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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Read, write, retreat: a collaborative reflection on shared writing retreat experiences among PhD candidates

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ABSTRACT

As PhD candidates of geography and planning, we engage in a collaborative autoethnography to reflect on our experiences during a writing retreat. We explore the significance of material and immaterial spaces of the retreat and how these spaces impacted our academic writing. We emphasise the value of a collaborative and supportive learning environment that challenges the productivity-driven, neoliberal narrative imbued in academic writing. Drawing on our personal reflections of the retreat, we illustrate how writing retreats foster a "space" of support, facilitate academic writing competence, and expose participants to new avenues of learning. Using a grounded theory approach, we draw on Donna Haraway's situated knowledges as well as and Dooren Massey's theorisation on space, to examine our individual reflections and collectively discuss the intricate relationship between solitude and productivity in academic writing. Our findings delve into diverse experiences of material space (physical) and immaterial space (psychological and imaginative), as well as the negotiation of solitude-togetherness and speed-slowness interface within the retreat context. We argue for rethinking the notion of a retreat, envisioning it as a space that challenges the norms of academic productivity and fosters a more caring and interconnected approach to scholarly writing.

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Introduction

This paper has been co-authored by four geography and planning PhD candidates who reflect on their experiences of a writing retreat they attended together in January 2023. As geography students, we reflect on the role of material and immaterial "space", with an emphasis on relationality and more-than-human co-production of space. Drawing on our own post-retreat personal reflections, we contribute to the evolving scholarship on the value of collaborative autoethnography, the space(s) of writing retreats and critiques of the neoliberal retreat. While we bring to the fore a critique of neoliberalism and its pervasiveness within academic environments, we also recognise the inherent limitations of positioning neoliberalism as the totalising nature of university culture. As such, we

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acknowledge that neoliberalism is manifest in situated ways and that it is just as equally present and equally resisted.

In the broader context of retreat culture, Hesselberth (2021, p. 253) argue that retreats and wellness culture essentially function as a way of "privatizing solutions to, what are in fact, social problems – stress, burnout, labour precarity, our always-on culture or the present economy of attention". Building from this critique, we position the academic writing retreat as something nested in solidarity, beyond the purpose of mere production of academic papers. We reflect on the value of working in a collaborative and supportive learning environment, one that cultivates a different mode of seeing, thinking, and doing beyond the neoliberal mindset of relentless productivity. For example, in the current individualistic academic milieu, there is a pervasive valorisation of the "independent scholar" (Baker & Pifer, 2011). We challenge the notion of solitary writing as it thrives on individualism in a highly competitive academic environment, which fails to recognise community and social connections that flourish in academic work. Solitary writing also risks perpetuating that academic life is a pursuit in isolation that only a select few can succeed in, rather than a collective effort towards diverse perspectives and contributions. As such, we draw upon Cameron et al. (2009, p. 273) paper on demystifying academic writing to reflect on how our writing retreat provided opportunities for us all to "hear how others feel about writing and to express their own feelings" as a way of building scholarly solidarity.

Two out of four authors of this paper are writing a traditional manuscript of ˜75,000–100,000 words, while the other two are pursuing a thesis by publication (TbP). With a requirement to publish and contribute to the academic canon, we take this opportunity to reflect on how creating a writing retreat was an opportunity to facilitate a conducive "space" for writing. In her extensive work on space and place, Massey (1994, 2004, 2005) often reminds us that the nebulous concept of "community" is not always synonymous with place, as individuals are multiply placed. Yet, we aimed to create a writing community, as writing in the context of higher degree research (HDR) is frequently an individual experience and is not usually geared towards communal engagement (Grant & Knowles, 2000). HDR students are particularly vulnerable to feeling isolated from others due to the intensive focus on individual writing and research. To this end, writing retreat participation has gained traction amongst HDRs as an opportunity to "make time and space for writing" (Murray, 2014, p. 57). Writing retreats offer an opportunity to reconnect following the added isolation, stress and anxiety experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns (Kee, 2021). As many students and scholars alike would recognise, writing can be a rewarding, challenging, difficult and daunting task. For PhD candidates, this familiar and at times forlorn relationship with writing comes and goes through the duration of our candidature. Between the moments of intellectual breakthroughs and the moments of writer's block, we persevere to get words on a page, a basic currency of academic success.

Such a rollercoaster of emotions related to writing provides a gap for the retreat as a space to foster a community of support for peers to engage in valuable bonding and social interaction. Together, retreat attendees navigate writing emotions and develop procedural and technical writing know-how (Cameron et al., 2009), and escape from distractions (Murray, 2014, Papen & Thériault, 2018, Tremblay-Wragg et al., 2022, Vincent et al., 2021). Participants can discuss ideas, collaborate on research, and navigate

common roadblocks, ultimately contributing to the communal aspect of writing (Grant & Knowles, 2000). These experiences encourage the development of academic writing competence (Aitchison & Guerin, 2014, Tremblay-Wragg et al., 2021), providing ample opportunities for learning and gaining exposure to new avenues of learning about writing (Kornhaber et al., 2016, Wittman et al., 2008).

In what follows, we provide an overview of our methods and data collection, explaining the reflective writing process through collaborative autoethnography and Haraway's (1988, 2008) work on "situated knowledges" and "becoming with". We also explain the use of grounded theory and how this was used to inform our analysis. We then provide an overview of Massey's (2004, 1994, 2005) theorisations of space and how this informed our findings. Next, we discuss our key findings which include a series of observations from our data on how we experienced and interacted with space in the retreat, from the material (physical) space to the immaterial (psychosocial and imaginative) space to thinking beyond space(s). Our key findings contribute to the critiques of the neoliberal retreat as we challenge myths of productivity and solitude, linking to critiques of the expectations of neoliberal universities. We conclude our paper with suggestions for other PhD candidates thinking about organising and participating in writing retreat culture and consider opportunities for further research within this context.

Framing the retreat: grounded theory and space

Grounded theory

Grounded theory, typically used in the field of sociology (Hood, 2007), is defined as "theory derived from data, systemically gathered and analysed through the research process" (Strauss & Corbin in Bryman, 2016, p. 387). Hood (2007) contends that what distinguishes grounded theory from an inductive analysis (typical in qualitative social scientific enquiry) is the concerted focus on comparative analysis, theoretical sampling, and theoretical saturation of categories. Our own research approach followed a similar focus where we compared and sampled ideas, which informed the further analytical approaches for our analysis.

To begin the process of grounded theory analysis, we organised a shared document online as a repository of reflections. Each participant read everyone else's reflections to get a sense of the similarities and differences of our experiences. After considering the scope of this paper, we then revisited the reflections with the task of developing a handful of critical and thought-provoking questions for each writer's reflection. This informed a more critical and collaborative approach to the writing process of this paper. Grounded theory was utilised through the reading process, as we read for certain patterns and themes within each individual experience of the retreat. We kept talking and reading and asking questions together until we reached a saturation point, where our reflections coalesced. This aligns with the central tenets of grounded theory wherein theoretical sampling is used as a responsive approach to make sampling of data open and flexible (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). In this way, the analysis of the data guides the research and the basis of our findings, rather than approaching our reflections with specific themes in mind. Corbin and Strauss (2008) add that theoretical sampling is about discovering relevant concepts

and their dimensions. The data collection and analysis advance simultaneously as each informs and streamlines the other (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007). As such, we moved from "data to analysis, and back again, recursively" (Star, 2007, p. 82) and it was through this iterative process that we engaged in comparative analysis of the different reflections to recognise patterns of similarity and difference (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). These patterns informed the basis of our analysis and contentions on the value of collaborative autoethnography, overall critiques of the neoliberal retreat, and recognition of the different space(s) of writing retreats. The analysis led us to reflect critically on the different material and immaterial manifestations of space during our stay at the writing retreat.

Space(s)

As readers of geography influenced by Massey (2004, 2005, 1994) our understanding of space is something which is both physical-material and socio-cultural. The retreat was an "event of place . . . a constellation of processes rather than a thing" (Massey, 2005, p. 141), which brought together the house, our bodies, our belongings, the weather conditions, and nonhuman beings. These elements together produced a space which we experienced relationally and pluralistically (Massey, 2005), meaning that all of us contributed to one another's understanding of the space, yet we each came away with subjective and personal experiences of the retreat. Such an understanding of the retreat as a co-constituted space influenced our methodological approach of collaborative autoethnography (Bogac, 2020; Butz, 2012; Chang, 2021). As we write together, we create space together, yet we experience this space subjectively.

As well as shaping our methodology, Massey's work on relational space also facilitated our thinking about experiences of space as relational components through which our individual research approaches are refracted. In the findings section, we elaborate on how we experienced space at the retreat, both in terms of its physical-material form and the imaginative or emotional spaces we dwelled in at the retreat. Here, we do not assert a dualism between physical-material space and socio-cultural space, as all aspects of space are produced relationally (Cresswell, 2004, Massey, 2005). Rather, we discuss different aspects of space thematically to draw out ideas in our own research. In addition to Massey's conceptualisation of relational space, we use the concept to draw attention to the more-than-humanness of the retreat (Tsing, 2013). The retreat was not only a space we produced together and individually, but also a lifeworld where insects, ocean water, and foodstuffs came together with and without us humans in a becoming-with (Haraway, 2008).

Methods

Data collection

Our writing retreat took place in January 2023, attended by five PhD candidates from[1] the Discipline of Geography and Planning at Macquarie University. The retreat was funded by the Discipline, in alignment with the University's institutional objectives of supporting its students.[2] We acknowledge our privileged position as scholarship

Table 1. Introduction of authors.

Author	Bio
Elise (she/her)	I am a PhD candidate in the first year of my candidacy. My research interests are in the diverse ways we value outdoor spaces and the ways in which outdoor spaces facilitate connection with place and one another. I am a cisgender, queer, and middle-class white settler Australian woman, with Anglo-European ancestry. Currently I do not have everyday caring responsibilities. The writing retreat was a wonderful opportunity to work on my literature review, as well as to connect with fellow doctoral candidates and hear from those further along in their academic journeys. The physical space of the retreat opened to an embodied experience of thinking-writing.
Helga (she/her)	I am a PhD student in the second year of my candidacy. I am a first generation European migrant Australian, grown up on Gadigal land. A clinical psychologist-turned-geographer, my research concerns how relational conceptualisations of wellbeing can inform urban planning in the context of multispecies cities. I employ a more-than-human geography lens in my conceptual framing and methodological approach. The main goal I had for the writing retreat was to produce the first draft of an analysis chapter of my thesis, having just completed a period of fieldwork.
Aireen (she/her)	I am a PhD candidate in my final year whose research pays particular attention to children's spaces and the importance of children as co-creators of knowledge. My academic engagements involve amplifying children's voices on the urban spaces they occupy, with emphasis on slum-dwelling communities in the global South. I am a scholar from the global South whose research unpacks how we can unsettle urban theory.
Milena (she/her)	I am a PhD student in the third year of my candidacy. My research explores just and sustainable futures for Aotearoa New Zealand's dairy sector. As a migrant who grew up in Aotearoa, I have close relations to this place which drives my passion for this topic, as well as my interests in the intersections of food system change and climate change, agriculture, and alternative protein development. I organised this writing retreat based on previous experience of organising workshops for my fieldwork and also attending a similar writing retreat with fellow PhD geography students in 2021.

beneficiaries in an institution in the global North. Table 1 presents a short biography for each author of this paper.

For four days, we stayed at a rented Airbnb house in a coastal setting, 90 minutes north of Sydney, Australia. The writing retreat schedule was designed to promote optimal conditions for writing and developing an overall sense of well-being for the participants.

Throughout the retreat, we worked on our individual theses or papers in the living room of the rented house. We set up our workstations together at the large dining table in the living space and agreed upon specific timings and activities at the beginning of the retreat. Before the first writing block, we shared our writing objectives and discussed our desired schedule and activities, including writing periods, exchanging of drafts, outdoor activities, social meals, and free time. We typically engaged in writing activities for about 5–6 hours each day in 50-minute blocks. There was flexibility in terms of the time to begin and end writing, which varied for each participant. Additionally, break times and mealtimes were also flexible to accommodate everyone's needs. At the interim of writing activities, we also had the opportunity to discuss our writing practices as well as challenges we face when writing. We have included an example of our writing schedule in Appendix B.

Our data collection included autoethnographic reflections by each retreat participant, as well as photographs taken of the space during our time at the retreat. Initially, we agreed to write one reflection each (~1000 words each) of our experiences at the writing retreat to submit to an informal research blog run by out department. However, upon discussing the transformative potential of writing retreats and our own reflections, we decided our initial reflections could be used as a data source to be analysed for an academic paper. This was informed by the desire to gain

a more nuanced understanding of the writing retreat process and outcomes, specifically for doctoral candidates. After the retreat, each participant wrote a reflection of their experience, drawing on their own research interests, how they felt about the retreat, the opportunity to work together in a retreat setting and whether they were able to achieve any writing goals. The reflections were collated a few weeks after the retreat to give each author enough time to provide a summary of their experience. We then shared these reflections in a single document and went through an iterative process of reading, reviewing and asking critical questions of each other's reflections, It was these interactions and questions that informed the empirical and the methodological foundations for this paper, which also led us to develop an understanding, appreciation and practice of collaborative autoethnography, In our discussions of productivity and slow scholarship in particular, we engaged in critical discussions about the role of the neoliberal university and how the retreat both reproduced some aspects of neoliberal productivity agendas, while at the same time, facilitated a space for meaningful collaboration. We reflected on Kern et al.'s (2014, p. 848) assertion that collaboration can serve to "break the normalizing internalization and dehumanizing tendencies of neoliberalism's imperatives". Full reflections from each participant are included in Appendix A. We refer to excerpts from each participant's reflection as data for analysis throughout our findings section.

Collaborative autoethnography

Collaborative autoethnography is an approach where participant-researchers can go beyond individual narratives (Wolfe et al., 2018), enabling a richer and more dynamic juxtaposition of experiences and perspectives, and creating a shared scholarly space for mutual self-reflection and inquiry (Chang et al., 2013). Drawing from Chiu's (2006) model of "inter-personal reflexivity", we approach our analysis together as co-inquirers seeking to comprehend the intricacies of academic writing. By drawing on our experiences, we aim to offer insights on the transformative capacities of reflective writing and writing retreats in thesis writing and scholarly endeavours. Our collaborative autoethnography employed "narrative placement of self in social context" (Butz, 2012, p. 2). We write this paper with the knowledge that our individual reflections also mirror the social context of the writing retreat. A focus on the self in this social context enables a deeper understanding of our shared experiences as geographers in training, allowing us to uncover points of commonality and divergence with greater vibrancy in our analysis. Through this process, we engage in an iterative process of knowledge generation (Cameron et al., 2009), interweaving our different but mutually reinforcing encounters with our writing spaces. In essence, we leverage our personal experiences as PhD candidates to gain a deeper understanding of the value and challenges imbued in writing retreats.

The epistemological foundation of our collaborative autoethnographic approach draws heavily on two of Donna Haraway's ecofeminist-aligned conceptual frameworks – situated knowledges (1988) and becoming with (2008). Because the thinker can never claim universality, nor can they be removed from their bodies, histories, and positionalities, Haraway's situated knowledges (1988) argues that knowledge must be recognised as inherently partial and contestable. Countering

dominant claims that bias/subjectivity and rationality/objectivity are competing modes of thinking, situated knowledges reminds us that bias can never be avoided. Crucially, situated knowledges expands who contributes to this enterprise, making room for "the agency of the world in knowledge" (Haraway, 1988, p. 593).

Fisher et al. (2015) have previously foregrounded collaborative thinking about situated knowledge to highlight that writing is both performative and central to knowledge production. While acknowledging the ontological politics involved in "engaging and representing the relational, the messy, the spontaneous, the unpredictable, the non-human, and our bodily experiences" (Fisher et al., 2015, p. 18), the authors contemplate writing as a foundation for enacting difference. By using situated knowledges as a frame through which to analyse our experience of the writing retreat, we attune to thinking as "an apparatus of bodily production" (Haraway, 1999, p. 595). We consider the shared and diverse experiences of the group members and attune to relationalities, emergences and co-becomings between a broader number of actants[3] – human and non-human, material, and non-material in the space.

This formulation is what Haraway's (2008) becoming with entails, where there is no stable "I" but a relationally entangled being in the processes of becoming with the many others with which we share this planet. It offers a metaphysics grounded in connection, where space becomes a contact zone, and where (bodily) attunement challenges delusions of separation (Wright, 2014). That is, while we view our thinking as always partial and embodied, we endeavour to become attuned to a multiplicity of worlds through encounter with novel relational contexts (Wright, 2014), and to use our writing to enact our differences (Fisher et al., 2015). In this case, we have chosen to attune to the varied, diverse, and myriad contributors of knowledge that work to inform the writing retreat. This more-than-human, relational perspective offers a lens through which to see/think/do the writing of the world (Fisher et al., 2015) differently and reimagine what "space" we are talking about when we go on a retreat. We embrace a more dynamic and flexible perspective in analysis and reflection rather than striving for conclusive findings (Siltanen et al., 2008).

Writing also highlights the relationship between solitude and togetherness, revealing them not as opposing forces but as interconnected experiences that individuals go through simultaneously (Coplan et al., 2018). To think of writing as a relational space reveals the challenge to negotiate individual reflection and collective engagement and the dynamics between writing as a personal creative process and as an activity of exchange, feedback, and support. The goal of our collaborative autoethnography is to maintain a fluidity in the co-creation of subjectivities. In other words, our experience of cowriting reveals the nuances of writing as always being a work in progress and a practice of relationality. To think of writing as a relational space reveals the challenges of negotiating individual reflection and collective engagement and the dynamics between writing as a personal creative process and as an activity of exchange, feedback, and support. This is explored further in the following section.

Space(s) beyond the retreat: how collaborative sense-making shaped and continues to shape us

Here we focus on three key themes that emerged from our analysis of the data. First, we explore different articulations and experiences of space (both material, as in the physical space, and immaterial, as in the imaginative space and psychological space), negotiated solitude and challenging speed and slowness in the context of research. These key themes coalesced to form our broader observation about re-imagining writing not as solely productivist, but as a more caring and convivial space in which peers and their ideas could come together to support one another in their research and writing endeavours (Mountz et al., 2015). The retreat offered a material and immaterial space within which we could consider the time it takes to produce knowledge.

Material space

One of the key findings to emerge from our collaborative writing was the different ways in which we all navigated the spaces of the retreat. In this section, we reflect on the physical spaces we encountered. In their research on writing retreat, Wiebe et al. (2023) found that the "organisational investment" in writing retreats influences sustainability, success, and possible publication outcome post-retreat. In particular, the appropriate allocation and provision of resources to organise and facilitate the retreat in an accessible and cost-effective manner (Wiebe et al., 2023) create the conditions for a conducive writing space. As the organiser of the retreat, Milena sought to find a site that could house everyone together:

> My intentions were to mirror as closely as possible the experience from the previous retreat by choosing a location that was close to the coast so we could visit the beach to break up our time at our laptops, as well as a space that was big enough to house a group of people with amenities we could all comfortably share. (such as a kitchen and work space)

To this, Quynn and Stewart (2021) find that maintaining distraction-free writing spaces positively influenced PhD candidates' experiences of writing retreats, as the limited distractions meant it is easier to write with others and maintain motivation. To limit our distractions, we set specific times for writing and breaks, with the knowledge that writing time was designated quiet time. The house that was chosen for this writing retreat was ideal for support writing practice – it was located in a quiet street and had a large dining table in the living room which became the centre of our daily writing. Sitting together at the table was an opportunity to "engage in activities of reading one another's work, providing advice and suggestions on how best to shape our writing" (Milena reflection). This was a common experience found by Murray's (2014) study of participants at writing retreats, who explained that their writing practice was more focused, creative, and productive when they were able to compare writing experiences and concepts and have conversations with others who were engaged in the writing process simultaneously. Thus, organising the retreat to have a physical space that could facilitate these types of interactions was central to its planning. The focus of the dining table as the

designated quiet, distraction-free space meant that other physical spaces of the retreat location,

> forecalled attention to new "emergent possibilities," both for joy and for writing" as "seeing the ocean from our writing desk, making coffee in the old kitchen, and sitting at a bay window led to feelings of contentment. (Elise reflection)

Further to this, the multiple spaces which we occupied during the retreat,

> became inspiration for getting closer to the very frameworks and methodology [our] research relies on- that of de-centring humans and perceiving a wider spectrum of agential actors in each moment. (Helga reflection)

Similarly, directing our attentiveness to the material components of place (or the world outside our laptops) led to expanded emotional geographies of the retreat (Anderson & Smith, 2001). For Elise especially, the retreat being located near the "blue space" (Wheaton et al., 2020) of the ocean facilitated joyful immersion through swimming:

> Being so close to the beach allowed for ocean swimming, a practice which I have begun to see in a new light after commencing my research. After my body had spent all day sitting in a chair, all my focus on thinking and looking at a laptop screen, my arms and legs were thrilled to strike and kick amongst the water. (Elise reflection)

Having a variety of material spaces within the retreat made the writing retreat experience stimulating for each participant beyond their writing obligations by facilitating opportunities for joy, wonder, collaboration and, when needed, solitude to recharge.

Immaterial space

By attuning to multiple subjectivities and multiple ways of enacting these differences through writing (Fisher et al., 2015), we turn next to immaterial space. We here consider space as constituted and performed into being (Gregson & Rose, 2000). That is, our written reflections revealed the multiple immaterial spaces that were performed into existence, where our interpretive work (the thinking and writing about immaterial spaces at the retreat) constituted an act of performance and performativity (Gregson & Rose, 2000). Two immaterial spaces predominated – psychological space and imaginative space.

Psychological space

Loosely related to its usage within cognitive science and linguistics (also referred to as "mental space" (Fauconnier, 1997), we use the term "psychological space" to describe a state of increased attentional, perceptual and conceptual awareness (Eliot, 1987). For us, psychological space was most clearly defined in the reflections on what the retreat offered in terms of our conceptual model of the role of a PhD candidate is. Role theory in sociology and social psychology posits that roles are learned by social interaction with others; that the roles people occupy provide context that shape behaviour (Biddle, 1986). Equally, context also shapes which role is enacted. Roles are multiple and co-existing; a PhD candidate is never just in the role of PhD candidate but like the faces of a cube in three-dimensional space that cannot be seen from all angles simultaneously, not all roles can be experienced at the same time. Different social contexts shift the predominance of

which role comes into focus. Engaging in meaningful conversations with fellow scholars, mentors, and friends during a PhD candidacy fosters a patchwork of interconnected roles. Such multiple yet interconnected roles reveal PhD students' identities not just as solo academics, but as participants in a broader community, weaving together professional and personal dimensions. In reflecting on the sharp divide between the demands of the role in day-to-day life compared to being on the retreat, Helga wrote,

> The retreat provided a rare role break. Much of my role as parent in its tangible material sense could be relegated to the end of the day phone chats with my children. This change in the reality of day-to-day life produced the "psychological space" for my PhD candidate role to come to the fore, and for a more nuanced experience of that role. . . the experience of living with colleagues produced vital, restorative conviviality, and the sharing of ideas had a direct impact on my thinking and writing.

Amid the barriers affecting women in academic life, those with children have been documented to struggle with significant feelings of guilt in their attempt to juggle roles (Evans & Grant, 2008, Quynh Phan, 2023). We do not posit that writing retreats offer "guilt-free" time to focus on academic life. However, the awareness of the reality that roles are multiple, co-exist, and dynamically shift in time and space may be helpful. For example, being physically removed from the day-to-day in a new environment changed our perceptions of material space. It furthermore changed our connections with our roles as PhD candidates.

Embracing the situated knowledge (Haraway, 1988) that informed our reflections, we were motivated to consider how a collaborative autoethnography and grounded theory methods approach might make it possible to iteratively extend our perceptions beyond the limited time-space of the writing retreat. Helga noted:

> Reflecting on the retreat reminds me that there are too few opportunities within my PhD to live the research. While I am continuously thinking about the theory and the practicalities. . . to really immerse in it is rare. . . I was surprised to find that my experience of the retreat felt very much like a prolonged immersion. . .

Aireen also experienced a perceptual shift. She wrote:

> Aside from finding a peaceful setting, surrounded by like-minded people who share a common passion for scholarship, I was able to have a headspace to reconsider my relationship with my thesis. Just as cartographers make choices about what to include on a map, writing my thesis took a lot of decisions and choices to be made. And just as maps are not neutral or objective representations of geographic information, I was able to see how I need to explain with clarity my bias.

This perceptual shift was perhaps directly related to our shared habits of thinking as geographers in space, our conversations on the retreat and the broader theoretical frameworks. There was a noticeable influence of "the shift that is being encouraged, both in scientific practice and in the epistemology and philosophy of science, extends to the part that the non-human plays in the ordering of social relations as well as in the production of knowledge" (Latimer & Miele, 2013, p. 24). Additionally, the shared habits of spatial thinking as geographers and the conversations we shared during the retreat enabled us to enrich our intellectual environment. Yet even as we cultivated a shared space, we negotiated solitude and being "alone together".

Within the psychological space, imaginative spaces in writing emerge. Imaginative spaces are the mental landscapes where writers let creative thoughts flourish. Within the psychological space of thoughts and feelings, imaginative spaces in writing become doorways not only express themselves creatively but also to understand themselves better, whereby they dig into their minds. Writing and imagination are intricately intertwined, if not symbiotic (Grant & Knowles, 2000). In Aireen's reflection, she told themselves they were a cartographer; that we were all cartographers. Aireen imagined that a cartographers task *"was to make maps that convey the information [they] want to show in a comprehensible way"*. This approach to a writing retreat prompts rethinking writing with the reader in mind, rendering to what other things might transpire out of this activity if the reader was at the forefront of the writing. Likewise, the imaginative space of academic writing enables thinking of how imagination can be leveraged to provide an avenue for writers to navigate their craftsmanship and relationships with their manuscripts. In this regard, the writing retreat provided the opportunity to engage in a 3-day creative exercise, a unique approach that prompted a fresh perspective on writing, ultimately enabling the craft of writing to be looked at and practised in a different way.

> I decided to tell myself a fiction as I went about writing my thesis for the next three days . . . . I imagined our task was to make maps that convey the information we want to show in a comprehensible way. Our job was to follow certain conventions such as using metric information, symbols, reference points, and other elements . . . . But at the same time, maps are distortions of reality (Monmonier, 1991). The degree of the distortion depends on the choices made by the cartographer for the purpose of the map . . . . (Aireen Reflection)

Seeing the art of writing as mapping allows for rethinking writer-writing relationships, in that Aireen imagined "follow[ing] certain conventions such as using metric information, symbols, reference points, and other elements" to represent spaces and ideas. This prompts a re-evaluation of writing as influenced by one's background, just as maps are distortions of reality (Monmonier, 1991). In other words, both writing and mapping involve selectivity and interpretation, influenced by the perspectives and choices of the writer or cartographer. Both imbue creative subjectivity, which shapes how ideas, experiences, and information are represented. Aireen reflects that "the degree of the distortion depends on the choices made by the cartographer for the purpose of the map". This, however, does imply an objective reality but instead emphasises that the choice to represent one's writing is a relational experience. The notion of distortion here highlights that there is one way to represent knowledge in our writing and we can always distort it through the ways in which we construct and communicate knowledge. This resonates with the relational conception of space with regards to the interconnectedness of lived experiences and the fluidity of spatial experiences, rather than assuming a singular and fixed reality.

Likewise, writing, including our citation practices, is a political act whereby we curate what we chose to emphasise (Gregson & Rose, 2000). Aireen reflected how just as in cartography, where *"we needed to make trade-offs and compromises to create maps that are useful and informative"*, writing is imbued with choices and frames. Aireen concludes her reflection by appreciating the imaginative space that enables them to recognise that, *"like cartography, scholarly writing always has trade-offs"*. The "imaginative space" in

writing alludes to the creative and interpretive aspects of the writing process, which comprise making choices and framings as we craft our works.

During the writing retreat, the exploration of imaginative spaces became salient in terms of the "trade-offs" in which to include and exclude in our writing. The writing retreat provided an environment that encouraged exploration of the creative aspects of writing and how they intertwine with the political dimensions involved in decision-making during knowledge production. In acknowledging the presence of imaginative space, we gained a deeper understanding of how scholarly writing involves making choices and embracing the inherent limitations and possibilities that come with it, particularly through the frame of "trade-offs", which we acknowledge as a common trope within a neoliberal agenda (Gair et al., 2021).

Negotiated solitude: autoethnography and subjectivity

Building on the empowering character of writing together, our analysis prompts us to critique the prevailing reverence for solitude in the production of academic work. Solitude holds an appeal for many as it offers an opportunity for creative thought and productivity by creating an environment conducive to deep thinking (Zenk et al., 2021). Specifically, in writing, having a solitary time and space to write allows one to focus on important work as "flow is such an individual experience" (Perry as cited in Elwood et al., 2017, p. 214). However, solitude is not all that there is in academic writing. As a way of reflection, we consider the idea of solitude-togetherness dynamics as a constant negotiated process in academic writing.

The on-site multi-day writing retreat enabled us to rethink writing as a back-and-forth between solitude and togetherness. The framing of writing as a relational space reveals the challenge inherent in constructing individual reflections, as the space of the writing retreat and context within which the events we reflected on took place relationally. The key challenge was to negotiate individual reflection, collective engagement and the dynamics between writing as a personal creative process and as an activity of exchange, feedback, and support. While there are times when we wrote alone, developing our writing further with the support of a writing group facilitates boosting each other's "motivation to write, to continue writing, and to finish a piece of writing" (Keane & Castle, 2016, p. 82). This balance of writing time alone and time spent with others is important to bring joy and passion back to our writing. In terms of experiencing this joy, Elise reflected:

> Letting go of the dichotomy between productivity and indolence can also facilitate joy . . . . Submersion in the waves brought to the fore the emotional geographies of the retreat; the frustration of not finishing a section of a chapter, the tiredness in my body from early mornings and walking in the hot sun, and finally, joy at letting the ocean carry me away from the shore and back to it.

Moreover, evident through these reflections is the way our writing retreat offered a way back to connecting more to the world, and a new motive for being with others. Our mini-writing circle provided concerted support, which fostered a sense of community and constructive feedback to each other (Hedengren & Harrison, 2018). The writing retreat became a way of strengthening our communications with each other, which is important for our well-being and fundamental rights to be part of a network of social connections (Brownlee, 2013). We

consciously avoided feelings of competitiveness (a pillar in the neoliberal university) by focusing on writing to our strengths based on our diverse research interests and expertise.

The experience of the writing retreat advanced our understanding of the imperative need to acknowledge that cultivating intimacy, empathetically engaging with the challenges of other academics, and being receptive to interpersonal influence are all indispensable components of scholarly writing. A potent academic is one who recognises and values the power of interconnectivity. Helga began to attune to a wider set of collaborators including non-human others (Barry, 2019) and employed a care ethic that attempted to de-centre and de-exceptionalise individual and human-only contributions to productivity (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017). She reflected:

> I became attuned to the presence and impact of non-humans in the space. . . the reconnaissance battalion of a colony of ants who had found our plate of butter; the tenacious mosquitoes who signalled it was no longer the time to write but to walk along the windy beach; the metronomic waves that could be heard from where we slept and worked; and the art and artefacts strewn through the old house, a collection of histories and values . . . [all] collaborated by deeply guiding my thinking.

In contemplating solitude, Helga's observations prompted a different experience of solitude. By noticing the living and non-living around us, non-human actants asked questions which we integrated into our own reflections. This worked to unsettle notions of independent scholarship and solitude and reminded us that we were emplaced not only with each other but with our nonhuman counterparts.

Re-theorising the retreat/dispelling myths and expectations of productivity (critiques of the neoliberal retreat)

The classical approach to a writing retreat in an academic context positions the individual writer at the centre of the production. Contesting neoliberal, and too often individualistic and human-centric notions of productive space, we acknowledge and ascribe a wider set of actants and forces to the contribution academic output. Through the iterative process of reading one another's reflections and coming up with questions for each writer about their experiences and observations, there were contrasting views about productivity and the way in which the space and atmosphere fostered a sense of pressure to get work done. On the one hand, Milena wrote:

> I found the writing retreat to foster what I would consider a "positive peer-pressure" environment as I personally work more productively when surrounded by peers who are also typing away, reading and actively thinking and engaging with their research. I find this type of working model encourages a collaborative environment as each time we took breaks we shared and reflected on our progress, our frustrations and our triumphs.

Helga also reflected:

> The slower cadence that our retreat offered, and the clear boundaries around what the retreat was for, produced physical and psychological space for writing and thinking that are too often inaccessible when such constraints are not present. For me, the retreat facilitated flow states in which the perception of time changed, and an experience of productivity without the active effort of resisting and rejecting multi-tasking in the everyday, a time/place which is characterised by multiple roles, responsibilities, and temptations.

Conversely, Elise expressed the opposite:

> I felt a little insecure about my perceived slowness in writing and was concerned about having to perform productivity. The first thing we did upon arriving at the house was discuss our goals for the retreat. Having previously written out goals, I presented mine to the group, feeling somewhat stressed about how little I expected to complete in the three days of writing. I imagined myself struggling to write a single paragraph while everyone around me sailed through page after page. Such self-derived concerns about my own productivity (by which I mean speed of production of written work) are not new, nor are they exclusive to situations such as a writing retreat where I write among others. So-called productivity hacks such as the Pomodoro method (50 minutes writing followed by 10 minutes of break time) implore me not to write but to obsessively catalogue the passing of time. Counting minutes, counting words written; these habits derive from the obsession with counting and accounting in the neoliberal university.

These observations provide the basis for a key discussion that ensued during the writing of this paper, which was the need to critically think about the function of a retreat and the extent to which the notion of a retreat evokes and reproduces a neoliberal agenda laden with class privilege and heightened individualism. The "slow scholarship" discourse (DeVerteuil, 2022, Mountz et al., 2015) unsettles the notion that the speed of scholarship must be dictated by the neoliberal context of production (Mountz et al., 2015). However, idealising slow scholarship and the ability to retreat risks uncritically reproducing structures of privilege from which we, as scholarship-supported PhD candidates, benefit. The uneasy tension in acknowledging one's privilege while using said privilege to foster greater equity in academia is acknowledged by Mountz et al. (2015). Thus, while we have examined the productivist impulses behind participating in a retreat, we must recognise the privilege of being able to retreat at all. Even as the retreat provided an escape from the "everyday", allowing us to forgo multi-tasking and focus solely on our writing, normative ideas about productivity persisted which were evident in our discussions following an analysis of our reflections. Nonetheless, the oxymoronic nature of being "alone together" meant we could connect with one another and our writing work, as well as be more attuned to the more-than-human co-collaborators in our writing.

Conclusion

While this paper offers insightful and valuable perspectives, it is limited by our contextual, partial, and inherently incomplete perspectives, much like all other forms of knowledge. Hence, we engage a pluralistic integration of diverse epistemic traditions and perspectives, with the aim of giving visibility to various ways of understanding writing retreats. Our goal is to disrupt the assumption that writing is a solitary practice, to bring to light the oft-hidden collaborative aspects of writing. We hope that this process contributes to the ongoing formation of collective knowledge towards thickening our understanding of what writing means as PhD candidates and deepening the discourse on writing retreat experiences for PhD candidates. We believe that writing retreats can foster a sense of scholarly and personal community among PhD candidates. Having experienced such a strengthening of our connection as a group through our writing retreat, we undertook a collaborative autoethnography of the retreat to better understand how retreats can push back against neoliberal

ideals of productivity and encourage scholarly solidarity among PhD candidates. We began by applying a grounded theory analysis to reflections we wrote in the week following the retreat, drawing out ideas about how we experienced space at the retreat as well as how persistent norms about academic productivity affected our perception of the retreat's purpose. Our ideas were initially kaleidoscopic in their fragments but came to be understood collaboratively through the lenses of Massey's and Haraway's theoretical frameworks. We found that there were multiplicities of space for us in the retreat, including physical-material (indoors and outdoors) and immaterial (imaginative and psychological) and that these enabled us to connect the space of the retreat to our own research. Furthermore, such multiplicities of space informed our individual productions of knowledge through writing, which encouraged a deeper connection with our own individual research projects, whether that be the more-than-human aspects of the retreat for Helga or the blue space of the ocean for Elise. The oxymoronic nature of being "alone together" meant that we could connect with one another and our writing work, in addition to being more attuned to our own and each other's diverse experiences of space at the retreat. We recognised a collaborative productivity that extended far beyond the initial expectations of the retreat, and beyond the time and space of the retreat. By reflecting on the individual and shared experiences of the spaces the retreat opened, we connected more deeply with our own thinking and research.

We invite other academic writers to reflect on the culture of productivity in academia and its effects on PhD candidates. We encourage further research by fellow postgraduate researchers which includes collaborative practices. Engaging in collaborative autoethnography has provided an avenue to enrich our collective experiences and reflections. The process of contemplating both the challenges and the joys inherent in our writing endeavours has been fruitful in the deepening of our understanding of our academic experiences. Such an introspective approach also provided us the opportunity to further explore and shed light on the oft-hidden aspects of our writing journeys.

Notes

1. One retreat attendee opted not to co-author this paper.
2. For example, see Macquarie Universities (2023) 2020–2024 Operating Plan.
3. Haraway prefers the term "actants" to "actors", noting that the latter still belongs to the language of liberal individualism (1999, p. 331).

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Appendix A – Individual author reflections

Elise

Productivity

As my PhD journey began less than one year ago, I am still carefully navigating the academic and collegial networks in the university in which I work. This was my first experience with a writing retreat in person and I wasn't sure what to expect, both in terms of my own expected productivity and of working so closely around others for an extended period of time. I felt a little insecure about my perceived slowness in writing and was concerned about having to perform productivity. The first thing we did upon arriving at the house was discuss our goals for the retreat. Having previously written out goals, I presented mine to the group, feeling somewhat stressed about how little I expected to complete in the three days of writing. I imagined myself struggling to write a single paragraph while everyone around me sailed through page after page.

Such self-derived concerns about my own productivity (by which I mean speed of production of written work) are not new, nor are they exclusive to situations such as a writing retreat where I write among others. So-called productivity hacks such as the Pomodoro method (50 minutes writing followed by 10 minutes of break time) implore me not to write but to obsessively catalogue the passing of time. Counting minutes, counting words written – these habits derive from the obsession with counting and accounting in the neoliberal university (Mountz et al., 2015).

So, how to be "productive" and achieve my writing goals within the artificial (yet beneficial!) structure of the writing retreat, without uncritically reproducing the counting that the university does to catalogue (and therefore assess) our work (Mountz et al., 2015)? I think the answer here is to disentangle ourselves from the dualistic notion that one is either productive or unproductive (Longhurst, 1997). One distinct advantage of the writing retreat as a site for production of academic work is the ability to "workshop" ideas with one's peer group. Workshopping activities can be formal, for example through a writing exercise, or informal, for example through a chat over coffee at morning tea. As a somewhat green PhD candidate, simply listening to the discussions about other students' thesis structures and theoretical framings was valuable, and dare I say, productive – without needing to write a word.

Joy

Letting go of the dichotomy between productivity and indolence can also facilitate joy. My PhD research lies at the nexus of phenomenological geographies and urban planning; I am concerned with how LGBTQ+ people connect to place through embodied practices of outdoor exercise, and how we can apply the knowledge of such connections to improve wellbeing for LGBTQ+ outdoor exercise practitioners through urban planning. Part of my data collection involves autoethnography of my own exercise practice. Being so close to the beach allowed for ocean swimming, a practice which I have begun to see in a new light after commencing my research. After my body had spent all day sitting in a chair, all my focus on thinking and looking at a laptop screen, my arms and legs were thrilled to strike and kick amongst the water. Submersion in the waves brought to the fore the emotional geographies of the retreat; the frustration of not finishing a section of

a chapter, the tiredness in my body from early mornings and walking in the hot sun, and finally, joy at letting the ocean carry me away from the shore and back to it.

Joy is a fundamental component of emotional geographies of blue (and green) spaces (Foley, 2018). In ocean swimming, where one is amongst blue space, the water is filled with "emergent possibilities" (Foley, 2018, p. 257). There is no specified "use" for the ocean, only a relational coming-together between the swimmer and the sea. Similarly, the novelty of the writing retreat compared to my usual surroundings at home or the university office attention to new "emergent possibilities", both for joy and for writing. Seeing the ocean from our writing desk, making coffee in the old kitchen, and sitting at a bay window led to feelings of contentment, even as I typed away at my draft chapter.

Helga

Reflecting on the retreat reminds me that there are too few opportunities within my PhD to live the research I strive to do. While I am continuously thinking about the theory and the practicalities of my conceptual framework and methodology, to really immerse in it is rare. It only has been in the field that I have intermittently felt in it; and these moments are so fruitful but sadly, also fleeting. As such, I was surprised to find that my experience of the retreat felt very much like a prolonged immersion, a few days of living the research. The "space" the retreat opened up became inspiration for getting closer to the very frameworks and methodology my research relies on- that of de-centring humans and perceiving a wider spectrum of agential actors in each moment. Writing and thinking is of course always a relational endeavour, a co-production of knowledge that finds a resting place, perhaps just temporarily, on the page. Thinking with this lens, I began to view the writing that took place on my own page as being temporally and spatially influenced by the unique characteristics of the retreat. While writing about several species of fauna and flora, I became attuned to the presence and impact of non-humans in the space. Co-collaborators in the process of my own thinking and writing were: the reconnaissance battalion of a colony of ants who had found our plate of butter; the tenacious mosquitoes who signalled it was no longer the time to write but to walk along the windy beach; the metronomic waves that could be heard from where we slept and worked; and the art and artefacts strewn through the old house, a collection of histories and values of the landlords. The arts and craft style house itself, with its creaky charm, filtered light, and novel smells, collaborated by deeply guiding my thinking on a central theme in the chapter.

It is also apparent that being away from daily responsibilities is useful for me, particularly when trying to apply a more-than-human lens when my daily life requires heightened attunement to other humans. As the oldest PhD candidate on our retreat and mother of two young children, the retreat provided a rare role break. Much of my role as mother in its tangible material sense could be relegated to the end of the day phone chats with my children. This left "space" for my PhD candidate role to come to the fore, and for a more nuanced experience of that role. For example, the experience of living with colleagues produced vital, restorative conviviality, and the sharing of ideas had a direct impact on my thinking and writing. This more focussed and deeper engagement with the role of PhD student created a felt sense of closer proximity to my PhD peers and to my own research. Parenting, I see for me, is a deeply human-centric endeavour, where the attunement to other humans' rhythms and needs is privileged. Understanding that I can switch between this lens and a broader one necessary for my own research, was especially important for me to experience. I was particularly appreciative of this awareness at this stage in the PhD journey, a stage which heralds an increased need for dedication to the PhD candidate role free from mother guilt.

Rejecting the myth of multi-tasking

All-too rare in daily life, our writing retreat represented a welcome immersion in writing and thinking, an act of resistance to the "busyness" of daily life. Neuroscientific studies (refs) show that the tendency towards multi-tasking, required of PhD students, like others attempting to carve out a livelihood and a life in the context of modern capitalist societies, has been shown to be suboptimal. Instead of promised

capacities to improve productivity, the very opposite is true- multitasking decreases productivity, and does so particularly in fields with creative requirements (ref). For activities known to require "flow states" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991) such as writing, there would appear to be an even greater requirement to abandon the hubris of the "multi-tasker," to recognise one's limitations. This is consistent with emerging "slow scholarship" research (refs), borne from a feminist ethics of care challenging the notion that good scholarship can occur without finding ways to slow down and resist neoliberal agendas (Mountz et al., 2015). The slower cadence that our retreat offered, and the clear boundaries around what the retreat was for, produced physical and psychical space for writing and thinking that are too often inaccessible when such constraints are not present (Quynn & Stewart, 2021). For me, the retreat facilitated flow states in which the perception of time changed (ref), and an experience of productivity without the active effort of resisting and rejecting multi-tasking in the "everyday" (ref), a time/place which is characterised by multiple roles, responsibilities, and temptations.

More-than-human agencies in the co-productions of space

Writing and thinking is of course always a relational endeavour, a co-production of knowledge that finds a resting place, perhaps only temporarily, on the page. Thinking with this lens, I began to view the writing that took place on my own page as being temporally and spatially influenced by the unique characteristics of the retreat. While writing about several species of fauna and flora in my draft chapter, I became attuned to the presence and impact of non-humans in the space. Co-collaborators in the process of my own thinking and writing were: the reconnaissance battalion of a colony of ants who had found our plate of butter; the tenacious mosquitoes who told the time of day like clockwork, signalling it was time not to write but to walk along the beach with its onshore winds; the waves that could be heard from where we slept and worked, providing a rhythmed, timed backdrop; and art and artefacts strewn through the old house, a collection of histories and values of the owners of the house. The house itself, with its creaky charm, filtered light, and smells, collaborated by deeply guiding my thinking on a central theme in the chapter. I was reminded that the affective ecologies offer an extension to Descartes's original humanism "I think therefore I am," with "I think, feel, and relate, and therefore I become" (Singh, 2017, p. x). The writing retreat was an exercise not so much in writing, or indeed thinking. By fostering relationships with both human and more-than-human co-collaborators, the writing retreat was much more an exercise in relating.

Milena

I organised this writing retreat based on previous experience of a similar writing retreat with fellow PhD geography students in 2021. The previous retreat I attended was helpful in kickstarting the writing process for a chapter, as well as developing meaningful connections with peers from my department. During my first retreat, we as a group we immersed ourselves in the natural surroundings of the caravan park we stayed in down the South Coast of NSW. Based on the success of that experience, and my more recent experience in organising workshops with participants for my PhD fieldwork, I was inspired to organise a retreat for the early weeks of 2023, in the Australian summer. My intentions were mirror as closely as possible the experience from the previous retreat by choosing a location that was close to the coast so we could visit the beach to break up our time at our laptops, as well as a space that was big enough to house a group of people with amenities we could all comfortably share (such as a kitchen and work space). I found the writing retreat to foster what I would consider a "positive peer-pressure" environment as I personally work more productively when surrounded by peers who are also typing away, reading and actively thinking and engaging with their research. I find this type of working model encourages a collaborative environment as each time we took breaks, we shared and reflected on our progress, our frustrations and our triumphs.

Setting up our laptops and bits and bobs on the old rickety dining table was an exciting start to the retreat. Seeing everyone's devices, books, pens, papers, drink bottles and small comforts from

home brought to the table made me feel at home too. It felt good to be able to find the time and space to work as individuals and as a group, particularly as many of us went through our Masters and PhD journeys through COVID-19 lock-downs. Finally, the time had arrived where we could organise and mobilise to have a few days of peace and productive quiet away time from our usual environments, to think, write and read in a home away from home. Our collective participation in this retreat disrupted the myth of the solitary PhD student writing alone in a locked room. We began each morning with an 8 am start which was great because we were all early risers. The work dining table filled with cups of coffee and bowls of breakfast mixed with the invisible flows of thoughts and ideas for the work ahead of us. Throughout the days of writing, the background noises for me were a pleasant chime of keyboards, clicks, magpies, the crunching of chips and the sipping of teas. I found the atmosphere to be conducive to quiet reading and writing time, especially as the sounds and the organisation of the space made me feel at home, away from home.

The sense of positive peer-pressure strengthened as each hour passed with the knowledge that everyone around the table was chipping away at a paper or putting together the final sentence in a draft. This was different to working alone at home or even at the shared office spaces on campus. I find in my usual settings, there tends to be an array of distractions, however at the retreat, these distractions were limited as we established clear boundaries about when we would have breaks together, and that we all appreciated the quietness of the working time blocks. Breaks were punctuated with talks about frustrations, observations, and breakthroughs with our to-do lists. We grew to understand each other's projects in more depth and learn how each person best worked under this kind of a peer-pressure environment. Some took more breaks than others, some worked longer hours than others, but everyone respected each individual's needs and workflows. The environment was supportive and caring as we also engaged in activities of reading one another's work, providing advice and suggestions on how best to shape our writing. Care extended beyond the work table as we collectively shared the responsibilities of cleaning, cooking, sunscreen, hats for the sun and lending extra bedsheets to those who forgot to pack theirs (me!).

Collegiality and collaboration

We worked in time blocks which changed each day depending on how productive we were feeling. In terms of getting my own work done, I found each of the two-hour writing blocks sometimes long and sometimes not long enough! For this retreat I was working on a first draft for a thesis chapter/publication. For me, I found the editing process each day was a little bit gruelling and exhausting, how many times can you really refine a sentence!? Nonetheless, by the end of the retreat, I managed to finish the full draft which felt like a big accomplishment. I felt proud of my progress and felt grateful to have the opportunity to work in such a peaceful and collaborative environment.

The opportunity to engage in so many diverse conversations about all kinds of topics (some academic, some just for a laugh) with everyone brought me closer to my peers and made me feel less like a solitary PhD student archetype. We all brought our personal experiences and intellectual musings to each breakfast, lunch, dinner and visits to the beach nearby. Based on my experience of this retreat, I hope to organise another one and I would recommend these types of retreats to any writers looking to connect with peers and colleagues who share similar work ethics and goals to achieve their academic ambitions. Selecting a space that is conducive to quiet writing time and access to nature to break up the day is the ideal space for productive, positive and peaceful work.

Aireen

Struggle

Whenever I write a journal article, I prioritise adhering to the writing conventions, encompassing style and organisation to ensure that my work is comprehensible to readers. But my PhD thesis was different. I wanted it to reflect my voice. Yet I found it difficult to meet the sweet spot of ensuring readability without sacrificing much of my voice. I tend to write in a lyrical style, almost

resembling literature – a style I find particularly enjoyable. However, without caution, this style may be unsuitable for academic writing and potentially undermine the clarity of my work. I did not want to risk confusing my thesis supervisors, editors, and reviewers. Yet at the same time, I wished that my voice was strongly present in my thesis. It has been a persistent challenge not to be imprisoned by the constraints of academic writing traditions yet ensure my work's clarity and readability. Then came our writing retreat. Day one of our retreat led me to a moment of deep conversation with myself. I decided to tell myself a fiction as I went about writing my thesis for the next three days. I told myself that I was a cartographer; that we were all cartographers in Tolkien's world of Middle-earth.

The fiction I told myself

As cartographers, I imagined our task was to make maps that convey the information we want to show in a comprehensible way. Our job was to follow certain conventions such as using metric information, symbols, reference points, and other elements to represent Middle-earth's terrains accurately to help travellers who rely on the information being correct and easily understandable. But at the same time, maps are distortions of reality (Monmonier, 1991). The degree of the distortion depends on the choices made by the cartographer for the purpose of the map. Moreover, as cartographers, we had the opportunity to incorporate our own artistic flair into our work, such as choosing a particular colour scheme or using illustrations to provide additional information. In this way, we can make our maps not only informative but also reflect our thoughts. As such, I imagined us all curating information we wish to show our audience, an activity that involves choices about what to include, how to depict it, and how to translate the three-dimensional surface of the earth onto a two-dimensional map. But along the process, we needed to make trade-offs and compromises to create maps that are useful and informative, but these choices inevitably introduce some degree of distortion and subjectivity. Upon reflecting on my secret fictional world during our writing retreat, I found parallels between cartography and writing PhD theses. Like cartography, scholarly writing always has trade-offs. As PhD students, we can explore new ways of presenting our ideas, but it should come with adherence to established writing conventions such as proper citation and formatting to provide clarity to readers.

Of retreats and daydreams

The writing retreat has served as a temporary fictional setting whereby I created a unique environment of being cartographers in Tolkien's fictional place. Aside from finding a peaceful setting, surrounded by like-minded people who share a common passion for scholarship, I was able to have a headspace to reconsider my relationship with my thesis. Just as cartographers make choices about what to include on a map, writing my thesis took a lot of decisions and choices to be made. And just as maps are not neutral or objective representations of geographic information, I was able to see how I need to explain with clarity my bias. I reckoned that clarity need not sacrifice style. While I am still struggling, I have had a different relationship with my thesis. The retreat offered a break from the ordinary and provided a unique opportunity to explore new perspectives about writing. Of course, our experience of a writing retreat was not entirely fictional, as it involved real people, real settings, and real activities. But it was a special type of circumstance that enabled creative thinking and writing, and that had an impact on my approach to writing.

Of fiction and reality

Upon post-retreat writing days, I reckoned, maybe imagining myself and my colleagues as cartographers was not as fictional as I thought. After all, "We would not be able to experience emotions in the fictional world unless there was some connection between the two worlds" (Mathies, 2020, p. 326). Maybe we were all writing fiction to an extent.

I have heard somewhere that all writing reinvents reality – in different ways and that fiction is never an infidelity to reality. Rather, it is a bias to one way of representing reality. This is perhaps what Austin (2010) meant by "useful fictions" in which humans can use narratives to make sense of experiences as we tell ourselves stories that reflect our realities. On this note, the success of our writing retreat is beyond measure. It might be true that our university may have allocated funds to support our writing retreats with the aim of boosting our productivity. However, retreats extend beyond productivity. The introspection and reflection that these retreats promote can lead to renewed relationship with writing, secret fictional worlds, and collaborative reflections such as this paper. This is also a clap back against the publish-or-perish regime that imposes the culture of productivity especially on new scholars. To this guilt of productivity culture, this is my message: whatever! In the end, I found myself caught between two reckonings and I am not sure which made more sense: telling myself fiction or grasping that it might not be fiction after all. Regardless, I am a cartographer, a trailblazer of the written word. Period!

Appendix B – daily writing schedule plan

Daily writing schedule

As we are all attending with the same intention to write and complete parts of our research project, please be mindful of the scheduled writing times and reserve these times for uninterrupted work time. If you need to take calls, attend meetings or would like to chat, please take this away from the communal space.

The writing retreat will have a schedule for each day which will be broken up with individual writing time and also writing activities to keep us motivated and accountable to our goals for the retreat.

We can try mixed methods for each of the writing blocks such as using the Pomodoro technique. This technique involved quiet, uninterrupted writing for a block and then a short break. We can go for 25 minutes with a 5 minute break or, 50 minutes with a 10 minute break.

Monday 23rd January

Time	Activity
2pm – 3pm	• Check in • Supermarket shop for dinners
3pm – 5pm	• Writing out goals for the retreat/2023 • Discussion of what we are all working on • Quiet free-writing time for remainder of time slot
5pm onwards	• Prep for dinner • Group meal • Leisure time – walk to beach/board game/movie

Tuesday 24th January and Wednesday 25th January

The next two full days of writing will commence from 8am. You are welcome to join the morning session at any time, but please do so quietly.

Jess has suggested this Pomodoro method of 50 mins work 10 mins break https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TZrt8Ktl8hk&t=8745s

Time	Activity
8 am – 10am	Quiet individual writing time
10 am – 10:30am	Morning tea break
11 am – 1pm	Quiet individual writing time
1 pm – 2pm	Lunch break
2 pm – 3pm	Writing exercise (TBC)
3 pm – 3:30pm	Afternoon tea break
4 pm – 5pm	Individual writing time
6 pm onwards	Prep for dinner, group meal and evening leisure time – walk to beach/board game/movie

Thursday 26th January

We are checking out by 2 pm on this day so the schedule is slightly different.

Time	Activity
8 am – 10am	Quiet individual writing time
10 am – 10:30am	Morning tea break
11 am – 1pm	Quiet individual writing time
1:30 pm – 2pm	Pack up and check out
2 pm onwards	Drive back to Sydney