Autofiction as relational mediation: a ghost in the throat and to write as if already dead

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Autofiction as relational mediation: *A Ghost in the Throat and To Write as if Already Dead*

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Abstract

Because of its exploration of the self and the resemblance to online styles of publishing, autofiction has been accused by certain scholars of reflecting neoliberal tendencies. Hans Demeyer and Sven Vitse have developed a more nuanced view on the relation between autofiction and neoliberalism. Autofiction can be a place where authors try to negotiate the paradox of wanting to produce creative work in times when our cognitive and affective capacities are relentlessly commodified. In this article, two recent books, *A Ghost in the Throat* (2020) by Doireann Ní Ghríofa and *To Write as if Already Dead* (2021) by Kate Zambreno, will be discussed as strategies to cope with the pressure of living in a neoliberal context and to develop a more relational form of writing. In both works, the authors attempt to attune to the voices and lives of other writers: Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill, Hervé Guibert, and others. Exploring affinities between the lives of these writers and their own, both de-individualize their struggles and connect with a wider community of people who shared similar struggles. Furthermore, Zambreno explicitly problematizes the conventions of autofiction, as well as the compromises she is forced to make with the demands of publishers.

KEYWORDS
A Ghost in the Throat, autofiction, Doireann Ní Ghríofa, Kate Zambreno, neoliberalism, To Write as if Already Dead

1 | INTRODUCTION

The current academic debates about autofiction reflect the alternation between fascination and rejection that the genre has triggered since the term was popularized by Serge Doubrovsky in 1977.[1] The fact that autofiction has been associated with contradicting phenomena is telling. It has been favored by radical feminist and queer authors, documenting life outside of the norm, and dismissed as a popular, even commercial genre, cashing in on the marketability of the memoir. It has been associated with narcissism and navel-gazing, but also with questioning the common postures of the author (Cernat, 2022). Attempts to pin down the genre seem difficult and, more confusingly, some authors whose work is described as autofiction openly dismiss or question the term.[2]

Though many authors of autofiction challenge gender norms, commercial marketing trends and genre boundaries, autofiction has nonetheless been scrutinized for chiming with neoliberal tendencies: the marketing of the self, the focus on identity (including the challenging thereof), and the promotion of genres that suit online culture and the world of social media (De Boever, 2019; Farrant, 2022; Kornbluh, 2023). Arne De Boever regards autofiction as an example of the "neoliberal novel," a genre he attempts to describe with a lot of caution and uncertainty (De Boever, 2019). In his analysis of Ben Lerner's *10:04* (2015), however, he leaves open the possibility that Lerner manages to develop a strategy of resistance to neoliberalism, even though the novel is openly situated within a neoliberal context. Anna Kornbluh flat-out rejects the claim that autofiction can be regarded as a form of resistance against contemporary capitalism. On the contrary, in her view, autofiction exemplifies the need for "immediacy" that characterizes contemporary capitalism and aestheticizes its effects, "failing the bar of strategy" (Kornbluh, 2023, p. 17). Recently, Hans Demeyer and Sven Vitse have developed an approach that aims to move beyond the binary choice of resistance and complicity (Demeyer & Vitse, 2024). They argue that people and cultural forms are never completely and successfully integrated into capitalist demands, adopting the term "friction" from Anna Tsing. In their view, the contemporary novel in general is characterized by a search for developing attachments to the world, and autofiction in particular can be regarded as an attempt to find relationality in a neoliberal context in which any creative work is immediately co-opted as a form of commodified information.

After discussing these various positions on autofiction, I will look at two recent works, one which is promoted as autofiction and another which thematizes an ambivalent attitude toward the conventions of autofiction, as examples of attempts to develop forms of relationality in a neoliberal context and the dynamics described by Demeyer and Vitse. The two works I will discuss are *A Ghost in the Throat* (2020) by Doireann Ní Ghríofa and *To Write as if Already Dead* (2021) by Kate Zambreno. In both cases, the narrators and their lives closely resemble the authors' lives, though I am aware of the fact that in autofiction the fictionalized narrator may or may not coincide with the author, even when they have the same name. Both narrators suffer from the pressures of motherhood and the constant struggle to provide a living for themselves and their families. This struggle brings them to the point of great physical and mental exhaustion. Writing their books is overshadowed and burdened by their precarious living conditions, lacking the time and energy to focus on the task of writing and doing the research required for their projects. In *A Ghost in the Throat*, the narrator strongly identifies with Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill, the 18th-century author of a poem commonly discussed in Irish schools. By paying close attention to the language of Ní Chonaill, translating her work and visiting places where she has lived, Ní Ghríofa de-individualizes her own situation and situates herself with a wider history of female lives and voices. In doing so, she not only develops the specific form of her book but also attempts to undo the silencing of the life of Ní Chonaill in the scholarly literature about her life. In *To Write as if Already Dead*, Zambreno describes the failed attempt to write a book about Hervé Guibert, comparing her situation to the fact that Guibert wrote some of his work while dying of AIDS. A second theme in the book is the online correspondence with an unnamed author who prefers to publish her work anonymously or under various pseudonyms, finding a single author's name a constraint on her writing. These topics lead to critical reflections about authorship and autofiction as a genre, as well as the need for collaborative creative work.

In *A Ghost in the Throat* and *To Write as if Already Dead*, even though they are situated in vastly different contexts – rural Ireland and the intellectual and artistic circles of New York – both authors use their fiction to find a space to disconnect from the constant pressures on them and to attune to the language and lives of other writers. By paying close attention to the voices of others, the tone of a text or an atmosphere of place, they de-individualize their own situation and connect to the lives and sufferings of others. In doing so, they attempt to develop a form for their own creative work, in a context of precarious economic circumstances and commercial demands, while at the same time attempting to free the lives and work of others from the limitations of scholarly reception. Their works are experiments with finding a form that reinstates collectivity and solidarity against the individualizing and isolating effects of the commodification of all aspects of one's lives.

2 | AUTOFICTION UNDER SCRUTINY

In spite of its popularity, autofiction has received disapproval from the start (Masschelein, 2022). More recently, various authors have argued that autofiction can be regarded as a genre which resonates all too well with neoliberal times (De Boever, 2019; Farrant, 2022; Kornbluh, 2023). In his attempt to clarify what "the neoliberal novel" could be (placing "the" between quotation marks to indicate that the neoliberal novel cannot be so easily delimited), Arne De Boever focuses specifically on autofiction as "an instance of contemporary fiction in which the neoliberal force is strong" (De Boever, 2019, p. 166). It would be beyond the scope of this article to discuss the various ways in which neoliberalism has been theorized, but most scholars would agree that neoliberalism requires a change in subjectivity; the neoliberal subject needs to self-monitor in a spirit of self-marketization and competition. Aspects of oneself have to be isolated and ameliorated to be maximally commodified in a competitive market. In such a context, self-monitoring techniques, such as diaries, self-help narratives and lifestyle guides become key. In autofiction, the self of the author is scrutinized maximally and the attempts to market one's book are often described as part of the narrative. De Boever wonders which forms of resistance the novel is still able to offer against neoliberalism? (p. 160).

Though he acknowledges that one would have to look at each work of autofiction separately, De Boever focuses on Ben Lerner's *10:04* as one striking example. In *10:04*, the narrator, a fictionalized version of the author, claims that a speech by Roland Reagan made him into a poet. The fact that one of the main architects of neoliberalism gets the credit for inspiring the narrator to become a poet, however ludicrous this may sound, situates the novel directly within a context of neoliberalism and openly suggests that the poetics of the novel is related in one way or another to the discourse of one of neoliberalism's most outspoken advocates. The narrator of *10:04* became a poet after hearing Reagan's speech to the nation following the explosion of the Challenger space shuttle in 1986. With this speech, Reagan managed to gather the nation together in the wake of a disaster, which, according to the narrator, should be the vocation of poetry. Again, the fact that neoliberalism is associated precisely with eroding communal values and solidarity, reducing society to competitive and self-interested individuals, makes this statement sound provocative. Neoliberalism is further thematized in the novel when the narrator, after having published a short story called "The Golden Vanity" in *The New Yorker*, is told by his agent that he can get a large 6-figure advance for expanding the story into a novel. This makes the narrator quip that this virtual, not-yet-written novel is worth more than the actual one (Lerner, 2015, p. 155). This book deal embodies the key neoliberal principle of trying to capitalize on the future for profit in the present, something the narrator is well aware of: "I was crossing my art with money more explicitly than ever, trading on my future" (Lerner, 2015, pp. 157–158).

The relation to the future is a central topic in the novel (whose title is derived from the film *Back to the Future*). From the very start of the book, however, Lerner inserts a twist. The book opens with a few lines recounting the story, generally attributed to Walter Benjamin, that according to the Hassidim the future world will be exactly like the present one, just a little different. Salvation in this sense will not come about as a radical break, but in the form of a minimal difference. After his agent asked the narrator how he will expand the short story into a novel, the

narrator ponders that he should have said, "I'll project myself into several futures simultaneously" (Lerner, 2015, p. 4). This repetition-with-minimal difference allows for an element of freedom in a context where the future has already been banked on. In the novel, changes in circumstances, such as the pending arrival of a storm, bring on a change in the narrator's disposition toward the world, making him act slightly differently. De Boever concludes from this that Lerner refuses "to give up the future entirely to neoliberalism" (De Boever, 2019, p. 170). By "keeping open a minimal difference between what is and what might be," (De Boever, 2019, p. 171) Lerner attempts to reclaim a future from one that is already determined by neoliberalism. The narrator makes it clear that *10:04*, the novel one is reading, is not the novel he received the advance for; *10:04* was written "in its place, for you, to you" (Lerner, 2015, p. 237). If Lerner's novel explicitly thematizes neoliberalism as the context in which the novel is written, it also explicitly thematizes how a novel could avoid surrendering completely to a neoliberal context. De Boever's choice for *10:04*, however, leaves us with the question what we can derive from this case about autofiction in general. Is *10:04* a singular case in which Lerner ingenuously develops a unique poetics of resistance against neoliberalism, unlike other examples of autofiction?

In her recent *Immediacy or, The style of Too Late Capitalism*, Anna Kornbluh squarely denies autofiction and autotheory the possibility of developing a form of resistance. Written in a fierce, take-no-prisoners style, this book argues that in the current stage of capitalism forms of mediation, such as the capacity of the traditional novel to develop complex plots and structures, have been in decline and replaced with the need for an experience of immediacy. According to her, the popularity of autofiction and autotheory exemplifies this tendency. She shows graphs revealing the decline in the use of the third person in novels (Kornbluh, 2023, pp. 78–79) and quotes authors such as Karl Ove Knausgård, Sheila Heiti, and Rachel Cusk, who have declared being tired of coming up with fictitious characters (pp. 65–71).

Kornbluh defines "mediation" as "the active process of relating – making sense and making meaning by inlaying into a medium; making middles that merge extremes; making available in language and image and rhythm the supervalent abstractions otherwise unavailable to our sensuous perception" (p. 5). Though autofiction feels like an engagement with the problems of the times, Kornbluh does not find it enough: "Working through rather than working out would involve cognizing that it does not have to be this way" (p. 18). In her view, autofiction hollows out the potential of fiction to develop elaborate forms of mediation, aiming for "identity, instantaneity, it-ness" instead: "Fiction, narrative, impersonality, and collectivity withdraw; reality, voice, personality, and atomism ascend" (p. 68).

Kornbluh regards the contemporary success of autofiction as a commercial strategy in times when the book publishing industry and the publishing houses (including the university presses) have been in a crisis; autofiction mimics the possibilities for self-promotion and self-expression of online culture (Kornbluh, 2023, p. 90, 101).[3] She acknowledges that the struggles to get a book published are often included in autofiction novels, but in her view, this "fails the bar of strategy" (p. 17). The descriptions of the struggle to get one's book published feel, according to Kornbluh, more like "a reflex that is ultimately crisis-continuous" (p. 17). It is used to create an immediate intensity, similar to the often very raw physical descriptions in autofiction novels. Instead of being a form of resistance, Kornbluh argues that autofiction aestheticizes the conditions it claims to denounce, and in doing so, "shedding literature's potential to immanently criticize the known world" (p. 69). Kornbluh's argument is at times overly generalizing, not taking into account the different aims, stylistic choices, and explicit theoretical reflections of the authors she discusses, nor how they each relate to the term "autofiction." Fictionalized statements by Knausgård are not representative of other authors mentioned.[4] At times, her attempts to denounce autofiction are so reductive, citing Dan Synikin's claim that autofiction is "the prestige version of reality TV" (Kornbluh, 2023, p. 76) and stating that it is "the equivalent of the permanent status update" (p. 108), that they seem to exemplify the immediacy she wants to expose: blunt tweets instead of elaborate theorizing and scholarship thoroughly engaging with its subject matter. Nonetheless, the claim that autofiction might end up aestheticizing the conditions of contemporary capitalism should be taken into account.

Hans Demeyer and Sven Vitse have developed a way of looking at autofiction that aims to move beyond "the models of resistance and complicity" (Demeyer & Vitse, 2024, p. 1). They adopt the notion of "friction" from Anna

Tsing to describe the way neoliberalism is disseminated through social and cultural life. Tsing describes "friction" as "the awkward, unequal, unstable, and creative qualities of interconnection across difference" (in Demeyer & Vitse, 2024, p. 3). Friction implies that we are never completely adapted to, nor successfully integrated within neoliberal models. Instead, it pays attention to elements of the uncertain and unstable. This, however, does not automatically make friction into a form of resistance. As Tsing writes, "Hegemony is made as well as unmade with friction" (in Demeyer and Vitse, p. 3). Demeyer and Vitse follow McKenzie Wark, who argued for replacing the neoliberal subject with the figure of the gamer who navigates uncertain terrain (Demeyer & Vitse, 2024, p. 4). Wark also offers them an updated theory of reification. Whereas Georg Lukács argued that capitalism produces the reification of the social and creative capacities of the people, Wark adds that in the present, reification is the result of neoliberalism's tendency to turn everything into marketable information, making "all human activity interchangeable and replaceable" (in Demeyer & Vitse, 2024, p. 5). Tsing clarifies that reification requires the disentanglement of one's affective capacities from their life-worlds by turning them into a "stand-alone asset" (in Demeyer and Vitse, pp. 5–6). Instead of being part of a more meaningful whole, our affective capacities, including the capacity to produce artistic work, become atomized.

Where does this leave autofiction? Demeyer and Vitse argue that contemporary fiction in general is characterized by "an interest in attachment, desire, experience, presence and identification." (Demeyer & Vitse, 2024, p. 6) It is "governed by affective questions: 'how to feel and experience reality?'" (p. 6). Whereas others see the focus on the self of autofiction as resonant with neoliberalism's tendency to commodify human capacities, Demeyer and Vitse want to emphasize that autofiction also reveals the "violence and alienation" the expropriation of these capacities causes (p. 6). In a neoliberal society producing commodified information, creative and affective skills are given a central place while paradoxically dispossessing people of these skills. Autofiction can be regarded as a way of facing this paradox: "Autofiction might also be a way of regaining a degree of autonomy in a context that deprives the subject of the possibilities of freedom and emancipation" (pp. 6–7). Autonomy should be heard here not as individual autonomy but as "the nurturing of affective attachments" (p. 7). Autofiction creates "a fold in the everyday grinding of affective and cognitive skills" and can offer a "reflection on the contradictions of both creating and dispossessing one's life in writing" (p. 7).

I believe Demeyer and Vitse's approach provides an astute picture of what happens in the two works that will be discussed in this article. In *A Ghost in the Throat* and *To Write as if Already Dead*, we can see that both authors describe the struggle to make a living, raise children, and produce creative work in a context which seems to make that impossible. Their works are the product of attempting to build meaningful affective attachments to other authors in a context which strongly isolates and debilitates them. In the case of Ní Ghríofa, this attachment involves inscribing her own situation within a wider tradition of female voices and actively trying to undo the silencing of Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill. Zambreno describes the stifling demands of individual authorship and the demands of the publishing world, explicitly questioning the label "autofiction," while turning toward the voices of Hervé Guibert and her online correspondent to find a more collaborative, communal form of writing.

3 | *A GHOST IN THE THROAT*: ATTUNING TO AN ABSENT LIFE

A Ghost in the Throat is a book that defies categorization. In the book, Doireann Ní Ghríofa weaves together aspects from her own life with a near-obsessive attempt to uncover the life of Irish poet Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill, ending with the author's new translation of Ní Chonaill's classic *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire*. The blurbs on the back and inside of the book describe the book as a "hybrid of essay, biography, autofiction, scholarship" (Parul Seghal of *The New York Times*), an "essay/auto-fiction and translation" (Caoillinn Hughes) and an "original hybrid of essay and auto-fiction" (David Nichols). The book does not fit within any standard genre categories and the expectations that come with them. The author is most commonly referred to as a poet, also in the context of doing the promotion for this book (Hayden, 2020).

Ní Ghríofa says that she wrote this book mostly in a car park after dropping off her child in a day care facility (Hayden, 2020). In the book, she describes how the daily chores of raising four small children take up most of her time to the point of complete exhaustion. Her to-do list of daily tasks is her "map" and "compass" and crossing out items on the list gives her a sense of achievement (Ní Ghríofa, 2020, p. 8). Still, in spite of claiming to obtain satisfaction from completing her workload of tasks, these passages have an overwhelming tone of desperation. There is a constant fear that her domestic world, which she always just barely manages to keep on track, might spiral out of control or that she will succumb to exhaustion and illness. The descriptions of the physical demands on her body sound clinical and draining. Mentally, motherhood seems to obliterate her, her personality erased just like the items on her to-do list. One of the rare moments during which she feels a bit of rest is when she sits down to use her breastmilk pump. In those rare moments that she can extract from her chores, she finds relief in reading a few lines from the *Caoineadh*.

The *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire* is one of the most important Irish poems from the eighteenth century. It is a dirge or a keen, composed by Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill for her murdered husband Art Ó Laoghaire. The poem was first transmitted orally before it was written down by Norrie Singleton. In the most famous passage of the poem, Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill rushes with her horse to the scene where her husband was murdered and in an act of despair drinks his blood. It is commonly taught in Irish schools and Ní Ghríofa recounts how her reaction to the poem changed throughout her life (Ní Ghríofa, 2020, pp. 10–12).

At various moments in the book, Ní Ghríofa indicates the precarious nature of her domestic life. Raising four children on a single income is only possible for her by teaching herself "to live by the rules of frugality" (Ní Ghríofa, 2020, p. 13). She examines ads and supermarket deals, roams private sales and thrifts for used goods. She lives in "various rented rooms" where the "taps always dripped" and with rats in the yards (p. 13). Every time the landlords raise the rent, she and her family are forced to find a more affordable place in another town with lower rents: "We had already moved house twice in three years, and still the headlines reported that rents were increasing" (p. 14). When she does find a new place that she can afford, the rooms are often in a decrepit state. On the first page, she writes that "the walls of our rented bedroom are decorated not with pastel murals, but with a constellation of black mould" (p. 5). As a student attempting to study dentistry, she also felt deeply out of place, which sent her on a downward spiral of alcohol, questionable boyfriends and mental exhaustion. Her most recent move, however, brings her closer to Kilcrea, the place where the murdered husband of Eibhlín Dubh (as Ní Ghríofa affectionately calls her, by her first name) was buried. The turn toward Eibhlín Dubh and the *Caoineadh* is born out of the struggle to cope with precarity, deep physical and mental exhaustion, medical complications surrounding pregnancy and the general feeling of despair to keep herself and her domestic life on the rails.

Throughout the book, Ní Ghríofa establishes the connection with Eibhlín Dubh by exploring the shared physical struggles and hardships of being a woman and a mother. The first words of the book read "this is a female text," which is repeated throughout the book (Carless-Frost, 2024; Ní Ghríofa, 2020, p. 3). She emphasizes that the *Caoineadh* is a female work, expressing female suffering and transmitted orally by women. At that time, poems were commissioned by men to male bards and copied into handwritten anthologies along with sacred texts. Poetry written by women was transmitted differently: "By contrast, literature composed by women was stored not in books but in female bodies, living repositories of poetry and song" (Ní Ghríofa, 2020, p. 74). The fact that the *Caoineadh* has been passed on orally and by memory has caused some scholars to question the single authorship of the poem, which Ní Ghríofa dismisses as a "male assertion pressed upon a female text" (p. 74). Instead, she praises the fact the text is the result of "entwining strands of female voices that were carried in female bodies," chiming with the etymology of the word "text" from the Latin *texere*, to weave (p. 74).

In the male-dominated academic reception of the work, however, much of the life of Eibhlín Dubh is erased. When reading introductions to the various translations of the *Caoineadh*, Ní Ghríofa notices how easily Eibhlín Dubh is characterized in terms of the men around her, as the "wife of" or "aunt of" a specific man, "as though she could only be of interest as a satellite to male lives" (p. 70). When reading the letters of the brothers of Eibhlín

Dubh, her name is mostly strikingly absent. This urges Ní Ghríofa to set out on a project to search for any material she can find about Eibhlín Dubh but to read it against the grain, or "oblique reading" as she calls it, and to find traces of her in the blanks between the sentences (Carless-Frost, 2024; Cosner, 2023; Ní Ghríofa, 2020, p. 76). In her words: "I decide that I will return to these texts and commit an act of willful erasure, whittling each document until only the lives of women remain" (p. 76). She knows the lives of women are there, even if "coded in invisible ink" (p. 76). It is no coincidence that when Ní Ghríofa gets a line from the *Caoineadh* tattooed on her body, she chooses white, transparent ink. She wants to find a truer picture of Eibhlín Dubh's life and wonders how she might appear "if drawn in the light of the women she knew instead" (p. 75). Throughout the book, she attempts to find traces of Eibhlín Dubh by being attentive to the tone and timbre of her writings, by visiting places where she lived, almost literally trying to walk in her footsteps, and by being attentive to the omissions in the writings by others about her work. In doing so, she looks for echoes of Eibhlín Dubh's life. This project is presented explicitly as an "unscientific mishmash of daydream and fact" (p. 71).

In her quest to retrace the life of Eibhlín Dubh, Ní Ghríofa visits locations that played an important role in her life and, by walking on the paths where she walked and seeing what she could have seen, tries to come as near as possible to her in an almost physical manner. At Kilcrea abbey, she imagines how it must have looked at the time of Eibhlín Dubh, with skulls by the sides of the road, and tries to embody the gait of the women in whose footsteps she treads: "I arrange my body as I imagine others held theirs" (p. 73). At the beach of Derrynane, she picks up a blue-green rock, split by three lines of quartz, which she regards as a "metaphor for intersecting existences" (p. 85). In Gearagh, she imagines the labor of the women there in the past (p. 194). In Derryane, she notices shards of a broken bowl or cup on the ground and takes them along like a relic, an "artefact symbolic of the female lives and thought and labor that belonged to this place" (p. 206). She is unable to find information about the death or the grave of Eibhlín Dubh, but, when reading the letters between her brothers, in which their sister is only rarely and indirectly mentioned, she grieves "the point at which her name disappears" (p. 182). When she reads the family history written by Eibhlín Dubh's son in a Bible, there is no mention of her name. At the sight of this erasure, Ní Ghríofa cries in front of the two librarians who have to observe the visitors reading old valuable works (p. 260–262).

Ní Ghríofa explicitly states her awareness of the large differences between her life and that of Eibhlín Dubh, but she nonetheless draws many connections (92). The main connection is the experience of trying to write while doing all the daily work required to raise young children, which is taken for granted to such a degree that is mostly goes unmentioned. Ní Ghríofa imagines Eibhlín Dubh as a mother, surrounded by her children, experiencing the anxiety over their health, the exhaustion of a mother, the pain of losing loved ones. She also connects the fact that Eibhlín Dubh was exposed to the dead body of her husband with the time when she felt miserable as a student, faced with a corpse during the anatomy classes (92). When Ni Ghríofa is in situations of despair, exhausted, incapable of sleep or in the hospital with a prematurely born baby, surrounded by equally despairing young mothers, she turns to the *Caoineadh* for support (55).

How should one describe the connection Ní Ghríofa wants to establish with Eibhlín Dubh? Identification does not seem strong enough for her longing, keening and even mourning for Eibhlín Dubh. Calling this process a mere projection or transference would amount to taking her genuine desire to do justice to the life of Eibhlín Dubh not seriously enough. The caring attention for the words of Eibhlín Dubh is an attempt to listen closely to the voice of the poet and her struggles. Ní Ghríofa's search for Eibhlín Dubh is almost a hope to physically embody her; she lets Eibhlín Dubh's voice "haunt her throat" (p. 10), she regards her words as sipping "dark sustenance from ink" (p. 25), and compares a scar on her fingertip with the blanks between the sentences of the texts in which she hopes to retrace the existence of Eibhlín Dubh (p. 115). When Ní Ghríofa manages to get a literary award which she can use as a down payment for a house of her own, she feels that Eibhlín Dubh had a hand in this stroke of fortune (p. 203).

Rita Felski prefers the term "attunement" for the strong bond between persons and artworks. "Attunement" better describes the active process of "resonation or aligning" with a work (Felski, 2020, p. 76). Ní Ghríofa

de-individualizes her own struggles to raise a family on a modest income and inscribes them within a longer tradition of women dealing with uncredited work, oppressive living conditions and engaging in artistic work. She has been living in a context which grinds her down and to an extent deprives her of her creative abilities. By attuning to the voice of Eibhlín Dubh, she is seeking to situate herself within a wider community of creative women, struggling against the dispossession of their talents. In doing so, she not only develops the specific format for her own creative work but also attempts to liberate the *Caoineadh* from the constraints of (male) academic reception, stifling the lives of Eibhlín Dubh and the women that transmitted the text orally. *A Ghost in the Throat* becomes a part of the tapestry of interwoven voices, consisting of the creation and transmission of works that give voice to the singular struggles of one person while also connecting to a collective body of work in which suffering is shared.

4 | *TO WRITE AS IF ALREADY DEAD*: TONE AS A FORM OF MUTUAL SENSITIVITY

Kate Zambreno is an American writer and critic who has been building an oeuvre of experimental, genre-defying works. In the blurbs and reviews of her work, the unclassifiable nature of her style is often emphasized, blending personal experience with theoretical reflections on authors and artists such as Kathy Acker, W.G. Sebald, David Wojnarovicz, and Chantal Akerman (Cooke, 2020; Mitchell, 2020). While the combination of personal memoir-like writing with essayistic reflection recalls the conventional picture of autofiction, Zambreno openly expresses resistance to that label, a resistance she shares with some of the authors she is influenced by. Zambreno writes in a tradition of authors whose experimental style was an affirmation of their anti-establishment views and their opposition to the social norms. The label "autofiction" is in this tradition too reminiscent of a recognizable conventional style which can be pigeonholed in marketable categories (Masschelein, 2022).

To Write as if Already Dead is the result of a request by a publishing company to write a book about Hervé Guibert. Guibert was a French author who described in *To the Friend Who Did Not Save My Life* (2021) the death of Guibert's friend Michel Foucault of AIDS, a disease Guibert himself would also succumb to. Zambreno's book, *To Write as if Already Dead*, however, turned out to be a book about the failure to write the requested book about Guibert. Instead, Zambreno describes that she is too exhausted from raising young children, coping with debilitating bodily ailments, and struggling to secure academic teaching gigs on which her inadequate health insurance coverage depends.

To Write as if Already Dead consists of two parts. In the first part, she describes the online correspondence with an author who chooses to remain anonymous and only publishes her work under various pseudonyms. This author, who is referred to as Alex Suzuki (one of her pseudonyms), one day suddenly deletes her blogs, ends all communication and disappears from Zambreno's life. In the second part, Zambreno draws parallels between her own attempts to write a book while feeling ill and Guibert's writings while suffering from AIDS (Chihaya, 2022). The thematic connection between the two seemingly very different parts is a reflection on writing and authorship, with Roland Barthes' and Michel Foucault's famous critiques of the author-function as a guiding thread (Barthes, 1977; Foucault, 2003). Zambreno is fascinated by Foucault's obsession with anonymity, which contrasts strongly with the fact that Foucault was also a famous public figure. Foucault destroyed his unfinished manuscript about Manet and requested that all his unfinished writings had to be destroyed after his death. Guibert observed that Foucault almost wanted to obliterate his name (in Zambreno, 2021, p. 80).[5] Foucault also suggested that all authors should publish their works anonymously for a full year (in Zambreno, 2021, p. 24). In "What is an Author?," he argued that writing should be the creation of a "space into which the writing subject constantly disappears" (Foucault, 2003, p. 378). Foucault seemed to long for a space offered by writing or another art form in which the subject can disappear from the exigencies of public life.

Zambreno encountered Suzuki on a literary blog and started an online conversation on the topic of Pessoa's notion of "heteronyms" (Zambreno, 2021, p. 24). Like Pessoa, Suzuki is keen on adopting various fictional personas.

Aspiring to be a writer, it would be better marketing to do all her writing under one and the same name, but she feels unable to convert all her various personas into one author. Furthermore, for Suzuki, blogging is like being a writer and reader at the same time (Zambreno, 2021, p. 25). Her first novel was written from the point of view of a "we" instead of an "I"-subject, aiming for a more communal and less individual literary approach. Suzuki compares her tentative online writings to what Foucault called *hypomnemata* and the daily practice of writing a notebook about working on oneself. This tentative practice is contrasted with the commodification of texts (Zambreno, 2021, p. 33).[6] Zambreno and Suzuki experience the literary world as a competitive arena ruled by ego, and they find that the anonymous world of online writing frees them from entering the literary marketplace (Zambreno, 2021, p. 41).

Like Ní Ghríofa, Zambreno would like to visit places that were important to Guibert, such as the island Elba, to gather insights for writing her book. Being dependent on temporary teaching gigs to make a living and not having the financial means to take weeks off, she feels, however, unable to undertake such trips while taking care of a young child. Zambreno is keenly aware of other people being in a financially better position than her. She has the impression that the doctors she visits play up their more comfortable financial situation and talk to her in a condescending manner (Zambreno, 2021, p. 107). She is also aware of the fact that Suzuki never had to deal with financial pressures; Suzuki owns a house in the Bay Area and has a fixed salary, which makes Zambreno wonder whether having stable financial conditions, or even being independently wealthy, is not a prerequisite to have the luxury to write anonymously and take a long time to write a novel (Zambreno, 2021, pp. 36–37). Zambreno feels the constant pressure to write and finalize a book project in order to secure the basic means to live in New York, raising young children and to pay for medical care. She writes:

> In this current environment of precarity, this so-called gig economy, it is difficult not to romanticize a job that ends, just like many romanticize being a writer so as to not have a job, to have one's hours to oneself after a certain time, to have weekends, to not have capitalism suck up all available energy and possible time, not having to work constantly, including often for free, in this nebulous and borderless realm of publicizing one's self and one's work, in order to continue, not even to succeed, but just to continue.
>
> (pp. 36–37)

Zambreno wants to produce creative work and to explore the form that suits her, but writing is also one of her means of income, forcing her to negotiate a middle ground between the writing style she finds suitable and the stylistic demands of the publishers. Acquiring money via her writing is also a way to pay for her medical bills. Throughout *To Write as if Already Dead*, Zambreno describes her efforts to find medical support she can afford, with her inadequate health insurances depending on the uncertain teaching gigs she does at various academic institutions and her writing contracts. Even though they provide only the most minimal of the much-needed medical aid, this puts enormous pressure on always securing a new teaching contract or to acquire a book deal with a publisher. At some point her partner considers going back to having a job in a library because it could provide a more stable income, but this would reduce Zambreno to what she calls "mommy jail" (p. 79); effacing herself for one's children, what Ní Ghríofa gladly surrenders herself to, is for Zambreno the death of her creative and intellectual abilities. When she meets the editor of her new publishing company while suffering from shingles, she hides her deep discomfort and tries to make a good impression to have her book accepted, needing the contract desperately to cover for the summer period when she has no teaching job. Her pitch is that alienation from being an adjunct and the exhaustion from motherhood stimulates her to write (Zambreno, 2021, p. 73). Zambreno hides how debilitating her precarity, exhaustion and physical ailments are and cynically adopts the pitch which is so commonly used by publishers to sell narratives of alienation to the public.[7]

Being sick is one of the few moments in which she can push all her obligations away and have the solitude required to write. She writes: "I cannot really be alone. Except when I am sick. Except here. In this book" (p. 76). She

gets shingles after being exhausted from finishing a book project in one month "in order to finally satisfy my contract to my previous publisher and make enough money to pay health insurance and cover rent for the summer" (p. 65). This state of despair over her income and health connects her with Guibert, who had to write while being fatally ill with AIDS, and authors such as Susan Sontag and Kathy Acker, who did not have any health insurance when they were diagnosed with breast cancer (Zambreno, 2021, p. 67).[8] Zambreno wonders whether Guibert wrote his last books out of financial anxiety as well, even though his editor told him that a big novel, which can be summarized easily by reviewers would be commercially better (p. 77). If she does find the time to write, it helps her to hold on: "The only way I can exist within this borderless state of worry, the velocity of my panic, is by writing in my notebook" (p. 69). On New Year's Day, she finds fifteen minutes to write a short passage, adding, "This passage will not be great literature. It will announce, perhaps – I existed today. I survived" (p. 87).

When an editor rejects her book proposal, she cuts her hair short as a way of grieving (p. 79). This rejection comes at the time when Brett Kavanaugh, who was accused of sexual misconduct, was nominated for the US supreme court. She is losing faith in all the institutions and gatekeepers, mostly male and white, whom she has to appease and that keep rejecting her. She writes: "I thought that publishing, that these institutions, would support me somehow, love me, as opposed to what they always do, which was fatigue and sicken me" (Zambreno, 2021, p. 79). The editor rejects her book by saying that he found the complaining narrator irritating and that he is "tired of the conventions of autofiction," which causes Zambreno to reflect explicitly on the topic of "autofiction." She is intrigued by the extreme confidence of successful authors of autofiction, such as Karl Ove Knausgård, Édouard Louis and Annie Ernaux, wondering whether there are cultural reasons behind this (Zambreno, 2021, p. 77). When a PhD student tells her shortly after the rejection that he wants to work on a male author of autofiction published by that same editor, it pains her (p. 85). Zambreno is equally irritated by the conventions of autofiction, just like Guibert was when autofiction was in vogue in the late 1970s, and now, as Zambreno writes, "dubiously back in fashion" (p. 84). Though rejecting the conventions, she does not reject the term as such. "What is the space of literature for," she writes, "if not a scratching pad for our irritants?" (p. 84). She finds that critics fail to understand what is at stake in autofiction. For her, the term "suggests slipperiness, an estrangement of the I-narrator, who may or may not have the same name as the author, so that the space of the work can become a space of freedom" (p. 84). Autofiction is valuable if it is "slippery," creating a partial non-identity between the author and narrator, sufficiently "irritating," not in the sense of persistently complaining, but scratching away conventions and demands of the literary market to create a space of freedom for the author. In the terms of Demeyer and Vitse, Zambreno is seeking a way to wrest away her writing practice from the reified demands of the market to find a more relational and communal form of writing in which she seeks affective connections to other voices.[9]

For this affective connecting, tone is important. Zambreno finds Suzuki's first novel a meditation on tone, a topic she herself is greatly interested in. She regards the tone of the work, which she also describes as a "feeling or frequency," as something one can inhabit or dwell in: "I've been trying to think of tone in writing as spatial – the idea that language as we encounter it on the page can take up space within us like a room" (Zambreno, 2021, p. 31). The difficulty of describing "tone" is of such importance for Zambreno that she embarked on a writing project with Sofia Samatar on the topic, calling themselves the Committee to Investigate Atmosphere. This project, described by Zambreno as a form of "care" and a "gift to herself" (Samatar & Zambreno, 2023, p. 12), is published as the book *Tone* (2023). The collaboration is presented once again as an "irritation," borrowing this time an expression from Fred Moten and Stefano Harney (Samatar & Zambreno, 2023, pp. 9–10). A study of tone is something that could not be undertaken alone, they claim (10). By discussing the works of authors such as W.G. Sebald and Nella Larsen, they try to grasp the slippery phenomenon of tone or atmosphere. Once more, the tone of Larsen's *Quicksand* is described as "pervasive irritation" (Samatar & Zambreno, 2023, p. 15). Here as well, a spatial image is used. Zambreno and Samatar wonder whether "tone is perhaps a room that we inhabit and are inhabited by" (p. 14). One can dwell in a tone, or "take residence" within it (p. 14). Ní Ghríofa too compared the process of translating the *Caoineadh* as "homemaking" for Eibhlín Dubh, recalling that the word *stanza* is Italian for "room" (Ní Ghríofa, 2020, p. 38). She writes: "If I am to conjure her presence, I must first construct a suitable home for her, building and

furnishing room after careful room, in which each mirror will catch her reflection" (p. 39). When she stops translating to resume her other tasks, she is "saddened to leave Eibhlín's rooms behind" (p. 41).

Samater and Zambreno take inspiration from the writings of Sianne Ngai on tone in *Ugly Feelings* (2007). While scholars such as A.I. Richards regarded tone as a form of relation, Ngai wants to go further. Paraphrasing Ngai, Samatar and Zambreno write that tone could be regarded as an "affective stance toward the world" (Samatar & Zambreno, 2023, p. 20). They add that tone could be something like a "collective mood" (p. 20), and elsewhere in the book they adopt the expression "mutual sensitivity" (p. 9). Tone is something shared, something social. At the end of the book, Samatar and Zambreno call tone an "ecology," a way of "making space for relation" (p. 98). In *To Write as if Already Dead*, Zambreno noted the fact that various authors, such as Maurice Blanchot and Georges Bataille, describe their writing as a way to transcend one's individuality. Guibert claimed that he begins a new book to have a companion (in Zambreno, 2021, p. 60). Even though writing requires a space of quietude and solitude – something Zambreno woefully lacks and longs for – writing is also a means to gain access to a form of community, a form of sharing with others, in which tone plays a key role.

Writing is for Zambreno in part a space of freedom, a literary "room of one's own" where she can temporarily be free from the constant pressures of motherhood and securing the means to live. It is for her indeed, to use the words of Demeyer and Vitse, "a fold in the everyday grinding of affective and cognitive skills" (Demeyer & Vitse, 2024, p. 7), a practice for which she has to find the time from her domestic and teaching work. Writing is for her also a way of connecting with others, a communal and shared practice of dwelling in a certain tone, or, as Demeyer and Vitse would say, a space for "the nurturing of affective attachments" (p. 7). This is why she feels attracted to the world of blogging, anonymous online communities and writing as a collective. For Zambreno, however, writing is also a means to desperately secure an income, which requires that she has to make compromises with the literary world in order to convince publishing companies to release her books and to secure an advance on the publication. One of these compromises is to publish under her own name, even though this is at odds with the writing practices she values. Her books are the product of the tension between the more communal writing she values and the rules of the commercial literary market, including the conventions and expectations surrounding autofiction (Crosthwaite, 2022). Writing provides her with a certain degree of autonomy, which comes in the form of finding a more communal writing practice. *To Write as if Already Dead* documents the struggle to develop meaningful attachments via writing in a context in which, paradoxically, writing is expropriated as a necessary means of income in a very precarious situation. To find meaningful, affective and relational forms of creating in a context in which one's creative skills are commodified, is what determines the form and content of Zambreno's book.[10]

5 | CONCLUSION

As opposed to the scholars who argue that autofiction merely entails the promotion and glorification of the self, *A Ghost in the Throat* and *To Write as if Already Dead* reveal the need to develop affective attunements to other voices. The specific literary practice of Doireann Ní Ghríofa and Kate Zambreno reflects the need to establish communal bonds in which care and co-creation can flourish. This relational practice, however, takes place in an exploitative, neoliberal context in which one's affective and creative capacities are routinely expropriated and commodified, as Demeyer and Vitse have argued. For both authors, writing is at the same time a space in which they temporally escape from their isolation and despair and turn toward meaningful interaction with other voices, and their prime source of income, which comes with commercial demands and expectations. The latter turns writing into a reified process, which, especially in the case of Zambreno, impedes her from exploring the writing practices she feels drawn to and forces her to write out of financial despair. Ní Ghríofa shows how institutional and academic reception remains largely blind to the life and struggles of Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill, almost obscuring her to oblivion. Zambreno and Ní Ghríofa escape from being worn down by their

precarious living conditions by turning to writing which connects them with a wider community of people with similar struggles, including the struggle to write in stifling circumstances. Kornbluh claims that autofiction deprives literature of the mediations "crucial for imagining different frames of value, meaning, representation, and collectivity" (Kornbluh, 2023, p. 18). Trying to imagine different frames of value, meaning, representation and collectivity is precisely what Ní Ghríofa and Zambreno aim to achieve in their writing: not being reduced to their own selves and personal woes, but inscribing themselves within a wider community of people with similar struggles. Their writing becomes, in the words of Demeyer and Vitse, a "fold in the everyday grinding of affective and cognitive skills," reflecting the paradoxical situation of "both creating and dispossessing one's life in writing" (Demeyer & Vitse, 2024, p. 7).

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ENDNOTES

[1] Though Doubrovsky's brief, and later deleted, use of the term is often regarded as the origin of the use of the term "autofiction," Paul West had already used the term in the *New York Times* in 1972 (Bloom, 2019, pp. 4–5; Kornbluh, 2023, pp. 72–73). For an overview of the changing and diverse usage of the term, see Effe and Lawlor (2024), and Bloom (2019).

[2] Chris Kraus and Annie Ernaux have explicitly rejected the term, finding it not adequate to describe their works (Ernaux, 2019; Kraus & Arrhenius Hagdahl, 2024). After initially rejecting the term, Sheila Heti has remarked that it could be useful to guide the expectations of the readers (Freeman, 2022). Ben Lerner stated that combining fiction with autobiographical elements is as old literature itself and that authors do this in diverse ways (Lea et al., 2019).

[3] For more about the relation between autofiction and online culture, see Bloom (2019).

[4] Ben Lerner, for example, explicitly discusses how his approach differs significantly from the approach of Knausgård in the *My Struggle* series (Lea et al., 2019).

[5] At the end of *To Write as if Already Dead*, the COVID-19 pandemic has broken out. Zambreno observes that Foucault's wish to disappear anonymously sounds tonally off in times in which people die on ventilators without mourners by their sides or a funeral (Zambreno, 2021, p. 130).

[6] For the critics who argue for the affinities between autofiction and neoliberal tendencies, the comparison with these techniques of the self-described by Foucault would precisely affirm their view. For Suzuki, however, it is a way to resist the demands of marketing and commodification on her writings.

[7] David Hadar has argued that autofiction is a reflection upon the contemporary demand to turn one's life into work, using Sheila Heti's *How Should a Person Be?* as a case study. Many authors of autofiction describe their daily struggles in their works but in doing so they end up using their lives as a resource for their creative work (Hadar, 2024).

[8] Zambreno's mother passed away from breast cancer. This gives her cause for concern, but the medical tests are expensive.

[9] Other scholars have also described works of autofiction as attempts to establish a form of relationality, for example Largent (2019).

[10] Zambreno will explore the relation between literature and the need for care and community further in her book *The Light Room* (2023).

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