



## **‘I found what I had lost: myself’. Writing as a form of self-care in times of crisis**

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### **Abstract**

This essay is situated within the broad area of autoethnography, particularly referring to the idea of ‘writing about writing’, which is grounded in the reflection of the process of writing and the contexts in which that writing occur. The author employs a personal narrative to reflect on the situation that she had found herself in during the Covid-19 pandemic and which can best be defined by the concept of trajectory. It is a biographical situation marked with chaos and disintegration, evoking identity changes. As a result, the trajectory set new directions for the course of the biography. In the discussion on the schemes of dealing with the trajectory of suffering, author refers to Paul Ricoeur’s narrative concept, in particular the refiguration phase, as a stage of redefining one’s own life situation. Finally, author comes to the conclusion that the process of writing this essay can be viewed as a form of self-care, which Audre Lorde defined as self-preservation.

*Keywords:* experience, narrative, self-care, trajectory, writing

### **Streszczenie**

Ten esej umiejscowiony jest w szerokim obszarze autoetnografii, w szczególności odwołuje się do idei ‘pisania o pisaniu’, która opiera się na refleksji nad procesem pisania i kontekstami, w jakich to pisanie następuje. Autorka posługuje się osobistą narracją, aby zastanowić się nad sytuacją, w jakiej znalazła się podczas pandemii Covid-19, a którą najlepiej można zdefiniować za pomocą pojęcia trajektorii. Jest to

sytuacja biograficzna naznaczona chaosem i dezintegracją, wywołująca zmiany tożsamościowe. W rezultacie trajektoria wyznacza nowe kierunki przebiegu biografii. Autorka omawiając schematy radzenia sobie z trajektorią cierpienia, odwołuje się do koncepcji tożsamości narracyjnej Paula Ricoeura, w szczególności fazy refiguracji, jako etapu redefinicji własnej sytuacji życiowej. Wreszcie, autorka dochodzi do wniosku, że proces pisania tego eseju można postrzegać jako formę troski o siebie (self-care), którą Audre Lorde określiła jako samozachowawczość (self-preservation).

*Słowa kluczowe:* doświadczenie, dbanie o siebie, narracja, pisanie, trajektoria

## Introduction

This essay is written as situated writing, meaning a situated practice which 'takes place at a specific moment in time and history and at a specific place in society'. (Chapetin Castro, Chala 2013, 27) My original goal was to reflect on my life experiences in the context of the cumulative disorder of biographical trajectory (Riemann, Schütze 1991). I wanted to understand how particular experiences (the break-up of my long-term romantic relationship, and the Covid-19 pandemic) transform my life over the telling of the story. However in the course of writing this essay I discovered that the result and conclusion of the trajectory process I experienced is not (only) in coming to terms with the suffering, but being in the process of the hermeneutic circle of narrative and writing as a manifestation of self-care.

In terms of form, the essay is situated within the broad area of autoethnography (e.g. Bochner and Ellis 2016; Ellis 2009), particularly referring to the idea of writing about writing, which is grounded in the reflection of the process of writing and the contexts in which that writing occurs. As Laurel Richardson states, writing is not only a method of recording but a method of inquiry. It is simultaneously ontological and epistemological; we 'word the world' into being at the same time as we come to know the world (2000, 923):

Although we usually think about writing as a mode of 'telling' about the social world, writing is not just a mopping up activity at the end of a research project. Writing is also a way of 'knowing'—a method of discovery and analysis. By writing in different ways, we discover new aspects of our topic and our relationship to it. Form and content are inseparable (2000, 923).

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Many years ago the article 'Writing: A method of inquiry' (2000 [1994]) was a kind of epiphany for me. Richardson articulated my beliefs, intuition and even my longing for a vision of writing that would be a materialization of my voice. With her paper she changed the way I conducted myself as a researcher and as an author.

Following Richardson, I assume that my essay is not a presentation in the sense of a final step in a research process, but rather it is my endeavour to capture the moment of being in the process of writing. Therefore I employ a personal narrative approach to tell a story that recapitulates the experience of spring 2020, first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic. However there is no rigid division into the narrative part (my story) and the analysis part, a discussion based on academic literature (my story as the object of analysis). That division would be unnatural because of different simultaneously intertwined levels of thinking, identifying, remembering, and transforming thoughts into words during the process of writing.

With this essay, my personal experience has become the subject of my research and reflection for the first time. Although writing in the first person (as I) is my writing strategy, I hardly ever refer explicitly to my biographical experience per se. Now I employ autoethnography, and place writing in the central position in the research process. My aim is to reflect on (graphy) the process of constructing my narrative (auto) in order to understand the cultural experiences (ethno) involved in my writing (Adams, Ellis, Jones 2017). Thus, this essay is a kind of experiment in terms of both content and form.

The unexpected break-up of my long-term relationship and at the same time the sudden outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic had caused a state of disturbance, confusion and uncertainty. My professional activities were interrupted and all the plans already scheduled were cancelled. The situation that I found myself in seemed to be unrealistic and illusory. One day I was a scholar who had recently obtained a postdoctoral degree (habilitation) and had made ambitious plans for the future, and the next day everything became irrelevant – all the conferences, lectures and seminars were cancelled or postponed into an undefined future. The academic work that has been my life for the last 15 years, now turned out to be short-lived and unimportant in the face of the pandemic. Suddenly everything came to a stop. A certain kind of satisfaction resulting from the successful completion of ten years of work on my habilitation was taken from me. Not only has my vision of the future disappeared from the horizon, but the present has also become questionable. I was deprived of any sense of control over my career as well as life. There was a life I had thought was mine, but it disappeared suddenly. A few days before the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic my 10-year romantic relationship ended, leaving me in a

state of emotional loss. The worst part was that I always expected this breakup. We have been approaching this moment for a long time. Nothing spectacular, or dramatic happened. Just one of us decided that, 'it would be better this way'. Yet the pain of the breakup was unimaginable anyway. I was not prepared for this loss. I was filled with a spectrum of emotions: love, hate, anger, sadness, longing, disappointment etc.. I felt depressed, hurt and distressed. I felt as if my thoughts became a speeding wheel in one minute, and in another I was sinking into a state of no-thinking, stuck in an emotional numbness.

The situation of living in the pandemic seemed to be a metaphor of my personal emotional crisis. I was locked in my apartment with my thoughts, my powerlessness and the feeling of helplessness. Something that I took for granted was gone forever. On one hand, the social isolation (lockdown) intensified my loneliness and depression, while on the other, because of the lockdown I did not have to pretend any longer that everything was all right. I could stay home all day and be in mourning. Paradoxically, the whole world was grieving. Everyone had a reason to despair.

### Trajectory of Suffering

The situation I found myself in is best defined by the concept of trajectory. It is a process of change caused by a sudden chain of events impossible to control and avoid without a feeling of chaos, disintegration or anxiety (Riemann, Schütze 1991; Glaser, Strauss 1970). The concept of trajectory is linked to the process of suffering and as such it evokes long-term life consequences such as identity changes; eventually, it sets new directions for the course of the biography.

Anselm Strauss and Barney Glaser have used the concept of trajectory to analyse the course of chronic illnesses mainly in the context of status passage, e.g. from a sick person to a dying person (1968, 1970, 1971). Since the 1960s' the concept of trajectory has been applied to analyse different aspects and phases of social processes of disorder. Gerhard Riemann and Fritz Schütze suggested the generalized concept of trajectory as 'a central category representing processes of suffering and disorderly social processes'. (1991, 337 In their view, this concept makes it possible to identify, reconstruct and understand the phenomena, such as 'social processes structured by conditional chains of events that one cannot avoid without high cost, constant breaking expectations, and a growing and irritating sense of loss of control over one's life circumstances'. (1991, 337)

According to Riemann and Schütze, trajectory should be discussed in the biographical sense. Particularly, suffering is a biographical phenomenon par excellence because it 'changes the individual's relationship to her or his personal identity, social relationships, and social worlds'. (1991, 338) A person who is suffering, feels vulnerable and powerless against what is happening. It is like falling into a vortex of overwhelming pain or turmoil which is everything that can be seen at this moment. The life affected by the trajectory stops proceeding in a routine manner. Suddenly, what used to be everyday life ceases to be usual.

Suffering, as a process of trajectory, has its own sequential order determined in specific stages. Riemann and Schütze claim that it begins with the gradual accumulation of trajectory potential (a state of being overwhelmed by unexpected powerful events that cannot be controlled), then it leads through the stages of destabilization, separation and isolation, to the stage of rationalization and reconciliation with trajectory. At this last stage, 'the process of suffering gives the person the chance of a systematic reflection, of finding a deep relationship to her- or himself and to the world and to significant others, and of mobilizing biographical work and creativity'. (1991, 334) The passage through the various stages of trajectory is a process of confronting one's fear, self-alienation and a sense of lack of control over one's own life. By suffering, a person is forced to confront difficult experiences and reflect on them. Hence, the trajectory process of suffering leads to a reworking and reformulation, or learning to live with it. Eventually, it is all about interpreting the past in conjunction with the present and the anticipated future.

### **What About Writing?**

Writing has always been to me a field of creative exploration and the most natural and honest way of being myself, as well as materializing my presence. As a scholar I made writing my professional job. I define myself through writing. My research is built on the argument that writing is a part of the process of self-empowerment, especially for women. My postdoctoral book on bell hooks was inspired by the idea that autobiographical writing is a tool in the process of shaping women's subjectivity. However, during the pandemic, the problem was that writing proved to be most difficult and even painful. There was a deep self-doubt in myself, in my intellect, in my skills and also in language as my powerful tool, the most powerful communication tool. As if I suddenly forgot all the words and did not know how to use them. I felt awkward and uncomfortable with words so I did not even try to describe what was going on in my head. I separated myself both from words and the

world outside. I preferred not to speak, not to think. I was just looking out the window and watching as traffic slowed down and fewer people were moving until one day the streets were empty and there was silence. And as I saw a void, the blank space outside, I finally felt in sync with the world. The emptiness I had inside me, surrounded me. I calmed down. I understood I was alone, without my beloved and without words to tell my story.

Writing about pain felt like pain. It was even more painful because by writing every thought and every memory seemed to tear me apart. And I was already fragmented enough. Every part of me split apart and became separated. I did not want to put it back together. It was impossible for me to think about the recent events. At that time the imperative 'write!' kept calling in my head. It was a strong compelling feminist voice that I wanted to follow. However, Violette Leduc's response to de Beauvoir's view that writing is a way to survive and to break out of the misery of life, sounded to me more intriguing and tempting, 'To write is to change nothing', Leduc said (Zakaria 2016). After all, the unnamed does not exist.

The ensuing days and weeks during the lockdown did not bring any breakthrough – I still could not write. The crisis continued. I was dreaming that I would sit down and just describe what my life looked like during the pandemic, but that never happened. I longed to write differently than I had written so far, because after all, something had happened that changed everything. Something and everything, these two words, these empty bubbles, waited to be filled. 'No more hiding in yesterday, 'cause yesterday's gone', the lyrics of a pop song by Foreigner popped into my head unexpectedly. I knew I could have elaborated on these words in my own way. I wanted to tell my story. I wanted to embody what Hélène Cixous stated, 'Woman must put herself into the text-as into the world and into history-by her own movement.' (1976, 875) Theoretically, I had the perfect conditions to write, it was quiet and I was alone in my apartment. I could dedicate myself to writing entirely. I stayed at home all the day, worked remotely, nobody disturbed me. The conditions that would previously have been an ideal working milieu, now did not meet their purpose. There was a complete block to writing, and thus work. This blockade is gender-related. The concept of 'woman as the Other' (de Beauvoir 1957) reflects the state of being misunderstood. Woman (writer) in Western culture must fight for her self, the position of subject that is not a shadow of a male subject. For this purpose, I must define myself in language. But how to write in a language that is not mine? The pandemic and the preceding relationship break-up made language an distressing issue for me. The same old questions came back. I found myself in a situation of asking, 'How to define, how to describe what happened?' I did not know

the language to be adequate to express my pain and a feeling of confusion as I wanted to. Therefore this inability to speak was for me a failure in the context of my professional identity (me as a writer), however on a personal level it was related to a kind of rebellion to language that did not allow me to express what I feel, think, etc.

During the first month of the pandemic I could not work. At that time, I was unable to think or plan my next papers, lectures or projects. I had no dreams, no plans, no future. All I knew then was my despair following the break-up of the relationship. I felt extremely hurt by the man I had loved. That moment in my life would be described as the first sequence of 'the cumulative disorder of biographical trajectory'. Riemann and Schütze define it as 'building-up of trajectory potential'. (1991, 349)

The difficult experience that had initiated the first stage of the trajectory process was the break-up of the relationship. At the same time, the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and the immediate lockdown had stopped my professional career. Conducting my research on women's autobiographies has lost its *raison d'être* in the face of the pandemic. Thinking about academic career ceased to matter anymore, it just seemed unethical to me when fear of contamination and death was around.

These first weeks of the pandemic deepened my loneliness, isolation and the general disintegration of my life. The emotional loss and pain together with the lockdown made it impossible for me to live in the way I used to. Particularly, it was painful for me because in that difficult moment of my life I could not write. And writing has always been an integral part of my self. At that time, I could identify with Susan Sontag when she confessed, 'I feel guilty when I don't write, and that I don't write "enough."' (2012, 447)

The goal of each day then was to survive: get up early, brush my teeth, do online classes and respond to student emails, do elementary housework and eat something, call my parents and ask how they are doing without talking about myself, then try to do something other than just looking out of the window, maybe take a shower, sit on the yoga mat and try to meditate and then, again, try to sleep. Not only the last two activities were difficult for me. Everyday life became a challenge. That would become the next sequence in the process of trajectory – 'crossing the border from an intentional to a conditional state of mind'. As Riemann and Schütze explain, at this stage, 'A conditional state of mind in experiencing events and organizing personal activities becomes the dominant orientational principle for the person's life organization.' (1991, 349)

For two months of the lockdown I was in a state of constant trying: trying to pull myself together, trying not to cry, trying to work, trying to change my life, trying

this, trying that. The disintegration of my previous life was the cause of my everyday life difficulties. There was a withdrawal from my previous routine and the social world. Scheduled trips and meetings did not take place. All deadlines no longer applied. Suddenly, no one expected anything from me. I was completely free or just completely alone. The phone stopped ringing. I also gave up both communicating with others. I did not want to talk to people as much as I did not want to talk to myself. I did not want to get in touch with my emotions. My days were filled with crying over 'what I did wrong' and 'why he did not love me'. Everything around me reminded me of my lost love: the pictures of us on the walls, his guitar in the corner of the room, his favourite mug etc.. It was a despair caused by the experience of loss: I was left alone. My ex-partner did not call or write and I could not find the courage to speak to him. I was just waiting for something to change. I did not know what was happening to him during the pandemic and lockdown ('was he safe?') He punished me with his silence. The contact between us was completely broken. That moment of my life would be the trajectory sequence that Riemann and Schütze define as the 'breakdown of self-orientation'. (1991: 350) It is a time when 'the person experiences a total paralysis regarding the capacity for the coordination of complex social action'. (1991, 350)

During the last 10 years of my life I had shared all my ideas with my ex-partner. He was the first listener and reviewer of my papers. When we were not together, we wrote to each other emails and short messages via smartphones. We were involved in a continuous communication process. We commented on current events and shared with each other the observations of the social world, we discussed research topics and ideas, we argued about various possible interpretations of the social phenomena we observed. Now there was nothing but emptiness. I found myself in a stage that Riemann and Schütze define in the following way:

The total breakdown of self-orientation is an incisive shock experience. [...] Moreover, the person realizes that the usual biographical resources for managing one's life do not work anymore. There is need for a radically new definition of the life situation. (350-1)

This sequence of biographical trajectory is described as 'attempts of theoretically coming to terms with the trajectory'. In my case, the crisis situation stopped me from writing. The break-up made me unable to focus on work. I lost my interest in research. Staying at home only made me focus on myself and my suffering. At that time writing appeared to me as synonymous with communication with my ex-



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partner that had been interrupted ('What's the point in writing If I can't share it with him'). Therefore, writing has become the same as suffering, because it was like experiencing a loss, feeling abandoned and unloved again and again. So, it could not bring the consolation or relief that it used to before the break-up. The model of a crisis situation at that time could be presented as follows:

The break-up – avoiding thinking about what happened (emotional withdrawal) – refusal to reflect and inability to write. The conclusion: writing is painful.

At this stage of experiencing suffering, I started thinking about the purposes that writing had ever had in my life. Identifying writing only with communication with my ex-partner limited my perception of writing. I realized that writing was primary to the relationship with my ex-partner. As I articulated these thoughts, I found that as far as I could remember, writing was the way of being myself, and only then, it was a way of communication with my ex-partner. I was writing long before I met him. Writing did not come as a result of our relationship. I might say that writing was something that contributed to our being together. Writing was important to me and because of it, it became part of the relationship with my ex-partner.

This reflection was the starting point for focusing my mind on new areas: the issue of writing per se, its ontological and epistemological dimensions. I reached for articles by Laurel Richardson (2000, 2001) and re-read them. I began reading like crazy. Just as I did many years ago while working on my PhD project. I felt like a student again. The pandemic paradoxically helped me; staying at home with all those books around me, I could focus on studying. Day by day I became more and more absorbed in thoughts of writing. I registered for webinars and online group discussions with writing as the main topic. I listened carefully to what other people had to say about writing and I analysed their statements. Though I could not work the way I had worked before the pandemic, a new strategy to overcome difficulties with writing was emerging. I was taking notes, writing down some quotes and keywords. Finally I asked myself this question, What is writing for me? As an answer, I noted: 'Writing fills the blank pages inside and outside of me.' Though I did not actually answer my question, with this short sentence I started to write, without any order and plan. Writing was no longer impossible. I entered the research phase. This following sequence of the process of trajectory is defined as 'practical working upon or escaping from the trajectory'. (Riemann, Schütze 1991, 351) This stage is still (being) now while I am writing this essay. What was pre-

narrative (trajectory potential) is transformed now into a narrative that gives meaning to it.

### Three Scenarios

According to Riemann and Schütze, there are 'different basic sorts of action schemes for dealing with the trajectory potential': an escape from a difficult life situation (I), a systematic organization of the life situation to live with a trajectory (II), or 'a systematic work on eliminating the trajectory potential by a reorganization of the total life situation, such as a biographical work on one's own personal development' (III) [1991: 351]. Which of these action schemes does apply to my situation? It seems that I could consider each of them because all of them are probable and because it is possible to narrate each of them. Links or transitions between these schemes can be discussed by referring to the concept of narrative and its hermeneutic nature. Therefore I proposed to reflect on these action schemes by making references to narrative hermeneutics (see incl. Freeman 2015, Brockmeier, Meretoja 2014) and in particular Paul Ricoeur's phenomenological-hermeneutic concept of narrative as a discursive medium of coherence and identity (1984-1988).

For Ricoeur, narrative is the structure of experience through time. He refers to this process as a triple mimesis (imitative of action) which consists of three movements: prefiguration, configuration, and refiguration (or mimesis 1, mimesis 2 and mimesis 3) [1984, 1991]. He explains,

This narrative activity already has its own dialectic that makes it pass through the successive stages of mimesis, starting from the prefigurations inherent in the order of action, by way of the constitutive configurations of emplotment [...] to the refigurations that arise due to the collision of the world of the text with the life-world. (1984, 180)

The experience prefigures the narrative as a potential story which via the stage of constructing (the phase of emplotment) reveals this potential and is finally 'restored to the world of action' at the refiguration stage (Ricoeur, 1984, 70). The process of these three phases is spiral – its continuous motion reflects a never-ending spiral of increasing understanding. The process never ends.

Ricoeur argues that narrative helps individuals come to understand their actual and possible worlds as well as to understand themselves, who they are and who they can be. It is a space where identity work is performed. Since narrative involves

the telling and reading of a life-story, the past, present and future are experienced together in one moment. That is to say, personal identity could be viewed as a narrative identity – a construction of a sense of the self.

At the core of Ricoeur's concept of narrative identity is a distinction between *ipse* (the self) and *idem* (the same) identity (1992, 117-8). In the course of life the ways in which 'I' acts, perceives and interprets change, that is to say, who I am changes with time (*ipse* identity). However, simultaneously there is still a sense of sameness (*idem* identity), it is 'I' who remains the same throughout life and enables narration.

The concept of narrative identity allows us to understand how someone can remain the same person despite changes in the course of his life without our needing to have recourse to an underlying and unvarying substantial self. The unity is that of a narrative, told as an answer to the question of who you are. Here there is room for the ongoing dialectic between 'idem' and 'ipse', that is between 'identity as sameness' and 'identity as selfhood', for stability and change and for ethical engagement. (Verhesschen 2003, 454)

In this context, writing my essay can be viewed as a process of narrative activity where the *ipse* and *idem* identities overlap and my narrative identity is created, interpreted and reinterpreted. Since narrative identity is realized in a threefold hermeneutic process of mimesis (prefiguration, configuration and refiguration), it involves being in and drawing / describing the situation (prefiguration), constructing a story by employing the available narrative modes and schemes (configuration), and finally redefining one's own life situation (refiguration). I refer to this concept to view each of the biographical action schemes of dealing with trajectory potential.

Riemann and Schütze describe the first of the action schemes as an escape, 'A mere flight from the present life situation, which normally will not result in an escape from the trajectory dynamics because the person still clings to a trajectory-afflicted identity.' (1991, 351). In this scheme, the dynamics of the trajectory continues, only, the person experiencing it ignores its manifestations. By ignoring it, it is easier to deal with suffering. In my case the scheme of escape would be narrated as follows: I do not acknowledge what happened (the break-up of my relationship and the outbreak of the pandemic), so as a result, I could not understand my situation and the crisis – my inability to work and write. I do not accept the events which stopped me from living my life the way I used to. I am clinging to my pre-pandemic vision of life. I wish my life was like before the pandemic, regardless of

the fact that the current situation did not allow me to do so. Therefore, I desperately want to keep my everyday life as if March 2020 had not happened. I force myself to work and write. I am trying to keep my identity as a professor and a researcher, a successful woman, a person satisfied with her life, professionally and emotionally. I am convinced that I should work and write as if nothing had happened. Thus, considering the escape action scheme, writing this essay can be viewed as a my inner imperative. As a scholar I am striving to complete a research task. I want to be active as a researcher despite the pandemic and the break-up of my relationship. However, at this stage narration is not possible. The story is being lived but not told (cf. Mink 1978, 133). This is the prefiguration phase of the triple mimesis process – it shows how the narrative is rooted in life (Ricoeur 1991).

On the other hand, the second of the schemes (a work on living with the trajectory) is an attempt to come to terms with the life situation. The consequences of the trajectory cannot be eliminated, all that can be done is to let these difficult experiences be part of life. Regarding my situation, I would say that the events of spring 2020 caused a deep crisis in my life and it cannot be undone. Since I cannot change these difficult experiences, I have to learn to live with them. I can see my life has changed – it differs from my life before the pandemic. Now I am someone who is hurt, lonely and fearful for the future. I cannot work or live as before, it is impossible due to pandemic restrictions, among other things. My identity as an academic and researcher has been in a disintegration now. Also my emotional situation has changed – I am no longer in a romantic relationship. However, I do not define myself as a single person, but rather 'the woman destroyed', to paraphrase the title of the book by Simone de Beauvoir. I recognized myself and my emotions in Beauvoir's story about a middle-aged woman, Monique, who experienced betrayal by her husband after 20 years of marriage. The 'destruction' that happened to Monique is not different from mine, it is an experience of life schemes disintegration, particularly with regards to romantic relationships and beliefs that love is something permanent and can be taken for granted. The lesson is, that 'All women think they are different; they all think there are some things that will never happen to them; and they are all wrong.' (Beauvoir 1969, 136)

This reference to the book by de Beauvoir reveals what the configuration phase is about: experiences are selected and shaped within the plot of the narrative. We choose only particular experiences to tell the story, however another option is also possible: we tell different stories based on the same events. As Piet Verhesschen notices, there are 'several different stories that can be told and suit the same set of

events. There is not one story and there is no overarching plot, no superplot.' (2003, 453)

The reference to 'the woman destroyed' shows also the existing links between my narrative and the cultural texts. We narrate our stories employing other stories and available narratives. We use the tool kit with a stock of 'canonical life narratives' (Bruner 2004, 694), or 'webs of narrative cultural modes'. (Meretoja 2017, 52) Jens Brockmeier and Hanna Meretoja state that we are entangled in the cultural webs of narratives, 'dialogic webs of interlocution, reinterpreting our experiences in relation to cultural narratives'. (2014, 15) Although these webs of narratives 'define our capacity to tell the story in very different ways', (Benhabib 1999, 344) 'we are not the mere effects of cultural narrative webs'. (Meretoja 2017, 81). Meretoja explains that,

Narrative models of sense-making cannot determine how we use them to make sense of our experiences. Our relation to them is a possibility relationship, and there is always scope for alternative, creative reinterpretations. Because they only exist through interpretative practices, narrative models of sense-making can be questioned and changed, even if in practice this may be difficult, particularly in the case of naturalizing narratives that appear as inevitable, camouflaging themselves as a simple reflection of the order of things. (80)

Therefore, writing this essay can be viewed as a dialogue with cultural systems of meaning carried out in order to 'weave a unique "life story" within these webs'. (Benhabib 1999, 344). As Seyla Benhabib puts it, 'We always have options in telling a life story that makes sense to us.' (345) This issue is particularly evident in the third of the action schemes proposed by Riemann and Schütze, where a suffering person is involved in practical work upon the trajectory. It is a stage of redefining the life situation and one's identity.

The third of the biographical action schemes is work on the elimination of the trajectory potential. It requires a complete reorganization of the life situation. The focus is on biographical work that leads to life transformation. According to Riemann and Schütze, biographical work assumes alteration of the person's relationship to herself or himself. 'This is the work of recalling, rehearsing, interpreting and redefining, and this involves the communicative work of fellow interactants, especially significant others.' (1991, 339) Biographical work takes place during self-narrative, in the process of storytelling or writing about oneself (Strauss 1969). In this scheme, the key issue is change.

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Here is my short narrative, entitled 'I found what I had lost: myself', dated 13 May 2020, the only text I have written during the lockdown in spring 2020. It can be considered an expression of the practical work upon my trajectory,

It has been two months since I was locked down due to the pandemic. Slowly, I realise what had actually happened and what happened to me... 2020 was supposed to be my year! A year of challenges but mostly a year of my success! It was supposed to be my year! I put in so much effort, did so much work, sent many applications, so many applications... And what's now? Is it all in vain?

I've been living in a different world since 10 March 2020. The pandemic has pushed me out of my box. It was a box full of endless anxieties and expectations. 'I should do this, I should do that...'. Now I can see that I was not living my life as I wanted to.

All I know now is that I don't want to go back to what was before March 2020. I don't want my life to be as it was before the pandemic. It is not because I'm afraid I can manage it. I don't want to go back there, because what was then does not matter now; it has gone... I do not want that life! I don't want to live with deadlines. I don't want to chase something that can turn to dust in a moment... (pandemicarchive.com) (edited)

Reflecting on the recent events of my life, I wrote this short narrative. It was the story of a specific moment in time. It reveals the change which is manifested in writing this story. The pandemic appears in this story as a demarcation point separating the two realities of life: before and after March 2020. The whole life situation changed and I admitted it finally, two months after the events that initiated the trajectory process. What distinguishes this action scheme ('a systematic work on eliminating the trajectory potential') from the previous one ('live with the trajectory') is the perception of a change in life situation. The outbreak of the pandemic and the break-up of the relationship had brought some positives (the expression: 'what I found') – they made me realize what I do not want in my life. In this narrative, the trajectory of suffering does not mark my future nor the way of defining myself. Reflecting on suffering is not the same as suffering.

The change I am writing about in this short narrative concerns the interpretation of the past and my perception of myself. However, not just the past and the present appear and exist in this narrative, but the future as well (emphasised by repeating the phrase 'I don't want...'). While I am reading this narrative now, I understand it

as my need to reflect on myself in order to reorganize the life situation. It shows where I situate(d) myself: in the process of transformation.

In particular this action scheme of dealing with the trajectory represents the refiguration phase of narrative. It is a text fixation stage, where narration is possible (Ricoeur 1976, 1984). Now I can bring my experiences to both language and re-experience myself and my 'possible selves' (Markus & Nurius, 1986). As Verhesschen puts it, due to the refiguration, 'Our transformed actions and experiences will call for narration and this will lead to different narratives.' (2003, 455) Am I still the same although I change? That narrative gives space to ask the question. Here and now, the dialectic of identity between idem and ipse can be an issue to argue and deliberate.

This discussion of the action schemes proposed by Riemann and Schütze was an opportunity to view the concept of narration and narrative identity. I was interested in how these action schemes and the triple mimesis of Ricoeur's narrative concept overlap. In my opinion, the process of trajectory, and especially the action schemes of dealing with it, can be combined with the process of narrative. Working upon trajectory is not possible without redefining the life situation, and that involves a process of narrative. It provides a constant (re)writing and (re)reading of what was written, with continuous references to the past, the present and the future.

While writing these words, I realized that the hermeneutic circle that I just mentioned occurs at the same time not just at the level of the narrative itself, but also at the level of writing this narrative. Although the issue is to 'tell a story', this narrative is also about itself. This is because the spiralling effect of the mimesis process is manifested fully in the narrative. Considering this, it is possible to say that writing the essay involves a confrontation with linearity. The essay consists of particular parts and sequences. Although they were initiated, designed and arranged at a specific point in time, they are nevertheless constantly 'under construction', that is to say, being edited. Until its publication, this essay was *in statu nascendi*. Every time and each moment I read its particular parts, I am in the process of (re)writing it. It is because the structure of experience in time changes. As I am writing the essay, I am doing two things at the same time: writing particular parts and weighing the meaning of each part against the overall meaning of the essay, as this text unfolds. Therefore it is a process of continuously circulating along the hermeneutic circle, going back and forth to earlier parts, versions, interpretations, as well as revising my expectations to better understand the point I am in and to write further.

With all that having been discussed, writing this essay, both its problem (narrative as a way of dealing with the trajectory process) and its form (autoethnography) appear to me as a manifestation of self-concern, or to put it simply, a gesture of caring for myself. This concern implies creating a space to speak for myself and with my voice, which implies breaking the silence. Symbolically it means that by writing, I am striving to make my life (being) cared for.

### Writing as A Form of Self-Care

The term of self-care refers to the active process of recovering and improving one's state of balance, including mental health, by managing one's self-identity, emotions and relationships (Giddens 1991). However, self-care can be interpreted in a more radical way. As Audre Lorde states, 'Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.' (1988, 131) The emphasis here is on the word 'self-preservation'. Lorde wrote this sentence when she was diagnosed with liver cancer and struggled for the right to decide about her own body and cancer treatment. Therefore the word 'self-preservation' refers to the autonomy to govern and direct one's own life. In the context of this essay, self-preservation is about the narrative agency, which means to have options in telling a life story that makes sense to me. Writing appears for me as a practice of self-preservation, in the way that it is a space to locate and negotiate my personal narrative. It is about agency that is rather 'a mode of reflection, perhaps, a way of taking responsibility for one's location in the world, a location that is not only or fully knowable by the subject'. (Hemmings, Kabesh 2013, 42). With writing I empower my voice to be heard. It is a way of facing the silence, the one in the last months filled with suffering, loneliness, isolation etc., and also the silence I accumulated over the years.

Writing as a form of self-care is about transforming silence into language and action. As Lorde confesses, 'My silence had not protected me. Your silence will not protect you.' (1977, 41) Diagnosed with cancer (twice), she experienced a new life situation: terminal illness and a vision of death. At a conference in 1977, she began her speech with the words,

I have come to believe over and over again that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood. That the speaking profits me, beyond any other effect. (1977, 41)



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Lorde confessed that what she most regretted in her life were her silences. She asked a rhetorical question to her listeners, 'What are the words you do not yet have?' (1977, 41), already knowing the answer. There was fear behind the silence, '[...] fear of contempt, of censure, or some judgment, or recognition, of challenge, of annihilation. But most of all, I think, we fear the visibility without which we cannot truly live' (1977, 42). These words appeal to me because behind my silence is the fear of self-revelation and visibility. It was easy to declare myself a researcher of women's biographies and a feminist, because it did not involve revealing myself and what was behind the words I wrote about other women and their biographical experiences. Now with this personal narrative I have got to the point of self-determination. Lorde describes self-determination as, 'the decision to define ourselves, name ourselves, and speak for ourselves, instead of being defined and spoken for by others'. (1991, 43)

In the course of writing this essay I define myself as an author, narrator, the main character of my story and the first reader as well. I am the one who 'appears both as a reader and the writer of its own life'. (Ricoeur 1987, 246) In this process I employ different discourses and narrative modes, one represented by the narrative hermeneutics and Ricoeur in particular, and the other represented by Lorde and feminism in general. The concept of narrative activity and the threefold mimesis provide me with the analytical tools to discuss the biographical action schemes of dealing with trajectory. On the other hand, Lorde's view of self-care as self-preservation gives me the framework to generalize about my entire writing process and emphasize its empowering effect.

Knowing that, the issue now is to conclude this essay, but not the process I am in. Therefore I will refer to Richardson, since 'everything' (the idea of writing) has started from her. As she states, writing about our lives can suggest two things, 'first [it] directs us to understand ourselves reflexively as persons writing from particular positions at specific times; and second, it frees us from trying to write a single text in which everything is said at once to everyone, a text where the "complete" life is told'. (Richardson 2001, 36) Having said that, I can start thinking about writing again.

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