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The hidden garden: cultivating relational writing through intimate encounters in the collective research journey

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ABSTRACT

Relational writing offers an alternative approach to traditional writing and is a process to explore intimacy in togetherness. In this paper, we offer a bouquet of stories that we, eight scholars, have written collectively to share our memories of researching and writing together over the past three years. Ours was not a linear journey; it evolved organically, like a rhizome. With our intention to relate, intimacy followed. We contend that this intimacy can help us withstand the pressures of the neoliberal academy, foster care and, most importantly, flourish like a garden. We find that the journey of relational writing nurtures new ideas and possibilities, it is not just transactional, but cultivated. This paper, therefore, contributes to emergent theorising on collective writing and writing differently by advancing the concept, practice and experience of relational writing across aesthetic, moral and political dimensions.

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Relational writing; collective writing; rhizome; intimate encounters; memory work

Prelude | It began with an invitation

In mid-2020, an email was circulated in our department (a Management department in an Australian Business School) to start a conversation about what it means to be an academic working at a higher education institution in contemporary Australia (see Exhibit 1). The academics writing the email had planned to attend and present at an international conference on 'Humanising the Academy', which was subsequently cancelled due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Colleagues in the department were invited to participate in a research project that would explore non-traditional ways of constructing academic identity, particularly in response to the challenges and uncertainties raised by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Exhibit 1: Initial Project Invitation

Dear colleagues,

Please see below the details of an invitation to take part in a research project that a few of us are involved with.

Academic identity before, during, and after Covid-19

Idea

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*Equal contribution with names listed in reversed alphabetical order.

This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

A while back and through informal personal, peer, and collective reflections, a few of us started a conversation about what it means to be academics working at a higher education institution in Australia. We had planned to attend and present our reflections at a conference on 'Humanising the Academy' later this month. The Covid-19 outbreak not only changed our plans, it has also challenged how we as academics work. Specifically, the blurring of work and home boundaries and the digitalisation of academic work have further contributed to the complexities of academia.

We acknowledge that we all live academia differently, have different notions of the 'ideal' academic, and therefore may respond in various ways to institutional and societal pressures before, during and after Covid-19 times. If we afford ourselves the time to critically reflect on these statements, we will have some interesting conceptualisations of academia and what academic life means to us.

Intention

Our intention is to capture the diverse academic identities in our department and our diverse responses to the demands of academic work. We would like to experiment with exciting research methods which aren't traditionally employed in management. We would also like to present the research in non-typical fashion. We are often constrained by the formalities of academic writing and so this is a chance for us to 'write differently'.

Invitation

This is a small research project with the possibility for the participants to be collaborators/co-authors. We would like to invite all our colleagues to be a part of the research. This means we will need to have complete trust in each other as we collaborate.

Involvement

The research will involve individual/group drawings (visual depictions), self-reflections, and online/face-to-face meetings. We aim to submit our final piece in a journal, although there is a call for chapters [link to external site] about this topic which we could also consider.

If you are interested to be involved in this project, please let us know by **Friday 19 June** by specifying your interest to be involved as a participant only, or participant and collaborator/co-author here [link to shared document].

We look forward to hearing from you.

Kind regards,

(Names removed for anonymity)

Some 15 colleagues responded to this initial invitation, comprising 3 men and 12 women. Each joined the group primarily for connection and a chance to explore the nature of academic identity in a difficult time. Personal growth and relationality were at the fore, with academic outputs an added bonus if opportunities arose. The first seedling of our project sprouted when 13 of us from the initial group (2 ultimately decided not to participate) used various arts-based methods to create individual portraits of our academic identity, documented in photographs, drawings, paintings and poetry (Figure 1). These portraits were planted in the form of a co-authored book chapter on 'doing academic careers differently' which used the 'bushland' as a metaphor for collectively creating conditions for academics to flourish in the context of the neoliberal academy (Ahuja et al. 2023). This seedling gave us the emotional connection we longed for in a unique time – grappling with the turbulence and uncertainty of a global pandemic, as well as the day-to-day pressures of working in the neoliberal academy.

In Australia, as in many other parts of the world, neoliberal ideology has permeated the academic world, creating universities that prioritise profitability at the expense of academic freedom and collegiality (Fleming 2020). Our beginnings in the bushland became a hidden garden we stumbled into during our subsequent projects – a source of learning, healing and rejuvenation. Many of the themes of our initial project have since sprouted into new collective endeavours. Importantly, our curiosity moved away from a singular academic identity and toward a focus on the collective: who are we *together*?

In the three years since the initial invitation, our group and its research and writing activities have evolved organically, much like a rhizome (Figure 1). Along the way, colleagues have withdrawn, for a variety of personal reasons (e.g. time commitments, ideological differences) and work reasons (e.g. teaching loads, differing career aspirations, research priorities). Yet the roots from our seedling have grown, fertilised by our curiosity, appetite for connection and a longing for togetherness (Figure 1). Expanding the rhizome, as a smaller nodule of 10, 1 man and 9 women, we turned, for our second project, to collective writing and the method of memory work – a feminist-inspired collaborative research method (Onyx and Small 2001; Ryan et al. 2021). The method fostered a novel sense of 'collective collegiality', a concept we forged and wrote about in a journal article to describe how collegiality can emerge through acts of care within neoliberal settings (Gavin et al. 2024). Writing

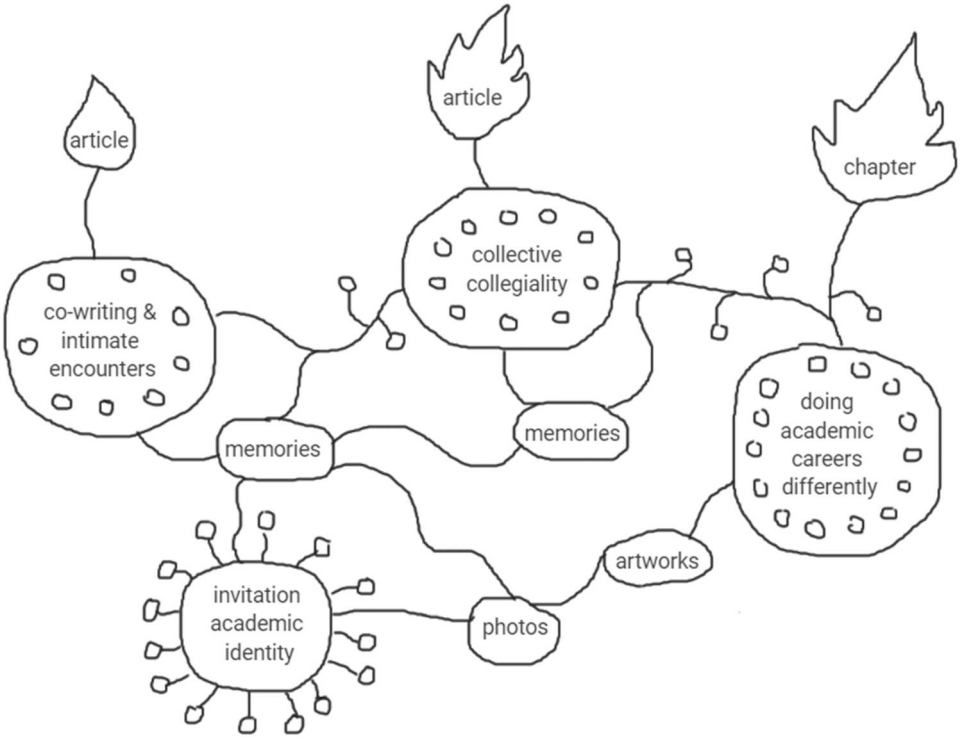

Figure 1. A rhizomatic, three-year project on academic identity, collegiality and co-writing.

Note: This figure depicts our research journey over the last three years. We began with an 'invitation' into an academic identity project. Over time, this grew organically into researching various topics (e.g. collective collegiality, co-writing), using diverse research methods (e.g. memories, photos, drawing) and producing different outputs (e.g. articles, chapter). The dots represent us as individuals along the collective research journey.

collectively to create this research output, both as participants and researchers we found ourselves unified through sharing intimate moments of play, care and learning. These intimate moments were much more than a group working towards common outcomes, i.e. research outputs. They emerged as forms of relational connection and shaped how we understood ourselves both individually and as part of our academic community.

It is these intimate moments in our research journey that we now explore in this article. The group has morphed into a node of eight core members, all women, who now document our experiences with relational writing (Figure 1). By reflecting on our projects through our memories, we explore the cultivation of relational writing through intimate encounters in the collective research journey. We show the interconnected nature of writing and research and how relationality can enhance not only the outputs of research but the experience of producing them. We wish to emphasise, however, that outputs are not the defining feature of our research experience as a whole – which is about our togetherness, our identities, and forging a path within contemporary academia.

Introduction – understanding the terrain

In this paper, the eight of us write together and offer an alternative approach to traditional writing where authors typically use writing as a means to produce a textual outcome. We feel that the act of writing has more to offer (Helin 2019). We follow the movement towards embracing 'boutique methodologies', such as autoethnography and participatory action research, which allow researchers and writers to explore subjectivity and the construction of self (Jordan and Wood 2017). We bring the voice of research participants, context and topic to the fore and explore relational writing (Helin

2019; Madsen et al. 2018) by drawing on collective research via memories. We are particularly interested in exploring how relational writing can foster intimacy and togetherness among co-writers.

We understand, as others have described that

> all academic writing is relational, as writers connect themselves not only to co-authors and readers, but also to those whose work they build on, the resources they engage with, the reviewers and editors who help the development of a manuscript. (Boncori 2023, 54)

Relational writing is a process rather than an end step of research (Boncori 2023). We see relational writing both as a practice and as a philosophy. For us, relational writing was both the set of practical writing strategies that enabled us to document our togetherness, as well as a conceptual way of thinking about that togetherness, about our relations to each other. Relational writing thereby enables creativity and connection between participants and presents further opportunities for discovery (Helin 2019). Relational writing challenges the emphasis on individualism and competition, enabling a more collaborative and intersubjective approach to knowledge production (Helin 2013). It offers space for authentic, creative, and joyful engagement as well as intimacy, countering the performative targets and managerialism that characterise the neoliberal university (Verster et al. 2023).

We name this metaphoric space of relationality the 'hidden garden', because, as you will see, it can be hard to find. Metaphors are useful in decomposing and making sense of abstract concepts (Lakoff and Johnson 1980), such as relationality, intimacy and togetherness. We have chosen the hidden garden metaphor to describe a relational and organic space which fosters intimacy and counters the neoliberal academy. It builds upon the 'bushland' metaphor from a previous publication in this project (Ahuja et al. 2023, 75), which framed our inquiry at the time 'to unpick the conditions we need to flourish individually, and how we can create those conditions collectively'. Our hidden garden is revealed by building intimate relationships that enable us to peer through the neoliberal forest to see the trees. The hidden garden is where we can freely play, experiment and cultivate our ideas and writing, away from some of the pressures of the neoliberal academy. It is a place into which we escape, a place to rejuvenate through care and togetherness. However, we note that metaphors are not perfect as they do not always precisely capture the full meaning of abstract objects (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). With this in mind, we use multiple gardening metaphors in this paper, each capturing a part of the concept, a part of the path to a hidden garden.

An important feature of our hidden garden is the rhizome. A rhizome is a type of plant structure in which there is a mass of roots that spread haphazardly like ginger or turmeric. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) use the rhizome as a metaphor to understand the world in a non-linear and non-hierarchical way. Taking inspiration from their work, we see our hidden garden as a mass of roots: each of us coming to this project with different ideas and orientations. Relational writing, for us, has been like a rhizome. We spread and grew in multiple directions at once, resisting a hierarchy and linear thinking. The rhizome informed our writing practices and strategies, as well as provided conceptual inspiration to understand our relationships differently. The foundations of our hidden garden, therefore, were multiple rather than singular, and we sought to maintain this structure as we practiced and thought about relational writing.

Relationality is core to our project. Relational writing is conceptualised as ways of relating to each other through the writing and research processes which are inherently intertwined (Helin 2013; Jaramillo et al. 2023). We see relational writing as part of the emerging 'writing differently' movement in management and organisation studies (Gilmore, Harding, and Pullen 2019), which seeks to challenge how we write (as well as what we write) in terms of aesthetics, politics, and morals (Grey and Sinclair 2006). The writing differently movement offers novel ways for us to communicate, to connect, to understand, and to be. The writing differently movement is composed of both different writing practices and different ways of thinking about writing, often concurrently. To this extent, in this paper we demonstrate that relational writing is an alternative to traditional research practices and writing, one which promotes intimacy in togetherness. It is a more inclusive, collective and generative approach to research and writing, that can foster new ideas and possibilities. This approach contrasts with the

neoliberal perspective that creates fear, distrust, and pressure to perform in which research projects must be solely outcome-driven and strategically planned (Campbell et al. 2024).

To explore the journey of relational writing we draw on memory work. Memory work involves participants writing detailed memories based on a specific cue, followed by collective discussions to identify commonalities, contradictions, and gaps (Onyx and Small 2001). The process includes theorising these discussions in the context of relevant literature, and culminates in collaborative writing and revising to synthesise and reflect on the findings. For this article, we each individually wrote a memory of a time we 'experienced an intimate encounter during the research project'; reflecting back to the point our initial seed was planted three years prior. The memories were anonymised and written from a third-person perspective, which enabled us to reveal a part of ourselves while also maintaining a sense of privacy and distance (Onyx and Small 2001). We explore, individually, our deepest thoughts and emotions about what we experienced and felt during those three years of working together. These memories are planted in boxes throughout the paper. As per the memory work methodology, we met as a collective to discuss the memories. These discussions were recorded and transcribed and form the basis of our discussions of the memories that follow each box; quotes from the transcripts are in quoted text. We collectively wrote these narratives. By collective writing, we mean that we were physically in the shared (online) document together at the same time, discussing our thoughts both in parallel online meetings and adding words, reflective comments, and editing as we wrote.

The memories follow our rhizomatic journey from the initial invitation to collaborate, through the process of collective inquiry and co-writing; demonstrating the different emotions that this process evoked. Ours is a message of multiplicity, rather than singularity. In a similar way to Ahonen et al. (2020, 467) then, we find that 'this writing experiment does not form a unitary voice, it forms a collective voice'. Every time we encountered each other, we sparked new directions, new ideas and new practices of writing collectively. This rhizomatic way of developing our writing and research is intertwined with our core motivation for relational writing. We write to change the way we view our relations, our research, and ourselves; the hidden garden nourishes the space for relational writing to flourish in philosophy and practice. Our paper therefore adds to the rich and growing body of work on writing differently (Grey and Sinclair 2006; Pullen, Helin, and Harding 2020) and writing collectively (Einola et al. 2021; Johansson et al. 2024) by showing how writing is intertwined with research, how it develops through relationality, and ways that relational writing can foster intimacy in togetherness (Helin 2019; Jaramillo et al. 2023; Johansson et al. 2024).

Planting the seed | Uncertain beginnings

Michelle remembered when a written invitation was circulated inviting academics in the Department onto a new research project. Almost immediately she clicked into the shared document and added her name. She barely thought twice about it.

It crossed her mind that this invitation would open both opportunities and challenges for Michelle. It felt like someone was reaching out to her. Yet there was no one around her at the time. She was alone. At her computer. There was no one she could share this with or talk to.

She was still really new in her Department and, with the pandemic hitting, it made it even more difficult for her to 'meet' people at her institution. She thought perhaps this would be a way for her to meet new people but also a way to be a member of a new project. Was this the right project for her? She had no idea. Being 'new' she felt immense pressure to 'perform' and show she was active and eager and competent. Before the pandemic, she had reached out to many more established colleagues to meet and learn about their work, perhaps a little bit desperate to build her network and make herself 'known'.

Michelle felt she had no idea how to navigate 'academia'. This was her first 'real job' in academia and also at a new institution. She felt she had to grab every opportunity, or what seemed like an opportunity, even if she had no idea what she was doing.

The project itself wasn't on a topic she was remotely familiar with (academic identity!). It was extremely different to her discipline area.

She checked back in a couple of times later on to see who else added their names to the project on the shared document. People were adding names that Michelle recognised but she didn't really know who these people (her 'colleagues') were.

But she didn't feel so quite alone because of the invitation. So rarely had someone asked her to be part of their project.

A difficult time – the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown – evoked a longing for relationality. The feelings of uncertainty, of unknowing, that we experienced in new or changing environments were substantial. This need for relationality resulting from moments of uncertainty permeates our research projects. We planted multiple seeds and, in doing so, relationality unexpectedly flourished. We adopted arts-based methods and memory work as collaborative inquiry methods to explore our own academic identity and bring forward our experiences of collegiality (Ryan et al. 2021). Emma, in one of our group sessions, noted that the arts-based method was 'a fun thing to do' and that memory work was a collective sense-making process that would enable us to connect and interact with each other (Mandalaki and Daou 2021).

The vast majority of us (the researchers and writers in this project/paper) are non-experts in the practice and/or theory of writing differently. We feel insecure, uncertain about our own writing, particularly sharing it with an unknown audience. We have the embodied knowledge of putting pen to paper, fingers to keyboard, words to text, but not necessarily the academic knowledge. This absence of 'correct' knowledge or concerns with 'fitting in' sometimes permeated the project, as Daisy reflected in group settings that 'the imposter idea … from the very beginning of the project, that's something I kind of keep feeling'. Yet, we also felt that spark of excitement which comes with something new as we cultivated knowledge and practiced collectively – a new language to explain our experiences, a new language to share with others, a new way of belonging in and beyond the academy. To follow this spark and let the roots of the seed grow, as a group, we needed faith. The new seedlings from these uncertain beginnings were infused with a hope for something beautiful to grow. In our group we hoped for togetherness. While some had pre-existing close relationships, most of us entered the project with others we did not know, or at least did not know well.

At the beginning of the first project, and throughout much of it, we were isolated – physically and perhaps emotionally – due to the pandemic but also because of the individualistic nature of academic work. We had already felt a sense of connection and inclusion through the open invitation to join the project and, in a leap of faith, we shared our intimate stories, embarking on the journey into collective research and writing.

We all had a genuine interest in the topic we were initially invited to explore – what it means to be an academic. For most of us, it was a personal inquiry in knowing who we are – not only our identity as academics but as human beings, with complex feelings, emotions, and anxieties. Often, the pressure to meet expectations and not disappoint others results in saying 'yes' to projects and people, even when we are pressed for time or already overworked. In this instance, saying 'yes' was a response to loneliness and disconnection. And while the project may have been a steep learning curve, adding to our heavy workloads, we hoped it would result in new connections, personal growth, and more certainty.

The rhizome forms | Shared spaces to nurture intimacy

The day the project team gathered on campus to discuss and analyse their memories of collegiality, Daisy engaged in meaningful conversation. A sense of anticipation filled the air! Although it was a warm spring day, the room was cold, but the desks were set up to create a warm togetherness. They also had a sketch artist capturing the essence of their interactions, a visual representation of their shared experiences. Daisy felt this was a unique addition that added a layer of significance to the occasion, making it feel like a momentous event.

After working remotely for nearly a year, the team's reunion held great emotional significance. Meeting in person rekindled a sense of connection that had been absent during the virtual collaboration. For Daisy, this physical gathering brought immense joy, nourishing her job satisfaction and revitalising her energy for the ongoing project. The power of face-to-face interaction became evident as they exchanged ideas, discussed a pathway for the next steps and reaffirmed their commitment to the project. Daisy noticed the change in the bodily experiences she had previously encountered during remote sessions. The intense mental concentration and stress induced by the online environment dissipated as they gathered face-to-face. She felt the intimacy of gestures, facial expressions, movements, and interactions. The physical presence of her colleagues allowed for a more natural and seamless interaction, enabling them to engage fully without the barriers imposed by technology.

During the meeting, the project team discussed their collegiality experiences and neoliberal academia's impact on their relationships with colleagues, with their work. Daisy found this conversation particularly profound, as each member spoke sincerely and openly. It was a refreshing departure from the performance-driven culture enforced by the neoliberal academy, where academics are often pressured to prioritise competition over collaboration. Daisy believed the team's willingness to engage in genuine dialogue created an environment of trust and authenticity.

In the Covid-19 context, our project morphed between the online screen and the physical office. Just as gardeners ensure that seedlings grow under favourable light, temperature or humidity conditions, we nurtured our project, through fostering shared spaces that allowed a rhizomic development of intimacy. Online was a space we had come to know due to our teaching, and so we had prescribed norms and behaviours that our students had modelled for us. Embarking on a collective project during this time was nerve-wracking. We know the trials of 'group work' that our students experience. It is fraught with problems – social loafing, ghosting, dominant voices, silenced or 'muted' voices. But we ensured that our online space was different; that we first and foremost prioritised relationships, trust, and humility. We shared the space by giving time and attention to each of us and listening to each other's ideas (Helin 2013). We 'Zoom-ed' in and out. We shared our memories and the narrative that flowed. We turned, as many academic projects do, to inscribing our experiences on the page.

Our one on-campus encounter enabled us to 'do research' in a more joyful and refreshing way than we had become used to during the lockdowns of the pandemic. Researching together, in one room, was an opportunity for relationship-building and human connection, orienting ourselves in the physical space. Intimacy seemed to flow from the togetherness in this space. For some of us, seeing each other's body language, facial expressions, and important visual cues around the meaning of their words allowed intimacy to be created. This relationality, the orientation between our self and others, allowed the project to grow in different directions just as a seedling leans towards the light or a rhizome spreads into new soil. The feelings of togetherness compelled us to continue to research and write relationally, always first and foremost emphasising connections between each other.

But interacting online was an inevitable part of the project. According to Daisy's comment in our group, it induced 'intense mental concentration and stress … I think the physical space really helped to open those relationships, develop those relationships, but the online space was much more isolating and difficult'. We were longing to experience each other in the same room, to fully sense the togetherness. Would that longing be the same if we did not have to go through a period of extended isolation? Probably not. But, as Michelle noted during group reflections, it showed us how important seeing and being seen in person, and together, was, 'how physical space can influence our feelings of intimacy … so notions of warmth versus cold … the notion of being physically present is important to fostering intimacy. It seems more natural, seems more fulfilling compared to being online'.

Intercropping | Weaving with text

'Who knew that an intimate encounter could arise through text?' she thought. Although the worst of the lockdowns were over, most people, including her, were still working from a distance. Scattered far and wide, away from that communal area in which they had once met daily. She had deeply felt the impact of that physical distance. She had felt isolated and lonely for many months. Somewhat ironically, she knew that she was not alone in this feeling. She knew, because she had continued to work on a special project with a group of colleagues. This special project had shifted and changed over time, but at the core it was still about academics connecting over their shared experiences of academia […]

Although she felt that writing journal articles could often be dull, painstaking work, it hadn't been in this case. She felt connected when she opened the document, shared on the Teams Site, and saw the layers of text and the comments from her colleagues. To her, the layers of text represented the layers of encounters with her colleagues, and the comments were her colleagues reaching beyond the text to engage. Typing, adding words, changing a sentence structure all felt like an intimate encounter. Taking words from each other, testing them out, finding which fits. One colleague writes long, winding, beautiful comments discussing word choices. Another colleague writes short, sharp practical recommendations. She edits sentences collaboratively written. She strengthens her relationship with her colleagues through adding their suggestions here and there and everywhere. She was surprised that so intimate a feeling of collegiality could arise through text, but she embraced it, countering some of that isolation and loneliness.

Unexpectedly, we found writing was a medium through which we could have intimate encounters. It was not only writing but the combination of writing, reading, responding, correcting or conversing that were mutually reinforcing. We were intercropping – cultivating multiple crops in the same space and time as we learned about each other through writing in a shared document, weaving the text. Writing collectively empowered us in transferring our individual and collective feelings, experiences and vulnerabilities to text (Ahonen et al. 2020). Reaching out, writer to reader and reader to writer, through text helps us to counter moments of loneliness and isolation. This can be through the practice of writing together whilst apart. Sitting down with a document and putting words to page and seeing the marks of others cultivates intimacy, like the author of this memory explained: 'She strengthens her relationship with her colleagues through adding their suggestions here and there and everywhere'.

Our fast-changing digital world allows this to be done throughout time and space in ways that were not possible two, ten or twenty years ago (Lowry, Curtis, and Lowry 2004). We can write at different times during the day yet be aligned and present on the page (quite literally 'on the same page'). Like different crops growing at different times and scales, but still belonging to the same field, still complementing each other. Traces of each individual can be left – small comments in the margin, in digital notes – as the writing morphs towards a whole. A cacophony of voices made intelligible through the processes of writing. In short, co-writing is a relational experience. Layers of ourselves are added to the writing, layers of intimacy grow.

Our feelings of being isolated gave meaning to another form of encounter. With writing we felt the closeness despite being in different locations spread across the city. We wrote and then used the comments from other members of our group to adapt and improve our message. We wrote relationally. We wrote intimately. Often that would mean adding a voice of another person to ours. At times, we would delete our own voice. This process of engaging with the thoughts of others through text was surprisingly intimate; we learnt how others view the world, gaining insights into their personalities that might not otherwise be revealed. This relationality meant that we progressed despite our differences. It meant that we became aware of our differences – how we write, rewrite, comment, respond to others' feedback. Like in intercropping where different plants can flower, grow and be harvested alongside each other but in different ways and times. These crops use different resources and hence the overall yield is improved. Our differences enhanced the writing, producing something none of us could create alone. It was not always easy, it felt, sometimes, overwhelming. But it was through shared writing that we found intellectual and emotional support, nurturing collaborative engagement within our group.

Climbing the trellis | Innocence lost

Taking a photo to express her academic identity sounded like a fun idea – she mulled around all the things that academia means – lovely old libraries; books; quadrangles with ivy growing up the walls; knowledge and learning …

She had not that long ago been in an old library and so she scrolled through her phone looking for the photo she had taken of books and stained glass and soaring ceilings. She checked the research project instructions, 'something that expresses your experience of being an academic today'. Does 'today' mean actually today, during lockdown, at home or just in modern times? She felt anxious, what would her colleagues think – is it pretentious to think of 'ivory towers' as her academic life?

She went into the file on Teams and opened up one of her colleague's pictures – a desk at home. Oh, what a disappointment. This is real life as an academic – a computer screen on a desk. She felt very much brought down to earth and rather sad. She also worried that maybe she had just cheated or broken the rules – she was now heavily influenced by her colleague's perspective. Slight panic ensued – she was unable to return to a state of innocence. Now she could not really think of what academia meant, today, other than her desk, in her home.

She felt conflicted – what was the right course of action? Did she want to expose her high-minded ideas of academia or should she just take a picture of her desk. Her desk won – with a few personal touches – this was her academic identity, today, but she was not happy about it.

Co-researching and collective writing inevitably mean we are influenced by each other. As individuals we climb like peas on a trellis – we support each other to reach new heights and sometimes our stems become indistinguishable from each other, they tangle and are impossible to separate. Having our peers around us can be both positive and negative. When writing or researching collectively, is it bad if we hide our ideas or get pushed into a group approach that we are not entirely comfortable with? Is it good if we start to encompass the ideas of others into our own thinking to allow them to mingle and spark new directions? Should we feel guilty if we 'break the rules' of collective writing and, like the author of this memory, feel we are 'unable to return to a state of innocence'? To what extent should individual voices be harmonised or permitted to stand out? (Helin 2023). What causes feelings of judgement or pressure to fit in or 'groupthink'?

As we write, we try hard to find a balance, to write together whilst ensuring our diversity shines through. How do we write 'dirty' but also clean? (Pullen and Rhodes 2008). Our reflections have been edited by the collective, while the memories stay 'pure'. Yet even as the passages become more collectively written, there is a desire to still 'hear' the voices of each of our contributions. We want to climb a trellis like peas, but in our own unique ways. There are no purely collectively or individually written projects. To a degree we are always shaped by those that surround us but *how* we are shaped is an important, relational, question.

Working with others makes us question ourselves and reflect deeply on how and why we do what we do, not just in this project but in our broader academic life. Can seeing the work of others suppress our individuality or does it embolden us to express our ideas? We grapple with the idea of portraying academia in its traditional, romanticised form, symbolised by old buildings, dusty books, long corridors, and high ceilings, while being confronted with the practicality of the present, a simple desk and computer (Figure 2).

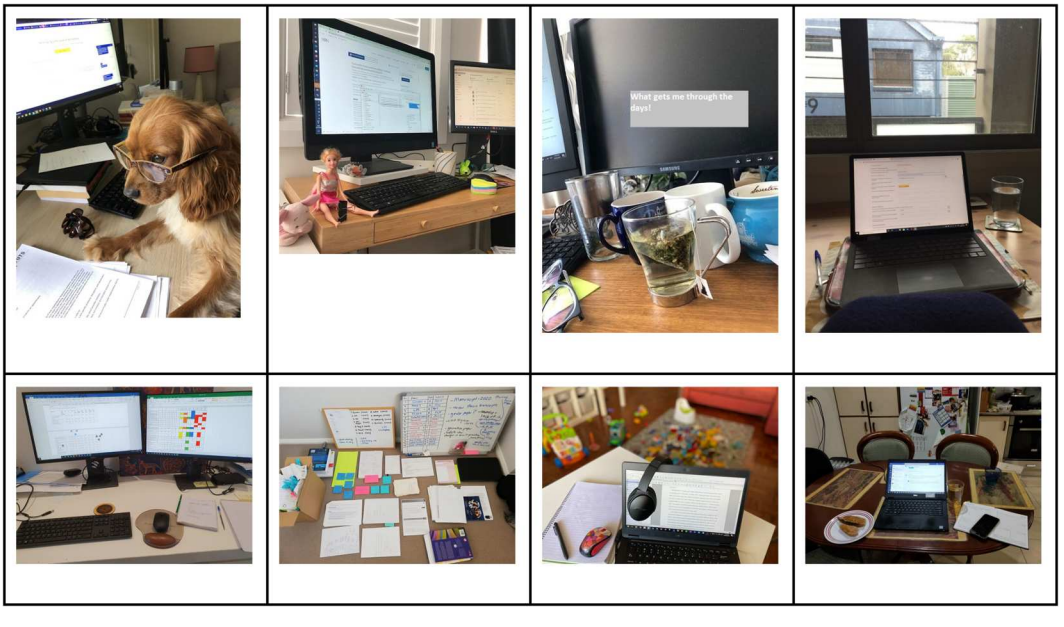

Figure 2. A selection of initial images for the project.

Note: This is a sample of images individually taken by group members early in the project on academic identity and during the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic. The photos were taken to form a visual abstract for a book chapter proposal. We were tasked with creating a visual representation of what it means to be an academic. We ended up taking very similar pictures, perhaps because we could see each other's contributions in the shared folder we created, or perhaps also because we were influenced by our immediate environment – being stuck at home during the pandemic.

We reflected on the importance of our approach in collective projects; when to work alone and when to share. It foregrounds how much insecurity one can have when entering a new project, when everyone wants to portray their best selves – to fit in, but also stand out. Whilst permitting the project to develop organically, like a rhizome, we were aware of the need for structure and process and proper 'project management' to ensure that we could fit the project into everyone's schedules around teaching, research, service (and life), particularly at a time when Covid-19 sucked up our 'spare time'. We could not fully escape the reality of our neoliberal workplace and its modern pressures. We climbed high into our fantasies about academia, research and writing differently, only to fall back to earth when the realities of deadlines, word counts, and publication expectations pushed into our days. Working collectively shone a light on the aspects of our jobs that we love and those that bring anxiety or sadness.

We learnt about balance and boundary-setting. Balance between what we would like to do and what our job prescribes, between opening up, or keeping to ourselves. Between shooting fast to the top of the trellis or exploring sideways, tendrils holding each other for support. We tested these boundaries in order to explore where the right balance lies. Did we make mistakes along the way? Probably?! We learnt from our mistakes; they served as fertile ground for growth, nurturing our academic and personal development. They cultivated a deep sense of friendship and intimacy, a relationality, which profoundly influenced how we chose to go forward.

Boldly blooming | Nurtured uneasiness

Emilia was enjoying this new, unfamiliar way of researching and exploring her thoughts as she was usually involved in projects requiring her quantitative research skills to investigate applied economic questions. The anonymised nature of sharing her visual and written reflections helped her overcome insecurities about not reflecting deeply or writing well enough and trusting such a big group with her personal feelings and thoughts. While they were shared and acknowledged as part of the arts-based exploration of academic identity, they remained separate snippets, the multitude of voices collected and showcased as a collection of different opinions. In the later stage of the research, however, employing memory work, they delved much deeper in that different memories were contrasted, discussed and the insights synthesised, which occasionally instigated controversy as people interpreted the data with their varying lenses of the world and life in academia. One such moment remains in Emilia's memory. It was a long face-to-face meeting at uni following earlier discussions on Zoom (due to Covid-19 lockdowns). The aim of the meeting was to link the memory discussions to the existing literature. Everyone sat in a half circle, and everyone dedicated time to talk (one after the other).

When the discussion moved from collegiality to the neoliberal university, Emilia felt increasingly out of her depth. She had little knowledge of that literature but felt it was a bit 'extreme' in terminology, using words such as 'survival'. At the same time, her experience living in Australia suggested that addressing differences openly might not be appreciated. However, the group had been collaborating for a long time, sharing personal stories and developing trustful relationships. So Emilia decided to voice her unease. The statement initiated a long discussion about using established terminology of literature versus other interpretations of such terminology, during which Emilia reflected that her own background nurtured uneasiness with the terminology used. While most of the group believed in using the established terminology, everyone agreed to acknowledge the differences in views in their collaborative writing. As such, Emilia felt that her difference in opinion was respected.

We feel the uneasiness of venturing into new worlds – those worlds might be new research methods, new discipline areas, new project groups, new terminology, new institutions, new countries or cultures. Being in academia often requires courage. Sometimes the wind of criticism or different world views can blow away our petals revealing our insecurities. Yet, we try again to boldly bloom – we make the decision to move out of our comfort zone to take a risk, a gamble, to learn new things, to take a leap of faith. At what point do we feel safe enough to do this? Do we feel our colleagues will catch us, consider our views and not exclude or 'punish' us? To what extent can we voice other, individual views? Raising your opinion in a group is never easy, particularly when it challenges the group 'norm'. It might be scary at times, revealing that we come from apparently different worlds, with sometimes opposing views. Relationality provides the safety net through which the ideas bounce back and forth. We, as a group, have weaved that net through nurtured friendships, trust and intimacy. We have bloomed together, catching each others' petals when

they fell. We are not scared anymore. Relationships developed through sharing personal stories/memories, so intimacy grew, and it became easier to voice our opinions among the group. We learnt the richness and value of working collectively as our diverse backgrounds and lived experiences contributed to the research process. We were careful to ensure that everyone had a turn – an opportunity to share their personal thoughts.

Our intimate encounters were not always comfortable. Sometimes, due to the diversity of our group, we had to try on a new skin, a new language, a new way of researching, a new way of writing. But we accommodated these differences, realising that they brought new perspectives. While our memories were anonymous to begin with, we chose to verbalise and read out our own memories, contrary to the practice of the memory work methodology. Doing so allowed us to become more familiar with each other's stories and journeys and push back on the homogeneity that a collective research project could produce. With trust blooming, we were able to freely share our experiences and emotions and more boldly bloom. We embraced our differences, leading to genuine caring in our interactions.

Unearthing the rhizome | Blast of emotions

Staring at her screen. Emma tries to write something. Something that describes the event of collegiality. So many of them in her head. Yet she struggles. There is a memory, very recent, which she might not be ready to share. She stares at her screen again. This time tears start trickling down her face. Wiping them with a tissue, she remembers a colleague who is not here anymore. The colleague, her friend who left way too early. Would writing, sharing and talking through this memory help? She stares at the screen. The words are not coming out.

Emma decides to have a break and go for a run. It is winter and a beautiful bright sunny day. She runs through the streets, and the idea of that memory starts coming alive. The words are almost falling from the sky, then sentences, then thoughts. She starts running faster and faster to the point when her legs cannot sprint anymore, to the point when she stops, trying to catch her breath. Crying again, very subtly this time, so other people around do not notice. She looks around. No one can see her. She starts breathing slowly and then returns home.

Sitting down on her chair, Emma stares at her screen and writes the memory. The words are coming out, the sadness is still there. Writing helps, yet the idea of sharing it with others is scary. She writes about her colleague and how their casual chats and hellos in the office building felt warm and friendly. She writes about her friend whose genuine interest in people, willingness to listen, and unwavering support created a nurturing and collegial work environment. However, her story does not reveal that the colleague is not here anymore. Emma does not want that to be in the spotlight. She wants to keep the memory alive, somehow happy, maybe less intimate. She tries to hide her sadness; she writes a happy memory. On the outside, she shares this story with the group. Deep inside, it is a form of healing.

We often wondered how we had become such a close group – when did we morph from a group of colleagues and acquaintances to (dare we say it) a group of friends? It was the power of writing about ourselves and sharing our histories and emotions. Learning through our struggles, whether because of the pandemic and/or the neoliberal context. We selected the memories we felt were relevant for our topic and over time our growing trust in each other led to less self-censorship and the sharing of our more personal feelings. We learned it was necessary to water and care for the plant before it would bear fruit. Harvesting fruit or unearthing a rhizome can be a destructive or painful process, where we cut through any remaining resistance to free the tasty prize.

Due to our prompt, 'write about an intimate encounter', we each selected memories that generated a blast of emotions – happiness, loneliness, joy, grief. Emotions that are sometimes difficult to write, difficult to unearth. Emma explained that her memory was something she 'wanted to hide from initially … Asking somebody to deeply reflect on something that occurred anytime in the not-too-distant past can be difficult'. Writing in the third person, as is common in memory work, facilitated a detachment that allowed us to perceive our experiences from a distant viewpoint. This created a safe space for reflection, enabling us to explore various aspects of our own evolution in relation to others (Mandalaki and Daou 2021). Yet it was still us who would read our memory aloud. It was still us who would reveal a slight piece about ourselves. Relationality meant being

vulnerable (and respectful) and therefore learning about ourselves (Satama, Seeck, and Garcia-Lorenzo 2024). We discussed how the process made us more intimate with ourselves.

Emotion accentuates our connections with one another. Any emotional encounter is a relational encounter, as we invest in or push away from particular objects/others (Ahmed 2014). Emma tried to both push away from, as well as invest in the screen, just as she invested in the memory while trying to get some distance from it. Fleur wondered in our discussions about how the building of trust revealed deeper thoughts, 'how many of us, if we were to go back, would write the same memory or would choose to write something different?'.

Writing becomes a way to keep memories alive, even if there is a struggle in writing them. Writing is the water that helps to soften the earth and permit the rhizome to push into new ground. There is a vulnerability attached to writing memories. Writing triggers emotions, but also becomes a way to heal, to cope with struggle and loss. When we entered into the initial project, we knew that the topic would become personal, it was about our identity after all! Playing in artistic spaces (photography, poetry, drawing) helped to hide some of what we may have felt while simultaneously helping us to articulate what we could not (yet) say. It eased us into our relationship in a non-threatening way. But when it came to sharing our written memories with others, we questioned our intimacy with the topic and our colleagues. Some of us were free to let others in, others were hesitant or took longer. Yet with the passage of time, trust was built. We all started to feel supported through our intimacy, talked about our insecurities, and made ourselves more vulnerable to others. The project had become a therapy in various ways for those of us who were in need.

The fallow field | Embracing the quiet times

Fleur met with her smaller group of 3 colleagues via zoom – it was the preferred method given they were in another Covid-19 lockdown. However she did long to be on campus on one of the many couches scattered around level 6. It was far more comfortable that sitting upright in front of a screen in her bedroom, at a desk that was only supposed to be temporary and therefore too small to hold the array of equipment needed such as a monitor, keyboard, microphone in addition to the laptop and books. Her shoulders and back did not appreciate the set-up and ached after a little while. The cold in the room was also uninviting.

This meeting was going to be a good one as Fleur got along with these colleagues especially. They understood each other's style of writing. They had written together before. They met up socially outside of work hours and connected via social media. Therefore, they spent some time before getting down to business, chatting about families, feelings, happenings in the department. This icebreaker was very necessary in the isolating moments that Fleur experienced at home. She felt understood, like her colleagues truly valued her, not just as a researcher but as a friend. She trusted her colleagues to let them in on her small world, and was happy to provide support in return.

Together they worked on the shared documents. There was the article itself, reading over the methods, the discussion, the conclusion. There was also the response to reviewers document. Fleur found the process of writing with her colleagues to be supportive and very natural. When one of them began typing, they might stop and check in, check that they were understood. Fleur lacked the confidence in her own writing ability and often felt like an imposter, so would often stop and ask for feedback. In this 2-hour online meeting there was never any criticism.

Sometimes there would be questioning – in recognition that they all had slightly different approaches to writing, and different understandings of the topics itself – but they were careful not to frame these challenges negatively. Sometimes there would be silence. There was never any need to break that silence, they were comfortable in that silence. Sometimes there was laughter, and sometimes several team members would talk at the same time. This was part of the process though.

Fleur loved being part of this team, just as much as she relished being part of the wider project group. Each member played a valuable role. There were important research goals to achieve however there were more valuable collegiality outcomes where Fleur felt supported and heard amongst friends.

As with any group, big or small, we naturally tend to gravitate to certain individuals; because they are similar to us, because we share some of the same experiences, or because they simply do not mind the moments when we can sit in silence and have nothing to say. In the moments of isolation or loneliness, we crave even more to experience such closeness. We search out certain scents or colours in our garden. Researching and writing with others – those who we see as friends – is nurtured by relationality and fosters it. As Fleur explained: 'She felt understood, like her colleagues truly valued her, not just as a researcher but as a friend'. We open up about ourselves and listen to others

(Helin 2013). We shared our vulnerabilities which sometimes was easier in the smaller sub-groups rather than with everyone.

Co-writing is not possible without some (or many) protracted moments of silence. Silence is needed to write and reflect. Like leaving a patch of ground fallow, the lack of activity permits rest and recovery of energy. Typically, in projects, you need to 'have the answers' and show you are a valuable, vocal, active contributor. Often in this project, we had many questions, very few answers, and we needed to navigate discomforts together. While sitting quietly, we reflect on the experiences of others, we compare with our own knowledge, and we see ourselves in new ways. There were also times when we sat in silence pondering our own thoughts and the words of others. This silence was a kind of vulnerability shared with others in the group. As Ahonen et al. (2020, 451) says: 'In silence, we open up and become more sensitive to others' vulnerabilities'. We have experienced both kinds of vulnerability; opening up and remaining silent. We feel comfortable in this vulnerability, able to expose ourselves and our ideas because we are seen as a whole person – not just as an academic.

There were parts of the project which required our introspection. Therefore, our memories are focused on ourselves and our feelings, more so than other people. We questioned what intimacy is or looks like and, on unpacking this, found that the intimate encounters came from learning about or uncovering ourselves, and then sharing our learnings with others. There was relationality between the self and others, as well as between members of the group. In our group, one of us noted that the project 'had an extra level of intimacy because we were writing about ourselves … we're reflecting upon our own behaviour'. We found, just like another collective of writers, that 'our individual "narcissism" is lost in a creative polyphony' (Ahonen et al. 2020, 468). As Weatherall (2019, 105) argues: 'Writing is not conducted in some state of romantic individualism, in which a [piece of academic writing] appears after locking oneself in an office, alone, for several months'.

Back to the roots? | Liminality

Looking back at the start of the research project, she realises that there isn't one specific 'intimate encounter' that stands out to her but the potential of the project to foster a stronger bond among team members through numerous 'meaningful connections'. The anticipation and excitement she felt before each team meeting remains vivid in her mind, eagerly awaiting the opportunity to engage with her colleagues and immerse herself in their stories. It was a time when everyone genuinely showed interest in one another's experiences. While most of their interactions took place online, there was a memorable occasion when they met in person on campus. During that meeting, they engaged in deep discussions, shared personal insights, and even challenged each other's assumptions (would this have been accomplished in an online meeting?), fostering a profound sense of connection among them.

However, as the project advanced and the primary focus shifted towards generating tangible outputs, she noticed a shift in the team's dynamics. In the initial stages, there were more opportunities for meaningful connections as the team came together as a whole more frequently and focused on sharing experiences and stories. These moments felt authentic and genuine, leading to a greater sense of closeness and solidarity. But as time went by, the meetings underwent a transformation. They became more structured and task-oriented. Attendance became limited to individuals directly involved in assigned responsibilities, resulting in less personal and emotional engagement.

While reflecting on the project journey, she wonders how meaningful connections can be nurtured and sustained throughout and beyond a project's duration.

Intimacy is not a mere dot or a discrete point, but lines of multiple dots stretched over time, a liminal space of connection. We build intimacy dot by dot (like Figure 1), like an impressionist painting or Indigenous Australian art. Together we weave texture and colour and a full picture from many moments of togetherness. Those dots form a whole. A whole that changes depending on your orientation. 'It was something that was stretched over time … really hard to identify or narrow down to this one particular location, like it was just too fluid for us to really be able to grip or grasp upon it and hold it down', as one of us noticed in our group session. You could stand close and examine each individual dot, each dab of colour, each bud in the garden, and gain a perspective of the singular moment of intimacy or you could stand far away, seeing the dots blur into a whole, appreciating

the full mosaic. The dots might be fixed, but the lines that join them are variable, like the criss-crossing stems of the flowerbed. As flowers turn to the sun, we can turn this way and that, orienting ourselves to various relations with others.

We search for pleasure in our work – not just in the success of outcomes, but in the process of researching together. Afterall, what is success? For us, this project falls somewhere between work and play, it is neither of them nor both of them at the same time. It falls in the liminal spaces of academia where we have some freedom to shape our shifting world, to cultivate our own hidden garden and plant various seeds to flower.

Play requires a careful balance of having fun whilst trusting others not to take things too far. There were instances along the journey where the bubble burst because the rules became too prescriptive, or the cold hard reality of work fell upon our sunny playground like a rainy cloud! As the project progressed, the focus shifted towards generating tangible outputs, leading to a change in the team's dynamics. Meetings became more structured and task-oriented; sometimes it was just about 'getting things done'. The realities of the neoliberal academy kicked in and started taking root again crowding out the space of joy. We slipped back towards our 'comfort (if not constrained) zone', or returned to our (neoliberal) roots, those that were planted for us. Our hidden garden became overgrown and difficult to find again. We realised it required ongoing maintenance or could easily turn into a maze. We wanted to emerge from the roots of traditional academic life and play again in the garden we cultivated, like little children avoiding bedtime when the fun is over. We wanted to stay in the moment. We learnt that it was less about where the project takes us and more about relating, listening and immersing ourselves in all aspects of our research journey, working relationally.

We knew there was something precious here, something to hold on to, something of value to care for. Even in the midst of the ups and downs of the publication process, there remained dedication to the core of the project: our relationships with one another. As we wrote, we wrote for each other. When we met, it was to share intimate parts of ourselves. Separated by time, space, background, personal demands, it was sometimes hard to sustain a meaningful connection. Yet dot by dot, we worked and played to ensure that those relations flourished. As each phase ended, our gaze moved quickly to a new horizon and the opportunity to travel together into the next phase. We tried to move more and more away from the traditional roots that made us stuck in the soil, instead embracing the more haphazard rhizome. Some of our colleagues made the decision to stop playing with us in the garden – understandably, they were pulled in different directions. But most of us did not want this play to end. We found ways to continue together, refreshing and reviving our project, allowing it to bud and branch (Ahuja et al. 2023; Gavin et al. 2024). Turning the page and extending the dots to create the next picture.

We would like to finish on a note about care. In this collective writing process, we feel supported by a network of people who, although may have different motives or interests, ultimately show compassion and care. We smile when we read what others have written or said. We nod. We also question. And the caring space extends beyond our small group when we invite reviewers to the process. We are vulnerable …

Our contribution: growing the field of relational writing

Our intention in this paper has been to capture the collective writing and research process in the term 'relational writing'. Our hope is to bring to the literature on writing differently (e.g. Helin 2019; Madsen et al. 2018; Pullen, Helin, and Harding 2020) our perspective on how relational writing can foster intimacy in togetherness among co-writers. Although academic writing is routinely relational, as authors come together with co-writers, readers, editors and reviewers, not all relational writing is infused with intimacy. Our memories about researching and writing together uncover how intimacy is experienced, practiced and what it means to us. We show how intimacy grows during our journey together, the journey into a hidden garden.

In our exploration of relational writing, we identified intimate encounters as a central aspect of relationality emerging from our project. Intimate encounters, for us and in this context, signify a sense of connection and inclusion ('Planting the seed' memory), nurtured through interactions in physical and virtual spaces that facilitate the sharing of emotions and experiences ('The rhizome takes form'). These encounters thrive on mutual intellectual and emotional support ('Intercropping') and embrace learning from mistakes as opportunities for personal and professional growth ('Climbing the trellis'). By embracing differences and acknowledging vulnerabilities, we cultivated trust and safety, nurturing genuine and caring interactions ('Boldly blooming' and 'Unearthing the rhizome'). Through self-discovery and sharing insights ('The fallow field'), our relationships evolved, maintaining a balance between depth and distance ('Back to the roots?'). As well as our growing practices, these were changes to our thinking about what academic writing is and could be: collective, relational, emergent, and playful. Relational writing is therefore simultaneously an aesthetic practice, collaborative process and philosophical approach.

Now that we have some interesting conceptualisations of what collective writing can do and what it means to us, we would like to articulate three areas in which relational writing provides new ways of writing about organisations and management. We believe relational writing can counter some of the concerns raised around the effects of traditional academic writing including aesthetic, moral, and political (Grey and Sinclair 2006) and, because it is intimately intertwined with the research process, its effects are more profound.

Let us explain. Traditional academic writing has been said to be (1) aesthetically and emotionally lacking due to its dry and impersonal style; (2) morally questionable in its use of exclusionary language; and (3) politically limited in its impact due to alienating terminology (Grey and Sinclair 2006). Relational writing, as demonstrated through our collective writing journey, not only produces writing that is more aesthetic, moral and politically potent but also has the potential to enhance the aesthetics, morality and politics of the underlying research process.

Aesthetics – distinguishing the rose from the thorns

Relational writing differs from traditional academic collaborations; it embeds intimacy with others – those who co-create the text. For us, relational writing was mostly a joy. It was an opportunity to play, escape, cultivate something different, something more creative than our usual writing (Średnicka 2022). We threw the ball back and forth in the garden and had some fun. Of course, we slipped now and again, we felt moments of overwhelm and uncertainty that led us to pause and think. Our relational writing was an emotional and vulnerable process. We wrote our memories, read them to ourselves, then aloud to everyone. We listened to others, sometimes stayed silent and wrote down our thoughts into a shared document. At other times we talked, reflected, responded, and left things unfinished. Our text was intertwined with intimacy as we expressed our emotions in anticipation of others sharing theirs. It is the intimacy that inspires connections between co-writers and between writers and readers, and strengthens the connection to oneself. In evoking feelings, some uncomfortable, others pleasurable, it sparks new ideas, reveals discoveries and enriches our working life.

Morality – companion planting

In our relational writing, we, together, created something more than the text. The trust and care we planted throughout our journey deepened our intimacy. It showed the human side of writing and researching and disrupted power differences in our hidden garden (Kaufman 2021). Relational writing draws on empathy as a means of understanding what others are experiencing (Johansson et al. 2024; Lafaire et al. 2022; Manning 2018). Each time we met as a group we learned about ourselves, and about the others in our group. We felt closer, safer and more secure. We were able to be more vulnerable. Through fostering care for others, relational writing allows all members of the

group to contribute and therefore permits more ideas to surface (Helin 2019). It has the potential to transform the way we work together, recognising our humanity (Gilmore, Harding, and Pullen 2019). Working together as a diverse group can reveal complementary skills and perspectives, bringing together a stronger whole.

Politics – navigating the weeds

Our relational writing, our togetherness, our intimacy showed us we all live in academia differently. We have different notions of what it means to write, and to write differently, yet all are valid. We all may respond in various ways to institutional and societal pressures to write and do research in normative ways. Before, during, and after(?) Covid-19 our ideas of what 'good' or 'intimate' research looks like, and how we engage with our work, has changed because of our relationality. We noticed that it is more than a pure collaboration in which text is co-produced and co-authored. Relationality allows for diffractive writing where insights are read through one another, bent and reshaped (Handforth and Taylor 2016). Weeds transform into flowers and flowers into weeds. We became more inclusive and forgiving to our imperfections. We afforded ourselves the time to critically reflect on preconceived ideas and to influence each other. We hope also to influence our readers and inspire new ways of collective research within the neoliberal academy (Jordan and Wood 2017).

Coda | An invitation to enter into our hidden garden

Dear Reader,

Now that you have come to the end of our article, we wish to end not with a closure, but with an invitation, under the same headings as our initial email invitation that began this project in mid-2020 (Exhibit 1). An invitation to enter into our hidden garden; to engage in relational writing that allows novel, collective forms of knowledge and practice to emerge.

Ideas

Through informal and formal, personal, peer, and collective reflections, we have started a conversation here about what it means to write collectively and relationally. We did not plan the ways in which the entire research journey would shift organically and change our ideas about what it would mean to write *together*. Inspired by ideas such as vertical writing (Helin 2023), collective writing (Einola et al. 2021), and rhizomatic writing (Deleuze and Guattari 1987), we burst with new ideas which scattered us in unexpected directions like dandelion seeds in the wind. We brought old memories into new worlds, travelling back and forth, up and down as we reflected on what we knew then and know now. We explored how moments in time 'are influenced by past, present, and future constructions of reality' (Madsen et al. 2018, 4). Our memories acted as nodes, from which our writing spread in novel directions, like a rhizome. We hope our experiences will spark new ideas in you too.

Intention

We purposely wrote about and interpreted our memories simultaneously, in large and small groups, but rarely alone. With our intention to relate, intimacy followed. Every memory reveals some intimacy. You might have noticed in our writing that we have experienced difficulties in coming to terms with what intimacy is, what it looks like, how it is felt. Our intention with this paper is to inspire you too, to permit intimacy in your working life, to work with others and see for yourselves the benefits this can bring.

Invitation

We invite you, dear reader, to play with the idea of relational writing. It may feel strange or uncomfortable, at first, to 'try on' relational writing. Instead of being driven by outcomes, you may be driven by the pure delight of exploring and developing intimate relationships between other writers and the readers. Remember: you are a multiplicity. We encourage you to escape from the ordinary ways you might be asked to do research in the neoliberal academy, and, as similar to us, experience intimacy and joy. We know it might be difficult at times, but do not give up. Throw that ball, start to play. And play with others.

Involvement

The intimacy we developed through being involved in relational writing helped new knowledge to emerge. Through sharing, reflecting together and taking turns we created an environment that nurtured new ideas and allowed them to blossom. Our research project grew into new and unexpected areas. It developed in a rhizomatic manner: our areas of inquiry were somewhat random yet connected. This is how we came to understand and develop relational writing (Madsen et al. 2018) – as a process of intimacy.

We invite you, dear reader, to explore new connections yet accept that they may wither and fade when conditions change. Involvement in relational writing requires courage and commitment, yet the harvest is rich. We learn about ourselves just as much as we learn about others and our trade as academics. Accept that this process is not for everyone yet throw caution to the wind and give it a try. People dropped out along the way without judgment or regret, and we hope to welcome them back into the garden if and when our interests next intertwine.

If you are interested, dear reader, you too can be involved in this kind of writing. Inspired by creating and sharing photographs, artworks, written memories, stories or bodily experiences, you may come to know others more intimately. These artifacts can refract our relationships with each other, shining light in different directions and fostering the conditions for the seeds of ideas to grow and flourish.

We look forward to seeing what you cultivate.

Kind regards,

Ruth, Alice, Ece, Pavlina, Anja, Najmeh, Simone and Mihajla

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