶ In other words, these three women did not simply pass on bits of knowledge, thoughts, writings, to one another when they were feeling generous, or withhold bits of knowledge, thoughts, writings, when they weren’t. Rather, they were (and continue to be) constituted in and through sharing, touching, thinking, writing: it is through others, because of others, with others, that they/I exist, that they/I think, that they/I write, and if they/I do sometimes withhold ideas and so on, this is what you might call a second-degree response.

Sharing, in this sense, could be thought of as an unworking of community, an unworking of myth, an unworking of identity. But this unworking, I would argue, is not simply the destruction of necessary certainties, nor is it just a postmodern game that ultimately achieves very little outside the ivory tower of the academy. This unworking, as Linnell Secomb has suggested in a paper entitled 'Fractured Community', is the refusal of unity, of totalising logic and of the violence endemic to such logic.²⁷ It destabilises the logic of the 'one' in and through the invocation of alterity, ambiguity, the 'not-one', *différence* perhaps. What's more, the recognition of this unworking enables the notion of a being-together that is not a togetherness and that does not annihilate difference nor presume difference to be articulable, calculable, predictable, fixed, something I can list: a being-together that is not a community of individuals, but a being-with founded in and through alterity. So while we can't ever rid ourselves of the spectre of murder, it no longer looms large on the horizon: it is 'death as the operative negativity of the One' that has been (mortally?) wounded.²⁸

I want to conclude by returning to the three women, the physicists who are less interested in Grand Unifying Theories than they are in those remarkable black holes which are formed, or so I'm told, when a star collapses under its own weight and which are discernable only in and through their invisibility.

So, there we sat, the three of us, in bars, cafés, each other's lounge rooms, talking, laughing, brainstorming, arguing, touching and being touched. And what we knew in our hearts, our bones, our blood, our very flesh, but what we would sometimes forget being human, all too human, is that this "we" is not the adding together or juxtaposition of [unique and discrete] "I's",²⁹ a 'we' 'is the condition for the possibility of each "I";³⁰ and thus, as Nancy has noted, the 'with' of our being, our thinking, our writing, is better expressed in terms of identifications, than in terms of identities. Our being, thinking, writing 'with' is a gift that none of us has given, a gift we cannot afford to forget.

This story is not a myth, but a writing on the limit. You can always make a myth out of it again, but there's no doubt that it'll be interrupted.

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1. Alphonso Lingis, 'Cues, Watchwords, Passwords', in Michael Strydom (ed.), *The Politics of Community*, Davies Group, Colorado, 2001, p. 16.
2. Lingis, p. 16.
3. Lingis, p. 21.
4. See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, Harper, New York, 1962, pp. 211–14.
5. Jean-Luc Nancy, 'Of Being Singular Plural', in *Being Singular Plural*, trans. Robert Richardson and Anne O'Byrne, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2000, pp. 28–9.
6. Nancy, pp. 12, 28.
7. Luce Irigaray, 'When Our Lips Speak Together', in *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1985, p. 205.
8. Irigaray, p. 209.
9. Georges Van Den Abeele, 'Singular Remarks', *Paragraph*, vol. 16, no. 2, 1993, p. 181.
10. Lingis, p. 28.
11. Irigaray, p. 217.
12. Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague, Boston and London, 1978, pp. 114–15.
13. Irigaray, p. 216.
14. Jacques Derrida, 'Le Toucher', *Paragraph*, vol. 16, no. 2, 1993, p. 125.
15. Zsuzsa Baross, 'The (False) Gift of Writing', *New Literary History*, vol. 31, no. 3, 2000, p. 452.
16. Jean-Luc Nancy, 'Myth Interrupted', in *The Inoperative Community*, trans. Peter Connor, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis and London, 1991, p. 50.
17. Nancy, 'Being Singular Plural', p. 62.
18. Nancy, 'Myth Interrupted', p. 64.
19. Irigaray, p. 212.
20. For a more detailed discussion of Nancy's understanding of the political see Linnell Secomb, 'Fractured Community', *Hypatia*, vol. 15, no. 2, 2000, pp. 133–50.
21. Levinas, p. 117.
22. That is, you the reader, me the author, the three women of whom I have been speaking, and so on. But, in a sense, to even make such an explanatory statement is problematic because it necessarily involves defining 'us' in terms of separate and definable units (for example, you, me, the three women) whereas the aim of this paper is to undermine these distinctions.
23. Again this 'you' refers neither to an anonymous readership nor to a unique individual whom I can know.
24. Nancy, 'Myth Interrupted', p. 69.
25. Nancy, 'Being Singular Plural', p. 26.
26. Nancy, 'Being Singular Plural', p. 30.
27. Secomb, p. 141.
28. Nancy, 'Being Singular Plural', p. 92.
29. Nancy, 'Being Singular Plural', p. 65.
30. Nancy, 'Being Singular Plural', p. 65.