Jefferson’s Some Permutations of We tells a personal story of grappling with the essays of James Baldwin, colored by her thoughts. Her style carries a sense of intimacy between her and the reader, the narration dipping down into Baldwin’s work and her reaction before resurfacing back to physical descriptions of Jefferson’s act of reading. She finds companionship in Baldwin, declaring “privileged relations” between them and creating an implicitly declared We between writer and reader which will be one of many groups that define the essay. Not all such groups are of the same relationship as Baldwin is to Jefferson, however. Much of the power of the essay stems from the distinctions drawn between people: who "We" includes, who it doesn’t, and why as emphasized by the focus on pronouns as surrogate for ingroups.

The first such distinction parallels her and Baldwin, serving also as an acknowledgment of her audience, directly addressed as “you, white readers,” an overt recognition of the reader and a callback to the opening of the piece noting her position at a majority white school. Jefferson employes here a quoted “We” from Baldwin to refer to such readers and uses instead a simpler We without scare quotes to refer back to herself and Baldwin. Through her interpretation of Notes of a Native Son, she creates a divide between audience and author opposing the previous declaration of We, forcing readers to contemplate their relationship with the author and the work that they are reading, just as Baldwin had does with his use of pronouns. She carries out this tension until she finally arrives at a direct confrontation, changing suddenly to singular pronouns of “Him” and “You” in a darker and tenser tone than previously. The choice to use direct address and response patterns: “You thought you were just reading Him – no, you are living with him,” creates also a sense of urgency and need for proper reflection and understanding, culminating finally in a threat, that “You will have no privileges my We is bound to respect,” drawing a firm final line between You and We that acts as an ultimatum. Having escalated, Jefferson then descends from that last cathartic passage by pulling back into the physical act of her reading, suddenly returning to a concrete time and place from analysis, and moreover from You and Him and We back to I, a change that allows for easing of the previous tension.