The day 'care' came up: Agitations for care-full approaches to inspire flourishing academic lives

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This paper presents vignettes of conversations around a politics of care between members of an all-women collective writing group at Western Sydney University, Australia. The collective, affectionately named 'Super Friends', focuses attention on the collective dimensions of writing as a form of care-full scholarship that seeks to disrupt an increasingly competitive and productionist university landscape underpinned by a masculinised 'carelessness' (Lynch 2010). Recognising that writing is relational and rejects traditions of solitude and competition, our collective creates discursive space-time for scholarship, supporting our identities as both teachers and learners. By sharing works in progress, we agitate for ethical and pedagogical approaches to writing and its support (Dufty-Jones & Gibson 2022). The vignettes presented were animated one morning after reading a member's paper on infrastructures of care and teaching praxis. Our vignettes offer a means for interrogating questions we grappled with including: (1) how do we collectively orient towards care work for it to flourish and generate confidence and resilience in Early Career Academics (ECAs)?; (2) what is required to disrupt the co-opting of care practices into neoliberal objectives?; and, (3) how can care allow us to do academic labour differently? Our dialogue aims to provoke the imagining and enacting of alternative academic futures. We consider the multi-dimensional ways in which a collective and affective approach to scholarship leads to conditions that encourage care-full epistemological practices (Motta & Bennett 2018), and the emergence of places/spaces that render caring powerful.

Keywords: *care; writing differently; neoliberal logics; flourishing*

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Introduction

Research, teaching, awards, citations.
They nurture ECAs with dedication.
‘Apply for funding’, ‘hit the ground running’.
‘What's your five-year plan?’ They keep on drumming.
The noise is numbing.
Leadership, mentorship, ‘have you published that paper?’
Your care cuts through me like a razor.

‘Books before babies’, ‘don't get stuck on the teaching treadmill forever’
They say these things with care, urging me to endeavour.
Good advice - caring interventions;
The road to hell was paved with good intentions.

If I told them, it was a good career, was I lying?
I still said, ‘we're de-casualising have you thought about applying?’
And then I saw her crying.
‘But this is what you signed up for’;
Sacrificing sanity for security is the ‘care’ of neoliberal lore.

Yet amidst the hustle, amidst the strain,
We question, does care remain?

Amidst the doubts, amidst the strife,
We seek a way to redefine our academic life.
Amidst the snare of academic despair,
We strive to build resilience, to repair.

In our circle, hearts laid bare,
We dare to show how much we care.
Mad fucking witches, cackle and laugh;
In our care, we find a different path.

Beyond the confines of neoliberal lore,
We cultivate a space where care restores.
Our ‘critical friends soup’ is our recipe for care,
To flourish, to build, to dare.
Can our model of care withstand the test?
More importantly, have you published this yet?

What you have just read is a poem written as a 'confessional tale' (Lindlof & Taylor 2011) representing the tensions around 'care' felt by a group of academic women. We invite the reader to imagine a collective of scholars brought together by a desire to imagine and create conditions for a different way of doing scholarship.

> It's Wednesday morning on a Super Friends writing collective day. I'm sitting in a traditional boardroom somewhere in the 'Science' building trying to get some emails done when a cacophony of recognisable laughter from the Super Friends crew makes its way through the corridor. They can be heard, for some time, before I see them file in, with coffees in hand. Perimenopause, imposter syndrome, workloads, raising children, and pet Instagram accounts are amongst the many topics we discuss before we 'settle' into our writing chats. We know each other well. In the act of offering our writing to the collective, often in very raw states, we have forged kinship.

We start this paper with a story and a poem, as a means of writing differently (Gilmore et al. 2019, McLauchlan 2018; Pullen, Helin & Harding 2020). For us, the material production of writing matters to the way we practice care for each other. As a group of academics with high teaching loads and governance roles, finding time to write together was difficult. Producing coherent work meant acknowledging our constraints. Conventional academic writing reproduces and responds to entrenched practices of the production of knowledge (Ahonen et al. 2020; Amrouche et al. 2018; Burke 2021). We want to find ways to question the status quo as 'writing itself is embedded in structures of exclusion that shape who is recognised as having the authority to engage in knowledge-formation' (Burke 2021, p. 24). Writing differently supported us to challenge conventions and generate alternative ways of working.

In this paper, we write to decentre the effects of performance rankings and metrics, the way they permeate writing practices, and the prioritisation of the competitive academic. Instead, we write for relationality, and against individualised academia. We argue for a reorientation towards 'care logics' where affective relations of care are not relegated to the periphery of academic practices (Lynch 2022). Mol's (2008) concept of 'care logics', initially developed in the context of a specific case; treatment of, and life with diabetes, refers to the rationalities or rationales that underpin the *practices* that people are involved in as they relate to 'care'. Importantly, Mol (2008) defines 'care logics' in contrast to 'choice logics', which are underpinned by individual *abilities*. 'Care logics' speak of 'situations of choice' not an individual's ability to make good or bad choices (Mol 2008). For Mol (2008, p. 8) 'logic' is a useful term because 'it invites the exploration of what is appropriate or logical to do in some site or situation, and what is not'. In articulating coherent 'care logics' in the context of her case study, Mol (2008) concludes that 'good' care is not a consequence of highly-skilled individuals making exceptional choices. Rather, good care is an outcome of collective and enduring practices that seek 'to make life better than it would otherwise have been. But what it is to do good, what leads to a better life, is not given before the act. It has to be established along the way... the task of establishing what "better" might be, involves collectives' (Mol 2008, p. 75). In the logic of care, this task is never done, it is ongoing and iterative. In determining 'good', 'worse' or 'better' through practice, collectives must ensure to 'give ample occasion for ambivalences, disagreements, insecurities, misunderstanding and conflict' (Mol 2008, p. 76). In line with Lynch (2022), we see the concept of 'care logics' as a valuable frame for exploring academic practices that support care-full scholarship, particularly our own, as members

of a writing collective operating against the grain of established ways of 'succeeding' in the context of an Australian university.

In our writing collective we practice friendliness and collaboration above competition, and the pedagogical function of being together is asserted in our practices to engaging with each other's writing.

The group's actions are geared towards creating safe spaces and bringing about generative moments for members to share their ideas and writing. We do not expect 'polished' works, instead we invite the 'unfinished' and 'half-baked' works that most of us are afraid to 'show' in other spaces. In doing so, we attune what it means to do academic writing to the complexities of our lives. This has social effects, and an effect on the way we produce knowledge. An emphasis on writing through meeting, talking, and writing together accentuates the collective social dimensions of our lives. These practices also establish a space where care is cultivated. We acknowledge that the concept of 'care' means different things for each of us. Therefore, there is no singular definition of care we adhere to. Instead, we are working through and with care for each other, as a form of collective mobilisation to animate the social value of writing together.

Our approach: Collectively orienting towards care work

The Super Friends

'At this point, we had included an image of Milhouse Van Houten, showing his friend Bart Simpson, the cave where 'he comes to cry'. Bart's response is 'cool'. Because of copyright laws, we can't actually show the image. However, in the spirit of writing differently, we implore the reader to imagine this scene… or Google it, like all academics do'.

In our case collectively orienting towards care work meant creating a space for writing. The writing group, affectionately named 'Super Friends' is an offshoot of Critical Friends, a pilot project formed to address a need for supportive writing spaces, where collegiality and care are centered. The Super Friends initiative is supported by the Critical Pedagogies Research Group (CPRG); a research collaboration within the School of Social Sciences at Western Sydney University. We started with an open call-out to all members of the CPRG. Yet, perhaps unsurprisingly, this call seems to have only been heard by women. From our first meeting we have been an accidental women's writing group, meeting monthly to take turns in sharing work. There are seven members of Super Friends who contributed to this paper, we are a mix of early/mid-career women, including women of colour from an array of fields of 'social science' including anthropology, sociology, geography, tourism, and criminology. We are a diverse group, consisting of Higher Degree Research (HDR) students, early-career academics, and mid-career academics. Some members have substantial governance and executive roles, others heavy teaching loads. Yet most of us have been around the academy for a long time, often on precarious casual contracts before finding full-time positions. Individually our positionality is diverse. All members describe themselves as working class, two of our members are first in family, and three were born, bred and educated in the Western Suburbs of Sydney. Five members have been part of the decasualisation program at Western Sydney University. One of our Super Friends is a PhD candidate and manages multiple sessional contracts. All members hold governance roles, some of these are student facing. Some members are or have been raised by single parents. Some members have children. Collectively we

have 50 years of sessional contracts, mostly teaching focused. When we count the time, we have spent in the academy, we have well over 100 years of tertiary education, teaching, research work, and governance experience between us.

Autoethnographic intraception & polyvocality

After reading a member's paper on infrastructures of care and teaching praxis, our group realised that we were collectively grappling with feelings and concepts related to 'care' in the academy and that we wanted to confront and potentially 'infiltrate' (Tran 2023) the conditions which we felt restricted or impinged upon our ability to enact care and be cared for. Our exploration for this paper, therefore, emerged out of our conversations about care, followed by a collaboratively-developed series of prompts to which we individually responded to in a shared document. The prompts were designed to help each group member to write personal accounts responding to:

- How do we collectively orient towards care work for it to flourish and generate confidence and resilience in ECAs and HDRs?
- What is required to disrupt the co-opting of care practices into neoliberal objectives?
- How can care allow us to do academic labour differently?

When collating our responses to these prompts, we encouraged a process of 'collectivity' and 'writing differently', opening space for different modes of autoethnographic intraception. The forms of writing produced through autoethnographic works are as dynamic, diverse, and intersecting as the people who create and feature in them. Our autoethnographic modes varied and included reflective writing, diary entries, confessional poetry, visual methods such as photography, meme generation, and use of lyrics (see Küttel 2021).

Four of us approached autoethnography through a diary entry, recording individual personal diaries, observations, thoughts, feelings, and interactions of our daily experiences (Dewalt and Dewalt 2002). One member used poetic autoethnography. Two drew on forms of visual autoethnographies, using photography and meme generation respectively as mediums through which to present, represent, and engage with their reflections. Finally, one member of our group drew on song lyrics as a reflective prompt. In this way we sought to mobilise a 'blending of genres and voices' (Brettell 1997). In the next section of this paper, we explore our entwined personal accounts, entries, musings, and reflective writing to capture our shared experiences, coming together to 'write' with and through these experiences. Following Fortune, Fyffe and Barradell's (2024) 'collaborative autoethnography', this involved working together, building on each other's stories, and gaining insight from group sharing. We independently read our own and each other's narratives closely and came together as a group to discuss and critically analyse the data together. In successive meetings, our discussion was built on our reflections and analysis of the previous meeting/s and returning to the data. Doing so enabled our data generation and analysis to be dynamically iterative and entwined.

The neoliberal imaginary: The perils of the 'ideal' scholar

> Academia can be, and is, overwhelming for anybody. 'Imposter syndrome' doesn't discriminate; we all feel it. A caring culture in a university is one that respects, values, and applauds vulnerability. It allows us to feel safe, emotionally and intellectually. It builds an environment where a HDR supervisor can tell a candidate that they don't know the answer, or a professor can share with an ECA that they are genuinely scared or confused in a task that they 'should know'. A caring culture means that we can all ask each other for help, and not feel ashamed. We're all learning, and by allowing ourselves to recognise that we 'don't know' or are overwhelmed, or even that we are emotional beings, allows others to feel that maybe, they'll be okay in academia, too (Super Friend #4).

The cultural norms of contemporary universities have deep roots in histories characterised by 'careless' patriarchy that have been prolonged by the rise of new managerialism (Lynch 2022). Objective, rational science reigned supreme in the construction of the 'intellectual' and 'scholar' who inhabited universities, whilst emotion, feeling and care were positioned as inferior due to their subjective nature. Lynch (2022, pp. 10-11) argues that the academy both 'created and consolidated the concept of feminine subservience and academic inferiority'. Because of this legacy, 'universities as workplaces operate on different relational logics to care relations'. The institutionalised conceptual framing of the 'ideal' scholar thus retains a white, middle- to upper-class, masculinised form.

A reflection on the politics of care that encourages the collective dimensions of writing as a form of care-full scholarship requires consideration of what subjectivities are imagined in neoliberal university. If we are to undertake any form of disruption inside a competitive and productionist university, we need to understand what kind of academic is imagined in the neoliberal imaginary. This has implications for our own subjectivities as 'caring' academics and the way practices of care are undertaken and valued in university settings. Neoliberalism is a complex set of practices, policies, funding regimes, and discourses (among other things).

As Davies and Bansel (2007, p. 255) note we are often 'hard pressed to say what neoliberalism is, where it comes from and how it works on us and through us'. Much has been written about neoliberal 'culture' in the academy, where corporatisation and managerial approaches have fundamentally changed the core values and approaches of universities (Bottrell & Manathunga 2019; Courtois & O'Keefe 2015; Houlbrook 2022; Lynch 2006). Neoliberal tenets of individualisation, deregulation, efficiency, and privatisation are cultivated through the commodification of education and knowledge. Universities, like the public sector, are commodities subject to market forces that should prioritise performance metrics and rankings to remain competitive (Lynch 2006). The consequence of such an approach is the valuing and devaluing of certain types of academic labour and skills, with a particular focus on research outputs, funding, and competitiveness, over teaching and governance, collectivity and care.

Collisions: When care and neoliberal logics meet writing

When our group talked about the kind of care we need, there was an obvious contrast between how we were framing care versus how the university frames care. Many of our group members actively opposed the university's model of what one group member called 'survival care'. Collectively, we decided that instead of expecting us to be resilient within an uncaring system, that what was needed for academics to thrive (rather than merely 'survive') is a systematic rethinking of care culture within the university. For some group members, this meant a system that encourages and allows us to be vulnerable rather than resilient (Super Friend #3).

> Writing collectively produces outputs that the university divides when counting each individual's 'output'. This forms a disincentive to working care-fully. While Professor Smith, the Lone Ranger, moves up in rank and pay bracket, and gets to eat the spoils of the university, those of us who approach our work care-fully and collectively remain stagnant and must feast of his crumbs to stay afloat (Super Friend #3).

Our autoethnographic vignettes show that Super Friends is a space where members think through the tensions they experience between neoliberal logics and care logics. Group members reflect on the challenges of writing to meet measurable outputs that count. Noting that forms of writing and forms of knowledge that are valued incentivise and reward individuality and competition, while subsequently disincentivising the kind of collaboration and collectivity that enables care to flourish. Mutch and Tatebe (2017, p. 223) contend that 'caught in this system like mice on a treadmill, are academics with increasing workloads, larger classes, more administrative requirements and less time to undertake the kind of scholarship they thought they had signed up to'. Academics are expected and demanded to provide a range of 'measurable outputs and skills, publications, income generation through the acquisition of external grants, international collaboration, and teaching excellence, as well proving that one can do all these things in combination and at pace' (Caretta et al. 2018, p. 262).

How can care allow us to do academic labour differently?

The rise of and critique of 'care' in scholarly literature is seen as a response to the perceived marginalisation of, and discrimination against, certain groups. Feminist scholars, notably Carol Gilligan (1982) and Nel Noddings (1984) challenged traditional Western moral philosophies that were often rooted in masculine, heteronormative representations of the 'good life'. These academics argued for an ethical orientation; an 'ethics of care', which focused upon relationality and experiences in the shaping of the individual. Therefore, through a feminist lens, care is seen as 'everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our world so that we can live in it as well as possible' (Fisher & Tronto 1990, p. 40). A 'divide and conquer' approach that undermines collectivity and devalues care work (through, for example, a focus on individualised self-care, see Ward 2015) means neoliberalism runs counter to practices of care and solidarity (Motta & Bennett 2018). However, while neoliberalism has made 'caring more difficult', Tronto (2017, p. 27) contends that care provides an explicit challenge to neoliberalism.

At Super Friends we have found that caring has a significant effect on shaping the quality of our collective social life. However, the invisibility and intangibility of caring labour across various

settings and institutions often makes such work 'difficult (for some) to appreciate, and thus easier to denigrate, ignore, and undervalue' (McEwan & Goodman 2010, p. 109). Our members continually reflect upon their frustration with the tensions between the care that the neoliberal university provides us, and the care that we need to sustain ourselves as academics. Our members acknowledge that in the academy, metrics and time organisation actively disincentivise collaboration and care.

> As an ECA, I am precariously navigating this career and learning about the complexities and realities of academic work. I acknowledge that this work exists within a specific system, with a specific set of objectives. For example, research, and the writing process itself, while envisioned as an intellectually creative practice, had sadly collapsed into a set of 'careless' measurable units which (un)intentionally signal the (un)successful academic career, no better represented than through the 'publish or perish?' mantra. As an ECA, I feel the weight and discomfort with such a mantra and wonder how a sustainable and meaningful career might function (or survive?) within such powerful structural conditions for which refraining from such does not appear like much of an option (Super Friend #2).

These observations are not to say that the university does not provide opportunities for care. It does. The tensions are apparent in that the institution's care infrastructures are informed by neoliberal logics. Care time that reflects what academics need to sustain themselves is simply not prioritised in the current context of increased workload, distress and external control, coupled with diminishing autonomy, and less control over time management (Ylijoki & Mäntylä 2003). As members identified, finding care within this context requires academics to make their own spaces where the kind of care required to sustain academic careers can be strategically manufactured.

> I think we lack time and space to collectively orient towards care, particularly when care is not on the agenda in most academic spaces. Carving out and creating time and space matters (Super Friend #6).

Our writing collective asserts a politically-informed praxis. Super Friends, as an all women collective, adopts approaches to relationship-rich writing that are underpinned by a robust feminist ethics of care. A feminist ethics of care offers scope for change and resistance to dominant neoliberal logics in that it 'seeks solutions to the problems of the giving and receiving of care that are non-exploitative, equitable, and adequate to ensure the flourishing of all persons' (Robinson 2011, p. 33). In regularly coming together to talk and write, we urge each other through moments of self-doubt, exhaustion, and despondency. We acknowledge that neoliberal logics, though dominant, are not uncontested, and that carelessness in higher education is not predetermined; 'universities can become more caring places for staff and students, not least by developing care-centric thinking and practices' (Lynch 2022, p. 11). Super Friends contributes towards making universities more caring workplaces by emphasising and centralising vulnerability and relationality in our approaches to writing.

In our group members' recollections of the kind of care they received from mentors within the university, a collision of care logics was identified. Many of our group members have been mentored by senior colleagues, whether formally or informally, and the university encourages and rewards such mentoring. Mentoring of junior colleagues is commonly considered in promotion

applications. However, our group members revealed that well-meaning senior mentors tended to reproduce the university's neoliberal and masculinised version of 'care'. This 'care' produces tension among our group members. While they are thankful for being given support, they are also somewhat jaded because the 'care' merely reproduces the status quo; a status quo that endorses an unsustainable academic life. This is captured in Super friend #7's analysis of the poem they contributed:

> I don't mean to sound ungrateful or spiteful - these were pieces of advice given to me, for the most part, by people I greatly respected, and it did come from a place of genuine care for my 'academic' career and economic wellbeing. I suppose this is the catch-22 of university life - mentors have a responsibility to teach us the 'rules of the game' in a neoliberal university. Their care was clearly geared towards metrics of success in the neoliberal university. But mentors have a responsibility to prepare me for that to survive the institution. And their advice worked in many ways. But in a sense, it was 'survival care'. Isn't there more - what's the saying - thriving not just surviving. To 'thrive' (to be resilient?) we need more than survival care. And this co-option of care into these modes left me feeling.... I don't know...insatiable...I could never do enough to fill the hole. I felt the opposite of resilient, I felt endlessly vulnerable (Super Friend #7).

Disrupting the neoliberal university: Practicing care-full scholarship

What does it take to disrupt the everyday practices of academic life, to orient them towards care-full work? We found that this involved recognising the many forms of care, and carelessness that we experienced and practiced ourselves, while also being open about how practices affected our work, and what we could do differently. The reflections offered by members of Super Friends bring to light the harms that experiences of care-less-ness can exert upon academics, whilst simultaneously offering insights into how Super Friends as a writing collective affords us with an opportunity to educate ourselves in 'cooperative caring ways'. Lynch (2022, p. 21) contends that a pedagogy around cooperative caring is central to change, noting that 'it will not happen by accident'. Super Friends has enabled the messiness and incompleteness of writing and academic life to be realised. These have included conversations about the numerous challenges which shape the writing experience, including the management of high teaching loads, and all the emotional weight which accompanies such work. It has done so by placing collectivity and emotion at the heart of the writing process and academic work; a process which has too often remained characterised as a set of competitive and individualised practices. The impact of a care ethic has been evident in the transformation of peer review into stimulating care-full conversations that move beyond critique of written words and suitability for publication; to discovering the intellectual context(s), passion(s) and direction(s) which inform our academic selves - why we write and what we want to achieve in our writing.

> Through care, Super Friends has contributed to dismantling some of the individualised, accelerated, and competitive norms which surround research production, providing a nurturing space to do academic work and build an academic self, a little differently (Super Friend #2).

> Taking time to discuss ideas. Being accountable, but accountability is softer and less pressurised. It works better. Not dehumanising, it's more humanising. I still got the article done, but I got it done more mindfully, and there was yeah ... there was time taken to actually engage with it in a way where it was collective, and fruitful, and not just a means to an end, which is what I find tasks end up becoming in this wheel (Super Friend #4).

The personal accounts offered speak to the emotional and embodied effects of the neoliberal university that are often overlooked or deemed insignificant (Ahmed 2014). They are thoughtful, emotional, funny, and sometimes sad. Perhaps more importantly, the sharing of these reflections has further cemented the sense of kinship and caring within our group and reminded us of the power of our shared stories to 'reveal and revise' our academic world (Holman Jones 2005). Thus, while ostensibly we are a critical friend writing group which supports the 'output' of writing, in practice, Super Friends has provided 'time' and 'space' for collective laughter, joy, rage, and sorrow. These emotions, which are provoked at various points during the research writing process, support the balance of research and teaching, and influence the content of our writing. More importantly though, the group has allowed us to reimagine our own individual and collective academic stories; stories 'animated by feeling and imagination' and forms of knowing that need not be stable, coherent, and finished (see Holman Jones 2005, p. 767). Such stories have a dual function. In the first instance, they confront our feelings of 'otherness' against the prevailing individualistic, masculinist, careless modes of extractivist epistemology and knowledge production. They have also become the genesis or origin story of our group, allowing us to start to tell a new story of connection and relationality.

> We have to show others our 'safe' spaces where caring takes place. Super friends; people within academic work groups; some committees; anywhere that like-minded people can be together to care (and rage, rant, and celebrate) (Super Friend #6).

Our autoethnographic accounts show our concerns with care and writing differently for relationality. We argue that these versions of ourselves are important for the creation of care-full spaces of refuge. For us writing differently meant creating space to breathe and move beyond the boundaries imposed on us by the disembodied metrics of the academic institution (Anohen et al. 2020). As Conradson (2003) argues, enacting care entails significant physical and emotional labour, requiring an empathic and mutual commitment to ourselves, and to others. Giving and receiving care relies on building and exchanging trust, disclosure, and vulnerability, thereby making it a collective effort and responsibility. Relatedly, to us writing differently meant writing across boundaries of our disciplines, and across our differences. Opening a space for relationality to flourish required building trust, and encouraging and supporting vulnerability. While this space-making was somewhat iterative, it was also supported by literal and symbolic gestures.

Early on when the group was formed, members divulged intimate details relating to their personal identities, and collectively made a pact that 'what happens in Super Friends, stays in Super Friends'. This began the foundation for trust which was further supported through further literal and symbolic gestures that dissolved hierarchies and power relations.

> Something I really appreciate about Super Friends is how when we come together, we also talk about our lives outside of work. We don't do a lot of this in academic spaces. The focus is always work. There is often this feeling of needing to emphasise your work identity first. You worry that people won't take you seriously if you are thinking about caring responsibilities, hobbies, or something else. I remember a colleague telling me she was told not to talk about her kids in academic spaces, as people won't take you seriously. It's been refreshing to walk into a space where people share about themselves rather than just their work; that their kids are sick, or that the morning was chaotic, or that something non-work related occurred over the weekend and how they couldn't wait to share it with our group because they knew it would make us laugh. I feel like I can be completely myself in this space, and that's something that is very rare for a working-class, first-in-family, ECA. I can take off my serious academic mask and relax a little bit. I don't have to think about what opportunity I might miss out on or be deemed less suitable for if I talk about something non-academic or as mundane as what my family discussed this morning at breakfast (Super Friend #3).

Our academic identities outside of the group might be seen as hierarchically organised by our varying status, position, and age - leading to the presumption that we function in a mentor/mentee web of vertical relationships between these junior and senior colleagues. Indeed, we may have started this way. But as we grew together, members who held senior positions within the university expressed that they planned to leave their executive identity at the door. Their acceptance of the suspension of power was further marked by their agreement to remove artefacts that symbolically conveyed institutional (and masculine) power, such as suit jackets. These literal and symbolic gestures resulted in the wider dissolution of stoic performances among group members, and, in collaboration with shared radical ranting and listening, allowed for our not-just-employee-but-human selves to come to the fore. More-human-than-employee identities shadowed the facades we typically perform to express our professional identities, resulting in a more humanising relational exchange. Such humanisation, which challenged the hierarchical notions of expertise, and colonial and patriarchal models that organise academia (Tynan 2021), enabled the 'joy of deep connection' that emerges when the 'empty, competitive hierarchies of higher education institutions' are suspended (Maile et al. 1998, cited in McLauchlan 2018, p. 88). However, it also provided the pedagogical advantage of allowing group members to comfortably move in and out of 'expert' roles in ways that were conducive to supporting members to strengthen their writing skills, to gain confidence in sharing their knowledge, and moving from beginner, mentee, and learner to expert, mentor, and teacher (McLauchlan 2018).

Intentional togetherness: Practicing care-full relationships

As a group, we have emphasised the value of our presence with each other - in showing up, being together, listening, reading and responding - reciprocity and relationality. We have done so with sick children in tow, and through both personal and professional crises - with an emphasis to 'come as you are', 'when you can', and with work in any stage of development.

> It's my turn to share a paper with my Super Friends again. Normally the sharing of my work provokes a deep sense of fear and anxiety - *this time they'll see me for what I am, an imposter*. But not here. I am excited to share my work here, more

than that, I am excited to *write something for them*. There is a half-drafted mess of an article that has been sitting on my desktop for nearly a year now, there is never time or motivation to finish it, it feels too hard, its edges are jagged, it is heavy with the memory of the participants I interviewed and their experiences weigh on me each time I open the draft. I worry about not doing 'justice' to them, and the ethics of me scoring publication points from their stories. But the excitement of just being with Super Friends reinvigorates me, I open the fearsome draft with new eyes, and an intention to write for my Super Friends, to talk to them about the ideas, and what motivated the project in the first place. Some of our emails before the meeting read:

> Hi everyone,
> I'm so excited I can come along next week.
> I just submit (sic) the paper you all read a draft of earlier in the year to the journal (redacted). Cross your fingers for me! Thanks so much to everyone for your time and feedback on it. This group really helped to give me the confidence to keep going. I feel a bit guilty I haven't been able to attend Super Friends regularly and return the favour this semester. If anyone does share this time, I promise to give your writing 110% of my attention (Super Friend #3).

>Hi Super Friends!
> Your mission, if you chose to accept it, help me make sense of this paper.
> I have attached a cleaned-up version (yes, this is the 'clean' version) of a (redacted) paper I have been thinking about for a while. I have included the abstract and methods, etc. for context, but I would really like feedback on the 'Findings' section and the discussion points that come after this. Much of this is just rough notes and ideas, but I am so grateful for the chance to just talk about some of these ideas! (Super Friend #7).

>Hi everyone,

> Can I please have special permission to Zoom today? (Child name) is sick (again! - please pray for me) and my husband can't come home until lunch time, so I won't make it (Super Friend #3).

>Sure 😀. I hope you are all OK and everyone gets better soon. It's not fun being sick (Super Friend #5).

As shown above, our concern with 'care' and building trust foregrounds the sociality of writing, allows for the disorderliness of process, and, above all, supports the writer(s) not the development of products. The breaking down of power dynamics and centring of our humanness enabled a space where care began to flourish.

Not just care in respect of supporting each other to do good work care-fully, but a space where care provided us with generative refuge (McLauchlan 2018). We understand caring cannot offer or guarantee a smooth harmonious world (van Dooren 2014), but we are not arguing it can or should. However, it has helped us design against 'extractivist' organisation of labour while

highlighting the 'inescapable troubles of interdependent existences' (Puig de la Bellacasa 2012, p. 197). We use the term extractivism here to foreground both extractivist labour practices as well as extractivist mentalities that permeate our academic lives (see Alcoff 2022; Tynan 2021). As Tynan (2021, p. 599), a trawlwulwuy woman and scholar explains, 'extractivism sits at the core of colonialism; the extraction of knowledge, labour, specimens, resources, relationships and research. Extractivism can seep into research practices, often in the quest to produce 'original research'. According to Tynan (2021), the inverse of extractivism is relationality - being in good relation - yet relationality is not easy inside an institution that operates in non-relational and extractive ways. Set timeframes, restrictive academic writing styles, hierarchical notions of expertise, and colonial and patriarchal models of data collection, 'discovery' (Tynan 2021, p. 599), and gap finding work against the ethos of relationality, and are often rewarded in academia. Many of our group members have struggled under the weight of such extractivist modes of being and the epistemic insecurity they generate:

> I don't know. When I was an honours student, I was told I shouldn't have gotten the marks I did. When I was an HDR student I was told I wasn't ambitious enough. As an ECA I was told I wasn't writing enough. Think about your h-index. When I got a permanent position, I was told I had to learn to play the game. I hear these comments a lot. I've been hanging around the academy for years. I feel like I should know more about how to be a good academic (Super Friend #5).

> Being dictated by the expectations that reflect the university's version of care leaves no time for self-care and significantly reduces our ability to care for others (our students, colleagues, etc.). You cannot count care ... care reflects surpluses of emotionality and labour that can never be counted (Super Friend #5).

To work with a relational ethos on the other hand means *responding* and *listening* with care and reciprocity *despite* these extractivist compulsions, deadlines and timeframes. It is a practice of both agency and kinship that centres relationships, the processes of connection, and the responsibility to treat kin and research with respect. As Tynan (2021, p. 599) reminds us, 'you cannot demand a relationship, nor give it a deadline'. To this, following Dalmiya (2016), we would add that the 'trust' that is necessary for relationality comes in part from the practice of 'relational humility' - the acceptance and even celebration of our own epistemic lacks and strengths in relation to others in the group as well as an openness to other ways of *knowing* and *being.* We actively generate spaces to reimagine and deliver value to move beyond productionist and extractive paradigms embedded in managerial practices, budgets cuts, increased workloads, and constant organisational system changes (among other things). As a group we have found generative refuge and comfort with 'not knowing', relinquishing the status of 'expert', and focusing on the quality and reciprocity of relationships with others.

> See, I'm not so assured
> Nor unusually strong
> Or outstandingly brave
> I'm more just fumbling around in the dark...
> For the bulk of my day.

These words are taken from the lyrics of a Gang of Youths song, 'The Deepest Sighs, the Frankest Shadows', and are written on the whiteboard in my office, along with other quotes (from musicians - yes Nick Cave makes the cut!). Song lyrics remind me, it's okay to '...say the most human of things...' above the most 'expert' of things (Super Friend #1).

Many of my days are stitched together by literal and metaphorical 'zooming' moments. But one afternoon in my rush to leave the office I was stopped in my tracks by an encounter with these guys, a flock of galahs:

Figure 2: Galahs on the lawn at Western Sydney University's Kingswood campus (Taken by Super Friend #1)

> As I stood there captivated by the sight of these birds, I recalled the First Nations storytelling - The Australian Museum project through which I have been learning about how 'Australia's birds play many symbolic roles in First Nations cultures. As carriers of story, they teach us how to live in connection with other living beings'. I took the photo because I was struck by the reminder of birds as 'carriers of story' and I wondered, what these birds, at that moment might teach me about connection (Super Friend #1).

The above picture taken by Super Friend #1 was revisited many times by the group who found affinity in its rich symbolism (see Hunter 2020, and Radley & Taylor 2003 on the usefulness of photography in autoethnography). The use of visuals in this way helped to 'excavate deeper, nuanced insights' (Pope 2016, p. 289). And, as Scarles (2010, p. 2) compellingly argues 'where words fail... visual autoethnography opens spaces of understanding; transcending the limitations of verbal discourse and opening spaces for creativity and appreciation, reflection and comprehension'. Galahs are a common Australian parrot and are known for their distinctive pink and grey coloring and loud call. While many Australian species suffered dramatically or became extinct because of settler invasion, the galah has thrived in changing environments, especially in rapidly urbanising areas. While Super Friend #1 pondered on the galah as a symbol of connection, so too did the galah become an analogy for our own survival and flourishing in academia. The ability for the galah to insert themselves into new and uncomfortable scenarios; to just be and maybe even 'thrive', strengthened our own resolve. The galah survives as a collective, or a flock, and maybe we do, too.

Figure 3: Meme created by Super Friend #6 on approaches to care

Generating spaces for confidence, resilience and flourishing

We are learning as we go, and generating spaces that prioritise listening, collective knowledge making, and system change takes time, involves commitment to the process and careful thought about the design and function of the group as we continue. This is a lively process that aims to build trust while exploring and accepting difference. As with the feminist writing group described by McLauchlan (2018), our group members express the ways that the 'lively, trusting, intellectual connection' between women encourages vibrant thinking, and in turn a greater sense of resilience, and confidence:

> My own writing has been invigorated by the conversations we have in the group. I am encouraged towards a constant criticality of the systems and structures that I navigate as I perform different roles in the university. I am reminded that I can show up in different ways in different spaces and still be whole (Super Friend #1).

> I brought a draft paper to the group from some research I was doing. Before sharing it I was really anxious about how authoritative I could be. I'm only an ECA and I was sort of dancing around the failure of government in addressing a serious social justice issue. The group were like 'hmm this paper is good, but I think you could go a bit harder, you are the expert here and you have the evidence to back yourself up'. I remember leaving the meeting feeling way more confident. The group assured me this was important work, which inspired me to keep going. Sometimes it's hard to feel motivated to finish a paper on a topic that's important to you because the emphasis on metrics and securing funding and industry partnerships can make you feel like you should be expending your energies more strategically. The group helped me remember why I wanted to be an academic in the first place and who, and what, I wanted to be researching and writing for (Super Friend #3).

> When I think back to when my paper was discussed at our Super Friends meeting, I came out feeling way better about it all. Receiving a rejection from the journal was really hard but bringing the 'rejected paper' to the group was not. After venting about the publishing process and listening to the group's ideas about where my argument could go, I was motivated to re-engage with the paper and see the resubmission process through. This was not only because of the feedback and support received from my Super Friends, but also because I felt accountable to them - they read my work, they listened to me. They showed they cared not only about my paper, but about me. And I care about them too. I probably wouldn't have bothered with resubmission had it not been for Super Friends (Super Friend #2).

Our writing collective, Super Friends, then represents a space and avenue for affective care relations to emerge and develop. We exist as an act of dissent and resistance to neoliberal approaches to scholarship; we are deliberate in our efforts of undoing the notion of writing as solitary and competitive, and moving towards forms of radical relationality. By radical relationality, we are referring to 'relations of care' and ways of being in 'good relation' as a concept and idea shared by feminist philosophy and indigenous feminist and decolonial ethics (see, for example, Yazzie 2023; Puig de la Bellacasa 2017). For Yazzie (2023, p. 596), radical relationality is 'a story about kin. Not necessarily the kin we are born into, but our chosen kin, the kin we make

through political struggle. It is a story that offers a thriving and capacious vision of kin, a story that speaks to the radical power of kinship to inspire our dreams of liberation'. It includes relations of care and responsibility for land, place and space as much as people (Garroutte 2003) - what Mushkegowuk geographer Michelle Daigle calls 'geographies of responsibility' (2019, p. 709). For Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) it evokes ways of thinking with care, and how we come to imagine relations as a means of worlding. By thinking, writing, and even crying together, we are proactively shifting the epistemic underpinnings of our identities as academics. Our time together produces a pedagogical re-orientation toward writing 'care logics' and relationality that position 'scholarship as a site of learning through cooperation' (Lynch 2022, p. 20).

> For me, academic work needs to be done with care and around care so that we not only 'work at our institutions' but also avail spaces and opportunities to 'work on them' (Ahmed 2012 as cited in Dufty-Jones & Gibson 2022, p. 341). When the opportunity arose to join a 'Super Friends' writing group, I saw a potential to 'work on' how writing and research can be reimagined with and around care, in ways which, while in line with institutional expectations for research production, do so through implementing pedagogies which challenge the typical 'careless' and often accelerated pace at which we are expected to work (Super Friend #2).

Engaging in collective forms of writing came from the need to critique contemporary knowledge production models and practices of knowledge creation. The publish or perish mantra continuously intervened in the fabric of our academic lives, promoting individualist social relations and neoliberal values associated with being an academic. We wanted to question these models, practices and ways of being 'an academic'. For us, writing collectively enabled moments of togetherness and opened critical discussion, giving us time to actively question models of writing where 'outcome' and 'output' are central to our daily academic subjectivities. Like our Super Friends writing spaces, our methods, and our approach to writing differently reflect a 'fusion', which McLauchlan (2018) describes as a lively shared experience. In Super Friends we are feeling our way through university structures as they prompt emotions such as desire and anxiety. We are responding to these structures by being open to what care means collectively. As McLauchlan (2018, p. 90) argues, becoming open to getting 'on the same page' with one's co-conspirators is vital. Autoethnography then is a means for forging more creative selves and creative cultures (Holman Jones 2018). Following Holman Jones (2018, p. 229) our use of diaries, poems, reflections, and images engages us as a group in a 'process of becoming', shows us 'ways of embodying change' as we collectively produce versions of 'knowing' and 'being' and 'caring' that center affect and relationality. Engaging in care is not only (inter)personal, but political, reflecting an act of collective mobilisation. Through an ethics of care, Super Friends has cultivated a community of trust and support, encouraged vulnerability in academic work, and humanised the writing process. Echoing Cunliffe (2018, p.16), who refers to the importance of choosing our significant academic others, Super Friends has provided a space for friendly, collegial relationships to flourish; relationships which see us 'talk, laugh, debate, and whine'. Such interactions translate into enactments of care to 'conserve energies' (Dufty-Jones & Gibson 2018) across research and teaching, build confidence, develop resilience, and begin the process of nurturing a healthier academic life.

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