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Dear vulnerability ... writing together to escape and resist the neoliberal university

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ABSTRACT

I am lost. My writing is lost. I feel isolated, under pressure, trapped in a cage. My writing is measured and molded, suffocating in a corset of norms and expectations in the neoliberal university. In a collective diary, I can share my experiences, ponder on my feelings. I breathe, I survive, I resist. And as I write, I open up. As I write, I find myself, I find ot-hers. Through my words, sentences, and pages, I embrace my vulnerabilities: insecurity, courage, relating, becoming. I write collectively, stronger together. I write to offer new understandings, to change and resist the neoliberal university. Will you join me?

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collaborative
autoethnography

*As I write, I think,
I become, I feel,
I learn, I reflect.
Not just ink on paper
Or words on screen
But thoughts, feelings,
Love, pain, moments.
Me.
Where are we going, together?
Me, my thoughts, feelings, moments,
Others, their thoughts, feelings, moments.
Traveling a path
Word by word
Sentence by sentence
Page by page.
Eventually pride, relief, grief?
Where to next?*

As I write, the words flow, my writing is poetic, light, and soft. As I write, I transform, my writing transforms. My writing is academic, structured, and clear. I am an academic – and I write in the neoliberal university. My academic writing thrills and scares me. I tumble through words, reflections, through blank spaces of paper and endless paragraphs.

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As I write, I struggle. I need to function, I need to publish to avoid perishing, if I want to survive in the individualized, competitive, and neoliberal university (Ahonen et al. 2020; Ashcraft 2017; Heron, Gravett, and Yakovchuk 2021; Sai et al. 2024). As I write, I enjoy it. I open up and forge connectedness (Johansson and Wickström 2023; Mandalaki 2021). As I write, I stumble onto others, and they stumble upon me. So – as I write – how can I write *with* others, to flourish and not perish, to not only survive but untie the corset (Gilmore et al. 2019) and rattle the cage of the neoliberal university *toget-her* (Mandalaki 2021)? Can this world not be more? Can writing not be a source of resistance to and liberation from hegemonic managerial values such as output, individualism, and competition (Ashcraft 2017; Wang et al. 2024) and masculine conventionalities such as dominance, mastery, and monologue (Lund and Tienari 2019; Mandalaki 2021; Sai et al. 2024), all pervading the neoliberal university?

As I write, I suffer. So I write to open up, sharing my truth of being lost. I write to touch others, hoping to be found. Because as I write, I can thrive – as we write ‘*toget-her*’ (Mandalaki 2021, 1014). This is a collective endeavor of writing with our vulnerabilities in the neoliberal university. As I write, we explore. As we tumble, I write.

In this paper, the I is Us, My is Ours, three voices are one, and one voice speaks for three. We, three female early career researchers, make up this Collective I. I attempt to explore my vulnerabilities (Corlett, Mavin, and Beech 2019; Helin 2019; Sai et al. 2024) through a collective letter diary, trying to survive and grow in an academic world without losing myself, my way, my voice. In the collective letter diary, I am able to have open, honest, and vulnerable conversations about my academic writing experiences; I find a space to breathe (Ahonen et al. 2020; Rodrigues Silva 2021), momentarily escape, and resist the neoliberal university. Come join me in the *Insecurity, Courage, Relating, Becoming I* encountered in this collective journey, allowing myself to be ‘*touched/able/ing*’ (Mandalaki 2021) – to be vulnerable *toget-her* (Mandalaki 2021). Hear my concerns about narrow and suffocating standards of what counts as ‘good’ academic writing (Helin 2023); feel my pain, anger, grief, and insecurities; but also: wonder about the beauty and liberation of relating, becoming, and changing, washing all over you.

Writing about writing in the neoliberal university

Writing is a central scientific practice (Essén and Winterstorm Värlander 2013). In academic writing, I read, take notes, paraphrase, and summarize. I experiment with different words and look for a suitable syntax. I write paragraph after paragraph, put together conference papers, journal articles, and review letters. As a researcher, I write to offer alternative descriptions, provoke novel thinking, and open up new knowledge. Ideally, I experience my writing as liberating, illuminating, and enriching, leading me and readers alike to places of better and more complete understanding.

My knowledge is inspired by literature reviews, research studies, peer feedback, and so forth. My knowledge ‘manifests itself through writing’ (Kinnunen, Wallenius-Korkalo, and Rantala 2021, 657). I transfer knowledge through text. Yet, at the same time, writing is so much more than the mere exchange of knowledge. In social science, researchers’ ‘identities and reputations as academics are largely formed on the basis of what and how we write’ (Cloutier 2016, 69; see also Heron, Gravett, and Yakovchuk 2021). As researchers, we write to get published; ‘we are pressured to do impactful research, write it up in standardized ways in the English language, and to target our work in specific journals’ (Nordbäck, Hakonen, and Tienari 2022, 332). I am at an early stage in my academic career, and writing is the most important way to express myself and show ‘who I am’ – which, at the moment, all too often means to show ‘what I can.’ But there is also already a pre-defined academic ideal of ‘who I should (not) be’ and ‘what I should be able to do’ – of what ‘counts as academic writing’ in the neoliberal university (Pullen 2018, 124). *My knowing and thinking, and with that my entire being, manifest through my writing.* That makes me nervous. It seems my writing determines my whole academic career, what I can and cannot do, who I am and cannot be.

A career in the neoliberal university requires writing a lot, even more, ever faster. What have you published? What’s in your pipeline? I write ‘what I can,’ but oftentimes not ‘how I want.’ I write to become ‘neatly functioning parts of the publishing machine’ (Ahonen et al. 2020, 452), to be ‘accepted

in the “malestream” fast lane’ (Cunliffe 2022, 22). Academic writing feeds off and is embedded in norms, conventions, and paradigms of how to write (i.e. precise, clean, structured), what to write (i.e. objective, universal knowledge), and when to write (i.e. always). These norms, conventions, and paradigms are embedded in the gendered neoliberal university (Ashcraft 2017; Lund and Tienari 2019; Mandalaki 2021): a university where researchers need to be aggressively competitive to survive, where success and failure are individualized, where outputs are measured, counted, and controlled, where the ‘universal academic – supposedly a white male from an Anglo-Saxon country’ (Ahonen et al. 2020, 458) is rewarded. As I write for a career, I don’t write freely. As I publish, I fuel the never-ending spiral of writing ever-more, too. The gendered neoliberal university is a business and writing is its currency (Bansel, Perell, and Tang 2020). ‘Publishing or perishing’ prioritizes speed over slowness (Helin 2023), monologue over conversation (Mandalaki 2021; Pullen and Rhodes 2008), representation over performativity (Beavan et al. 2021), purity over contamination (Pullen and Rhodes 2008), and competition over care (Johansson and Wickström 2023; Sai et al. 2024).

As an academic, I write as ‘a cage, in search for a bird’¹ (Kafka 2019). In the neoliberal academic context, the bars of this cage – the conventions, norms, and paradigms – stand for ‘rigour, purity, mastery and masculinity’ (Höpl 2000, 104; quoted in Pullen and Rhodes 2008, 242; see also Gilmore et al. 2019). Writing for and in this cage feels rigid, with little room to step aside, move left and right, deviate from the ‘how things are done.’ My words, sentences, and paragraphs are held together by this ‘Victorian corset’ (Gilmore et al. 2019, 3) of masculine academia which doesn’t fit but makes me, my writing, fit to certain standards, norms, and conventions. The bars of a cage, wrapped in a beautiful gown of glory, excellence, and publications. In many ways, this might explain why I am unsatisfied with my writing; with how my ideas and thoughts turn out once expressed on paper (or screen). Re/producing descriptions, explanations, and knowledge in standardized and pre-defined ways can make academic writing limiting rather than liberating. Even if I found a bird for my cage, it is trapped in a narrow world. Even if I found ways of writing in this corset, my writing is suffocating.

Tensions in writing

Academic writing is inherently tension-loaden (Ashcraft 2017; Heron, Gravett, and Yakovchuk 2021). While a finalized and polished piece of writing may indeed leave me with pride and relief and readers with a ‘piece of knowledge,’ my ways of getting there are often plagued with feelings of ‘struggle and discomfort’ (Henriksen et al. 2022, 562) as well as ‘anxiety, ambivalence and even shame’ (562). Disciplined by the neoliberal university, I pressure myself with perfectionism: Is this *really* good enough? Can it ever be? Is there a word that better captures what I am trying to say, a phrase that gets closer to the gist of my knowing and thinking? Can writing ever be finished? My academic writing is measured, strategic, tailored, technical, monolithic (Bansel, Perell, and Tang 2020; Mandalaki 2021) – molded against the violence of authority, success, and masculinity.

But as I write, I feel. I work with my intuition, I *want* to work with my intuition. Where are these feelings in my final pieces of writing? Where has my intuition gone? Softened. Veiled. Swallowed. Muted. No longer existing. Drowned out by voices of rationality, logic, academic conventions, and masculinity. It begins with conforming to journal guidelines, carefully selecting who (not) to cite, meticulously constructing and selling a research gap. It goes on with reviewers asking for more concepts (but no concept overload and more concept clarity!). Editors requesting another revision, more senior academics keeping fixed understandings of what is good and bad research. So, I strip away my own voice, feelings, intuition, subjectivities, the messiness of my knowing, thinking, writing, being. Layer by layer, a little less of ‘who I am’ and a lot more of ‘what I can’ – or rather, of ‘what I should and should not do’ according to all these others. My text becomes rigid and dead, theirs and no longer mine. I become detached (Lund and Tienari 2019), sanitized, rationalized (Mandalaki 2021). Something that fits the corset and becomes the cage.

Can we revive the potential to feel, to connect, to write *with* instead of *for* others (Ahonen et al. 2020)? Un-build the cage through our academic writing? Un-tie the corset?

And so I write – *write differently* – to write toget-*her* (Mandalaki 2021). A writing that breaks with masculine, technical, and monolithic conventions, norms, and paradigms and allows for the ways of knowing and writing of ‘different, vulnerable, black, “non-white,” junior, female, “non-masculine” bodies’ (Mandalaki 2021, 1014); one that allows me and others to find and express our voices, feelings, bodies, and subjectivities in my words, sentences, and pages; a writing not detached but ‘touched/able/ing’ (Mandalaki 2021); one that forges connection ‘as an act of care, wonder, love and healing’ (Henriksen et al. 2022, 562; see also Ahonen et al. 2020; Kiriakos and Tienari 2018).

Come and join me in my collective letter diary; in challenging the neoliberal university.

A collective letter diary

Who is the ‘collective I’?

Who is writing this collective letter diary? Allow us to introduce ourselves and explain what led us to writing this diary – what brought us to this collective journey and adventure.

I am Ellen. I am Milena. I am Monica. The first sprout of the Collective I that writes this paper emerged at the EGOS Colloquium in 2019 in Edinburgh, where the three of us met and our lives touched. Ellen attended the conference for the second time; for Milena and Monica, it was their first academic conference. Finding ourselves among mainly senior academics and feeling greatly out of place, we all longed for orientation. In each other, we found this orientation; we found comfort and tiny sprouts of confidence, together feeling less alone. Since then, our togetherness intensified, both in amount and depth. I – Ellen and Milena – co-organized some workshops; I – Milena and Monica – worked on papers together; I – Monica and Ellen – co-organized an event. I – Ellen, Milena, Monica – wrote together in this collective diary. As individuals, we make up the Collective I. Together, we also represent others that share (some of) our life trajectories.

As I write this collective letter diary, I am a female early career researcher, with all the wonders, freedoms, tensions, and precarities that are part of this stage (Bansel, Perell, and Tang 2020; Essén and Winterstorm Värlander 2013; Mandalaki 2021). I am in the middle or at the end of my (article-based) PhD thesis, overwhelmed, driven, confused, and inspired by my work all at the same time. I am pondering on my articles, planning my next submission, waiting for journal decisions, wrangling with reviewers’ and my supervisors’ comments. I do not know how to navigate the many voices that are not mine but nonetheless push, tear, and meander through my papers. I need to – *want to* – find my voice in my writing. And that better sooner than later. My contract is ending on a fixed term. Does that mean that my academic being is only temporary? I don’t know how an academic career works; my family doesn’t know either. I feel lost in the rules of this academic game, struggling with its power plays, and isolated by a global pandemic. It feels as if I were drifting in a stormy sea of uncertainty, confusion, and frustration. I search for others that share my struggles; I long for returning to the joy I used to feel when writing. I do my best to keep my head above academia’s murky waters. I reach out for a piece of driftwood, hoping to find a helping hand, support, and trust. And I do; I did ever since our first encounter. I – *Ellen, Milena, Monica* – learn to navigate the tides in the adversities of the PhD process (Rutter et al. 2023).

In my collective voice, I am still multiple. I find myself in the multiplicity and commingling of shared stories and experiences, in the dialogue and exchange between them, in the marks each one of us left on the other as we ‘wrote into each other’s lives’ (Coia and Taylor 2007, 23) in and through our letter diary. I embrace *us* when writing *I*, going beyond separateness, emerging from what binds us (and many others) toget-*her*. In our folds of togetherness and friendship (Henderson and Black 2018), I catch my breath, I find my voice in our collective letter diary, becoming a Collective I.

Becoming a ‘collective I’

Writing our collective letter diary

In October 2021, we all reach a pinnacle of struggles and uncertainties. We meet up online to have a coffee and talk. Our conversation flows from our worries with reviews to still searching our voice after

(more than) three years into the PhD to the nakedness we feel when working on our papers. We talk about how writing is intimately interwoven with all these topics and, in the end, agree to each write up a personal reflection on how we are presently experiencing writing. As we write these reflections and read those of the others, we share similar feelings: of finding ourselves in each other's struggles, of connection and friendship, of a weight being lifted off our individual shoulders and placed in our collective middle. In that moment, we first become aware of the potential of collectively writing about writing in the neoliberal university, primarily for us but perhaps also for others with whom these writings resonate. In the search of understanding our highs and lows in writing, we start a letter diary as a way to have a more continuous, open, and honest conversation about academic writing. We agree on a loose writing procedure:

- 1) We use a shared online text document easily accessible for everyone.
- 2) We come back to our diary every three to four days to write a new entry and respond to the previous ones, without sticking to a specific order among the three of us. That meant that, sometimes, two entries would be added on the same day by different people, but also that two entries by the same person could follow immediately after each other (possibly even on the same day).
- 3) Every letter is signed with our names and the date. The letters do not need to meet a minimum or maximum length.
- 4) Topic-wise, the only direction we agree upon upfront is that our letters are supposed to offer personal, honest, and reflective insights into our academic writing experiences.

We are writing this letter diary for about four months (November 2021 to March 2022). The process of writing, reading, and reflecting in the letter diary is by far not linear. It is messy, and often we fail in responding to all the thoughts raised in the letters. We jump back and forth between entries, thoughts, and moments. We pick up some things over and over again, while others move to the background. But the more we write, the more we create moments 'that are personal learning encounters' (Torres de Eça, Saldanha, and Vidal 2013, 288). Once a month during the process of writing our diary, we meet in an online call to talk about our experiences of reading and writing our letters. We share our thoughts about how the diary is unfolding (including reflecting on whether we are still writing about writing, if our letters have taken a different turn, and, if so, what to do about these turns). As we share our feelings and experiences, we embrace the differences and similarities we find in each others' entries.

Our journey of writing the collective letter diary did not begin with a clear methodological approach, not even with the idea to 'produce' knowledge suitable for 'publishing' and 'advancing' our careers. Maybe this is why our writing was not trapped in a cage and suffocating in a tight corset? Still, reflecting on our ways of writing, sharing, and making sense, writing our collective letter diary has many parallels to *collaborative autoethnography* (e.g. Chang, Ngunjiri, and Hernandez 2012; Coia and Taylor 2007; Geist-Martin et al. 2010; Sai et al. 2024). In collaborative autoethnography, authors share with each other intimate details of their experiences, struggles and joys, life histories, and much more (Rutter et al. 2023), often with regard to a particular facet of their professional and/or personal life. Some have done so through letters as well. For example, Knowles and Cole wrote letters to each other about 'the dilemmas, frustrations, and joys' (1994, 27) they encountered as they transitioned from being doctoral students to becoming professors. Meier and Wegener (2017) exchanged letters to explore when and why texts resonated with them.

In writing back to each other (Coia and Taylor 2007) collaborative autoethnography resembles a 'process of confession' (Rutter et al. 2023, 3) that asks authors to be vulnerable with both themselves and each other. This vulnerability pushes collective-reflective sensemaking as individual experiences interweave and form new collaborative ways of understanding (Allender and Manke 2004; Coia and Taylor 2007). By engaging with our autoethnographic experiences collaboratively in our letter diary, we inquire and write about our own experiences. Slowly but steadily, we transition from writing to each other to writing *with* each other, 'our ontologies [...] com[ing] together' (Ahonen et al. 2020, 448).

Reflecting on our collective letter diary

In March 2022, we agree to stop writing entries into our collective letter diary. By now, we have addressed countless experiences, feelings, and emotions about our academic writing and being. This moment of stopping feels like the pause after telling a cathartic story, like the smell of fresh air after a storm, rather than the silence before. We decide to take a step back, to ponder and reflect. What exactly have we been writing about in all those 40 letters flowing over 39 pages composed over the past months?

We allow ourselves some time away from our diary before turning and tuning (in)to its pages once again. We re-read all the letters. What are the topics and themes that come up in and through the diary's interplay of opening up, seeing each other, and writing back? We find threads of companionship, loose ends of confusion, personal-yet-shared moments of joy, struggle, and relief as well as passages that made and make us laugh, cry, or both. As we turn over our letters, again and again, these threads become mirrors in which we see and understand ourselves and each other, as peers, colleagues, friends, and human beings (Mandalaki 2021).

We talk on-and-off over several weeks about our thoughts and notes. Individually, we highlight text passages that stand out to us, resonate with us, and touch us; collectively, we reflect on what each of us is seeing in these passages (see Rutter et al. 2023 for a similar approach). We revisit our letters through each other's understandings and find a messy mix of insecurity, joy, enthusiasm, frustration, commitment, passion. To understand these feelings, we turn to works of literature on writing differently and resisting the neoliberal university (Ashcraft 2017; Gilmore et al. 2019; Henriksen et al. 2022; Kinnunen, Wallenius-Korkalo, and Rantala 2021; Lund and Tienari 2019; Sai et al. 2024), looking for similar experiences, helpful ideas, and some kind of guidance (see, e.g. Nordbäck, Hakonen, and Tienari 2022). Have others done, felt, or encountered the same topics, threads, and themes? Have they seen similar reflections in their mirrors? We are drawn to stories about opening up, about wounding and healing, about being courageous and fragile together, both in the literature we read (e.g. Helin 2019, 2023; Henriksen et al. 2022; Kinnunen, Wallenius-Korkalo, and Rantala 2021; Page 2017) and our own letters. We realize that through writing about writing in the neoliberal university, we have encountered our *vulnerabilities*. Being socialized in the realm of qualitative methods, we start weaving these vulnerabilities into common threads (Coia and Taylor 2013), folding them through multiple rounds of collaborative reflection, collectively choosing individual and shared moments of intense feeling. These resonating moments (Meier and Wegener 2017) are the glistening facets of our vulnerabilities, the *insecurity, courage, relating, and becoming* through and within our academic writing in the neoliberal university. Vulnerabilities that transformed from being *ours*, individually, to becoming *mine*, collectively.

Let me now guide you through these vulnerabilities by drawing upon quotes from the collective letter diary. I fear and hope that some of them will resonate, reverb, and ring true to you, my fellow writers, dear readers, and future companions.

Four vulnerabilities in academic writing: insecurity, courage, relating, becoming

Dear insecurity ...

*Two days ago, I was sitting in front of the paper and couldn't formulate one sentence. When I woke up that morning, I was afraid that this could happen. My biggest fear about writing is non-writing. This fear can be the biggest barrier. I am afraid of not representing others' thoughts as they would have wanted me to (e.g., when I cite their work), and likewise, of what others will think about my writings once I have shared them with them ... Will they like it? Will they just think that my thoughts are some wild ramblings without any real implications (or *contributions*—probably a word that we all fear)? Put differently, I am afraid of being judged. I care a lot about my co-authors' opinions. This can hold me back from writing because I think it might not be good enough. I fear that they might be disappointed when I only wrote one paragraph a day [...] If I don't accomplish progress on our paper on a day, I feel bad: Why do I fail despite living a presumably relaxed life without childcare responsibilities? What should people think of me?*

As I sit in front of my blank page, doubts, expectations, and pressure start filling me, taking ever more space inside me. As my attempts at writing end in *nothing*, I feel like a failure. Academia's numbers, stats, and performance indicators seem to agree. What is it worth to ponder on an empty page or nurture your thoughts if others are typing faster and publishing more? If they are writing more and better in a system that feeds off of *more* and *better*. So, I just write *something*. In desperation, in fear, in anticipation to be one step ahead. Perhaps I might even begin enjoying my writing. But my insecurities quickly find their way back to me. There is less joy, no joy, neither in the empty page (Kivinen 2021) nor in the words that might eventually flow from my fingers.

My insecurities, they drown my writing, they drown me. My texts are 'simultaneously me and not me' (Henriksen et al. 2022, 562): I wish they were mine, as that would mean I am productive, I am progressing, I can submit *something*. I also wish that these texts were not mine. *If they weren't mine, I could feel less vulnerable, less naked, less exposed.* My insecurities creep into my writing, they are part of it. They make my 'positioning as an academic subject collapse[]' (Moss 2014, 808): I am doomed, as I feel pressured to produce *something*, scared of not writing, haunted by my empty pages as they prove my incapacities. But as I write, I also become complicit in the monstrous neoliberal university system. In my writing, I feed more sacrifices to this greedy monster and I whet its appetite for competitive pressure and ever-increasing productivity (Ashcraft 2017; Bansel, Perell, and Tang 2020). Am I feeding pieces of myself to this monster? And if so: 'How many distorted, senseless versions of myself do I have to produce [to feed] to finally get the PhD and the tenure?' (Mandalaki 2021, 1014).

I hunt and feed, produce and progress, I write – all for the sake of not losing my future. But even worse, I want to be the monster. I want to be productive, good, more, *better*. And sometimes, it seems like I already am. I grind my teeth and I am fed. But after every bite, the insecurity taps on my shoulder, whispering in my ear: Are you even *that* good at writing? *Are you really good enough?*

I sometimes have this really weird fear, that once I start to enjoy what I do (in terms of writing and research) and not push beyond my limits, I won't get better or become just an average writer. And I like getting better. I am terrible at enjoying things without getting competitive [...] It can lead to really dark places, especially in moments of failure. Not being the best (OMG, that sounds so cheesy) – it crushes me. Not only because I put in the work, but because reaching goals is such a central part of my identity. So who am I, if I constantly fail? [...] What if everyone thinks I am not good enough?

Me, an average writer. I write average texts. I am average, at best. That is a problem. I am convinced: it is *my* problem. It is *my* perfectionism that fuels *my* insecurities, holding me in the ongoing, never-ending limbo of going back and forth in my texts, of writing sentences only to immediately delete them. My writing needs fixing, I am the problem I need to fix. *My* writing is what needs fixing. My inner critique forces me to strive for more and more and more. *More* is what can fix my writing, fix me. My insecurities and all my 'what if?' questions, they are *my* problems. They exist 'just' in *my* head. But do they? Are these really just *my* issues?

I stop. I think. I re-write to offer a new framing; one that simultaneously saddens and soothes me. I am socialized in 'neoliberal practices that pervade the academy' (Bansel, Perell, and Tang 2020, 124): where 'average is not good enough' serves as a vision, a mission, and a mantra to be proud of; where failure is individualized by default and nurtured by constant self-criticism (Wang et al. 2024). Re-reading my quote from the letter diary against the background of this institutionalized 'submission to the rule of excellence' (Ashcraft 2017, 36; see also Sai et al. 2024), I do not see my insecurities fueled by *my* perfectionism. I do not see myself daunted by *my* thinking, and I do not feel guilty about how *my insecurities* slow me down. It is not *my* imposter syndrome that keeps its tight grip on me; it's the system that drowns me, confuses me, makes me feel small. I see myself and my writing embedded in a system of perfectionism, fueled by doubt, guilt, unreachable standards, where the 'struggle of becoming good enough in harsh neoliberal conditions continues to etch itself onto our [my] bodies' (Zielke, Thompson, and Hepburn 2023, 51); a system that makes me vulnerable, that wounds without healing; a system that continuously judges me.

I still feel so vulnerable when writing something for the first time. It is the potentiality of opening a door for others into my thinking, my soul, my emotions. And for me, opening these doors is hard. What if someone discovers my doubts? My insecurities? My 'I don't feel as an expert' thoughts in my writing? [...] I doubt my writing (and in extension, myself) a lot [...] and I get annoyed by myself for doing that. It is not my writing that annoys me at that moment. It is the feeling I get when writing. Because it is so honest and deep. Because I cannot cover my insecurities when sitting in front of an empty page, not typing or typing imperfect words. That stresses me, not my writing, but my feelings about writing.

As I write, I feel afraid. I know that part of the academic writing game is being judged: through review processes, through job evaluations, through discussions at conferences, and so forth. My writing exposes me to this judgment, to this vulnerable position of getting evaluated for what and how *I write* – for what, how, and who *I am*. When starting my career, I agreed to play this game without knowing the rules and that these rules favor a certain type of winner: masculine, competitive, hyper-productive, individualistic (Lund and Tienari 2019). And with every piece I write, I agree once more to be judged. I thought I could learn to care more about the substance of the feedback and less about how much it hurts sometimes. I tell myself: these judgments by colleagues, reviewers, and readers will help me develop and improve my writing, my texts, my (academic) self. But instead, I 'get cast in a sea of risk, insecurity and vulnerability' (Pullen 2018, 123). I am sucked into a spiral of negative self-talk, worries, and fear. I judge how I write and who I am, because I learned that I should judge every word, every sentence, every paragraph, every part of me.

As I write, I am exposed to pressure, self-doubts, and judgment. I also expose myself, my thoughts, my ideas. And 'even though it hurts' (Helin 2023, 393), I keep holding on. Because through and in my writing, I find a glimpse of courage, too. It is (still) there. I am (still) there.

I put it [my voice] aside, allowed it to shine through only in small details and hints. In a figure of speech, in a specific syntax or additional footnote. It's still there, but not there at all at the same time.

Dear courage ...

Today was a good day. I was not afraid of writing words down [...] I wrote the introduction today and was in a kind of 'fearless mode,' which meant that I kept in mind that, for now, every word filling this empty page is better than no word. It went smoothly. It was fun. I felt much better afterward.

As I write, I simply do. The letters flow from my thoughts to my fingers touching the keyboard, trickling onto my pages. My words compose sentences, my sentences pile up to paragraphs. And as they do, my introduction comes to live. Against the odds, the doubts, the pain – *against all my insecurity* – I write and I write. I am fearless. I type with confidence, with courage. I am no longer holding my breath (Helin 2023), I just write. And I feel good about it. Writing feels good. As I write, I get excited. I have fun. Writing is fun. I get 'caught up in the creativity' (Shildrick 2002, 3).

The flow of words excites me, carries me forward. I produce a text! But with that text, I also become part of and contribute to the machinery of the neoliberal university that I, deeply inside, detest. And often I am torn between wanting my career to advance and wanting for things to change. Can my writing do both?

This is such an intricate and vulnerable position to be in [...] I could just conform, but there is something inside me really wrenching at just the idea of it. And I am simply not willing to ignore or just swallow down this gut feeling.

There are a few ways of how to respond to such norms [...] also in writing: conforming (actually appreciating the norms and reinforcing them) or resisting: being loud [...] being sarcastic [...] being simple and elegant. In academic writing, it is the same. Conform to the system and this will be a safer path – and safety, in such a volatile professional environment, must not be underestimated, especially for early career scholars or people with little financial safety. Or resist, in whatever way you want: be loud, be elegant, be playful, be simple.

My writing can do more than conform. Writing can help me resist. If I dare to, if I find the courage to listen to myself, follow my heart. This resistance, to write with courage, is something I long for,

something I seek – in despair, because doing things differently is unsafe, it puts me and my future at risk in the neoliberal university. I struggle. I want to be loud, elegant, playful, simple – be whatever I am. Write my research stories in whatever way does most justice to them. ‘Why not work with genres, styles, grammars, tenors, and vocabularies that can do otherwise than try to fulfill the false promise of representation?’ (Beavan et al. 2021, 450). Indeed, why not? Why do we tidy up and clean the mess, richness, and complexity we encounter in our research so obsessively? Should we not attest to precisely this mess, the mess that life, research, and writing simply are (see also Pullen and Rhodes 2008)?

There must be different ways, new ways of academic writing. Ways that embrace stories’ richness and complexity as they transform from experiences to texts. Ways that surprise me and my readers because they lead us down unexpected trails to yet unknown terrains; because they make us think and reconsider – rather than numbing our senses as we walk the same old beaten path, again and again, until it becomes the only path we know, see, and follow.

In a perfect (academic) world, there would be all kinds of spaces and audiences for other than Western(American)-centered ways of knowing, writing, or thinking [...] But there is no box for out of the box. And in a sense, I consider the Haikus as somewhat ‘crazy’ or risky or daring or not fitting the norm [...] it is about provoking something, about laying bare a norm or a boundary that was obscured or reinforced so far.²

My academic writing is conditioned to certain conventions. During my PhD, I became more and more familiarized with the norms my writing should follow. I can categorize a text as not fitting *the box* because I feel it: I feel surprised, I feel touched, I feel inspired when I see how others have the courage to break with norms and conventions in their writing. They *write with courage*, ‘loosened from the binds of “scientific” writing that pretends to objectivity, rationality and the elision of the author from the text’ (Gilmore et al. 2019, 5). And this can have many forms. Academic writing can be loud, full of rage (Ahonen et al. 2020; Beavan 2019). It can be dirty, messy, leaking (Pullen 2018; Pullen and Rhodes 2008). It can be calm, subtle (Rodrigues Silva 2021; Valtonen and Pullen 2021). It can be emotional, caring (Boncori and Smith 2019; Kivinen 2021). It can be poetic, playful (Henriksen et al. 2022; Huopalaainen 2022). It can be a personal statement by the author(s) revealing how they felt when engaging with their fields, data, and theories (e.g. Cunliffe 2022; Gherardi, Cozza, and Poggio 2018; Mandalaki and Pérezts 2022), visual plays on words that spark readers’ imagination (Brummans 2022), or a Haiku that interrupts the flow of a text and takes me into another world (Taylor et al. 2021). Academic writing can and should have all these possibilities and forms, without the demands to fulfill them.

Whenever I stumble upon such writings, I admire the authors’ courage, their willingness to open up, to make themselves vulnerable and touch-able (Mandalaki 2021). They allow me to relate to them. I long for these moments of relating when reading. And I long for them in writing.

Writing for myself, for others, with myself, with others.

Dear relating ...

I could deeply connect to both of you and felt touched. We want to be found, we want to connect, we want to feel loved – this is what makes writing so special and emotional.

As I write, I find connection to others. I collect others’ words that touched me and I carry them with me. I relate to them through my texts, in respect and appreciation for the emotions, thoughts, and ideas they nurtured in me.

I am moved. I hope my texts move others, too. My fingers touch the keyboard, but they seek to reach out much farther, deeper, to reach you. Through my writing, I can open up; writing opens doors. Doors that others can walk through as they read my texts, read me. I invite you to walk through my doors. I write, you read. I read, you write. We enter a raw and vulnerable space where we can come together and relate (Gilmore et al. 2019). We get ‘in touch’ (Mandalaki 2021,

1009). Writing is ‘relational knowing’ (Meriläinen, Salmela, and Valtonen 2022, 79; Sai et al. 2024; Torres de Eça, Saldanha, and Vidal 2013).

If I'd had to pin down one aspect of my work as my most favorite, that would be precisely it. The dialogue and conversations between different words (and worlds) that we can start by reading, thinking, writing. I love how a voice can travel from one paper to another, how it changes along the way, how it can constitute entire communities, how it can inspire new paths and exciting ideas.

I write, I engage with ideas – it's a mutual back and forth between what's on paper and what is not yet on paper; a process in which the writer, the written, and the writing become very closely entangled – which is probably why I find it extremely difficult to distance or detach, and consider writing as just some technicality.

My words emerge in ‘co-constitutive relation to other bodies’ (Kinnunen, Wallenius-Korkalo, and Rantala 2021, 659). My body, myself. As I write, I connect to myself. My writing and I, the writer – they touch and intimately merge as my fingers touch the keyboard. In this ‘emotional, embodied, experiential and evocative’ (Boncori and Smith 2019, 75) moment of writing, my words, sentences, paragraphs, texts, and I become inseparable (Beavan 2019). There is no word that is not a part of me; what, who, and how I am is emerging in these words. And they reach far beyond myself:

That's the whole thing about authorship: people contribute, have conversations, get into a spiral of ideas, and at the end, there is no way to separate contributions anymore. This is so fascinating.

These sessions were rich, engaging, helpful – truly collaborative. I think what we tried to do in the sessions was not only better understanding what each of us saw in the data, but also forming a shared voice around where we'd like the paper that will (hopefully) eventually come out of it will go.

My writing is truly mine and yet it is not. As I write, I speak for colleagues who inspired me, people I care for, voices I hear. I write as a collective. I do so right here, in these very lines: Sitting together – online and in-person – writing, re-writing, editing, finishing each other's sentences, entangling and merging each other's thoughts. I collectively reflect and ‘engage in dialogue’ (Ahonen et al. 2020, 448). I relate through writing and create something truly collaborative, something that is no longer just mine and more than ours. My struggles, hopes, and dreams echo through *our* words, and become *our-my* words again. No longer am I separable from *us*. I emerge in those encounters, through them. As I touch, relate, and speak, we speak toget-*her* (Mandalaki 2021) and resist the isolation of individual authorship (Ahonen et al. 2020). I don't know who speaks or who writes, so we all do. Our stories get written. As I write, as my pages fill, as I empty my mind: *I become*.

A blank space of paper can do wonders.

Dear becoming ...

Having the empty page in front of you – having the opportunity to speak – write – your mind, to learn, grow, reflect from there.

Writing might be more about emptying our mind, reflecting, thinking, and clearing our thoughts than filling a page. It IS about becoming.

As I write, I discover thoughts previously unspoken and feelings previously unfelt. I connect to parts of me and others that I did not encounter before. I trust my intuition to follow these thoughts and allow these parts to flow into words – to become *my* words. As I write, I form a new ‘composite, imbricated creation’ (Beavan 2019, 51) of my text and myself. I can feel how I *unfold* through my writing. I feel my writing's fragility, gravity, yes, power. It is not *a* writing, it is *my* writing. It is me-writing, it is HER-writing (Mandalaki 2021). While I am writing, I ask myself, sometimes critically, sometimes graciously: Is this who and how I want to become? Are those words *my* words? Do they nourish my ‘being-and-becoming-in-and-through-writing’ (Mandalaki 2021, 1015)? How I write and what I write shapes the type of researcher, the person, I am and will become (Weatherall 2019). My writing forms me. It is me. I can become me. Writing is how I become (Colyar 2009).

There is some beauty in this process. Despite and because of all the mess.

I begin to see beauty. I see so much beauty in the messiness surrounding me. It inspires me, it keeps me going. And I write, embraced by this beauty.

It's the flow of thoughts for me, gently moving from one to the other in continuous and hopefully comprehensible ways. I have to follow the discoveries (and my thoughts) and more than once, I got surprised by how my thoughts and knowledge actually materialized as something totally new, not in thinking, but in writing.

For flowy writing, I must feel similarly safe and adventurous, confident and challenged, in my mental and physical center and on the edge, alone but still together.

And sometimes, after such a writing session, I don't even read my own writing because (1) I am just exhausted or over-enthusiastic and (2) I don't want to 'ruin the magic' or flow by discovering that my writing may have not been as smooth and brilliant as it felt.

I don't know what I write, as I write. I am immersed in multiple paths full of wonder emerging between the words; magically adding line after line. I follow these lines, like a curious wanderer. I peak around the corner, the full stop of my sentences. Where will they lead me? I don't know yet, I (may) never know (Colyar 2009). I don't need to know either. I trust myself. As I step on the lines and paths unfolding in front of me, I leave my weighty bag full of academic norms of 'how to write properly and successfully' behind. Wandering along sentences, exploring ideas yet unthought (Helin 2019), and connecting to memories yet unconsidered; it is the journey – not the destination – that forms me and my writing. Some of the lines and paths may leave me in disarray at crossroads densely filled with different concepts, thoughts, possibilities. Others may even lead me to complete dead ends, to paths exceeding the present boundaries of my thinking and being. And yet, I keep moving, keep wandering. Me and my writing, we become more through these moments of flowy, adventurous, magical, and puzzling writing. My writing guides me and creates my wor(l)ds, and 'all of a sudden, [I] embrace something new' (Helin 2019, 95).

I don't judge what and how I write (Helin 2019), as I write. I just write, hopeful, excited, and content that my thoughts and words will lead me somewhere new or somewhere that feels like home. I trust the process, go with my intuition and feelings. And I don't care (or am too scared to care) 'whether my textual attempts are scholarly enough, interesting enough, or strong enough, if they are convincing, clean and clear' (Helin 2019, 95). I don't want to ruin the magic of the moment, disrupt the path that unfolds in front of me through my writing. I enjoy this rare magical moment and who I am right now. I cherish these warm tinglings that I can sense all over my body as things finally fall into place. They nurture my writing, my reading, my being, yet they are 'fragile, caught up in a continual becoming' (Moss 2014, 809). One critical comment, one boring paragraph, one situation of not finding the right expression – and they might hide for a long time again. Even worse, sometimes they just vanish because all the academic norms and expectations surrounding me creep back in: Can my text really be good when I feel good? Can I only feel good if my text is good? Do I not need to suffer for my writings so they become real academic writings? Is that not what I am told all the time? Why do I (or the system I am caught up in) do this to me and my magical moments in writing – why is it so easy to make them fall apart and so incredibly difficult to sustain them? My magical moments in writing, they are rare but I hold them dearly, I treasure them, I crave them. In these moments, I invite my insecurity *and* my courage into my writing. I relate to myself, to others with my writing, through writing. I become in my (academic) writing. Become more than I was before, more than the system allows me to be. I feel that I am right where I belong, in the proximity of others, toget-her (Mandalaki 2021).

I love writing in being similarly challenging and fulfilling, as unfolding in a messy chaos of thoughts, words, sentences, paragraphs, and pages that start to somehow magically align at one point [...] this flow is something I seek, I hunt and, sometimes, I desperately crave. Looking back, I guess, missing this unique entanglement of challenge and fulfillment made me quit my office job [...] I have been really unhappy in my life [...] I couldn't figure out why. I also wrote a lot [...] In these writing experiences, I never felt lost, but also, I never felt found. And although

academia challenges me (maybe us?) with so many moments of losing sight, of feeling overwhelmed, there are these moments of flow, where I feel that I found my passion.

Vulnerability in writing/writing with vulnerability

As I write, I feel *insecure*, and I feel *courageous*. As I write, I *relate* to others, and I *become* more than I was before. Sharing my diary in this paper lays bare my vulnerabilities in writing – dear reader, you now know depths of me that I did not dare to encounter and articulate before, aspects of my academic being that otherwise would have not found expression (Kiriakos and Tienari 2018).

I felt lost and vulnerable. Caught in a cage and tied into a corset, in the gendered neoliberal university (Ashcraft 2017; Lund and Tienari 2019; Sai et al. 2024). I was starving for care and connection in my academic life and knew that others were starving, too. I started to write the collective letter diary without the expectation of being healed from my vulnerabilities. Rather, I wanted to explore them. What I've experienced has gone far beyond my imagination: 'we shared more evocative experiences and vulnerability than was envisaged at the early stages' (Rutter et al. 2023, 4). It turned out to be far more emotional – in all its facets: I cried, laughed, got upset, and forgave myself for being human. I – we deeply connected through our vulnerabilities, in our writing. I – we felt found.

The collective diary became a tool for me to explore, reflect, and mirror my inner vulnerable states. I now look back with great gratitude for having the privilege to care and being cared for through this diary. Simultaneously, I am proud of myself for courageously stepping into this experiment, for opening my heart, for talking about my insecurities and pain, my joy, my love for writing, and for allowing the emergence of a 'space where others might see themselves' (Pelias 2005, 418; quoted in Boncori and Smith 2019, 80). One last time, I let the collective letter diary speak for itself.

There is much liberation and freedom in sharing your concerns with others. [...] That's why I am feeling relieved, satisfied even, after having read through these wonderful reflections. In a way, I am very sorry for feeling these positive things – because in your texts and reflections, I also see your pain. I don't just see it, I think I can feel it with you. Because I've been there too. And while I don't want you to feel this pain, these insecurities, the frustration that academic work all too often brings with it, I have to admit that I am very happy (at least for the moment) that I'm not alone with all this. So I guess I need to thank you for putting these thoughts on paper.

Writing toget-*her*, for and with each other, has set me on a path of 'collective healing and rehabilitation' (Sai et al. 2024, 5; see also Ahonen et al. 2020). I have shared the burden of my *insecurities*, passed on my moments of *courage*, related to the abundance of thinking and knowing surrounding me, and – in and through it all – I *became* more than I was before, more-than-me. Sharing these vulnerabilities with you, dear reader, is my humble but heartily attempt to contribute to an academic world that is less distanced and cold and rigid, more honest and human and caring (Ahonen et al. 2020; Mandalaki 2021): an academic world where vulnerability is not mistaken for weakness. I am strong because of my vulnerability, not despite it. Can we all be, in and through our writing?

Word by word, sentence by sentence, and page by page, I created an opening for others to slip through (Henriksen et al. 2022). A subtle hint between the lines of shared suffering, a bold leap between paragraphs. So that we can forge connectedness through our shared vulnerabilities (Johansson and Wickström 2023). So that we can discover intimate, vulnerable spaces and foster a relational knowing of communities (Meriläinen, Salmela, and Valtonen 2022; Sai et al. 2024; Torres de Eça, Saldanha, and Vidal 2013). Spaces where I become *more-than-me*; we become *more-than-us*; our writing becomes *more*. As I write, I finally take a deep breath and invite you to breathe with me.

Breathe with me and ot-*hers*. Explore your feelings, perspectives, thoughts. Your vulnerabilities. Take a blank page and see where it leads you. Or just pick a quote from my letter diary and immerse yourself into my feelings, making them yours, becoming part of *me-us*. I warmly encourage you to experiment without the pressure to deliver – breathe, write, escape the cage. A collective letter diary as introduced here in this article worked as scissors to open my corset. However, I am

not saying that it is the one and only solution or an exceptional or excellent contribution. Other collaborative autoethnographic works (e.g. Geist-Martin et al. 2010; Rutter et al. 2023; Sai et al. 2024), might inspire you to find your collective way out of the cage. And with them, I'll stay here with you, so we can breathe, write, and speak up toget-her.

Through opening up, through vulnerability, my – our – writing 'exceeds that which constrains it' (Bansel et al. 2008, 674). We escape. And more so, we resist. Our words, sentences, and pages – they rip off the 'mask of invulnerability' (Corlett, Mavin, and Beech 2019, 557) under which academic writing in the neoliberal university still hides; they allow us to 'divert from distanced writing traditions' (Kinnunen, Wallenius-Korkalo, and Rantala 2021, 658). In our words, we reclaim our own territory, we change norms from within, we contest the status quo (Essén and Winterstorm Värlander 2013), and 'stay in and destabilize the discourse of academic value and practices' (Sai et al. 2024, 12). In our sentences, we embrace vulnerability as a transformative gift (Helin 2019, 2023). And in our pages, we create a birthplace for something new (Corlett, Mavin, and Beech 2019). Our writing becomes a 'form of activism that enables us to march together, in our texts, body-to-body, hand-in-hand, finger-to-finger to write a new world together' (Mandalaki 2021, 1019). Our 'writing [toget-her] is political' (Pullen 2018, 128).

Toget-her, we reclaim authorship – aut-her-ship – over our writing. Toget-her, we find a little more of 'who we are' and a lot more of 'what we can' (Mandalaki 2021). Toget-her, we write to emancipate from the tight conventions of the gendered neoliberal university (Ashcraft 2017; Lund and Tienari 2019). Toget-her, we shatter the cage, we take off the corset. As we write, we speak up. 'Let's make contact!' (Pullen and Rhodes 2008, 242). Let's show what we got! Let's write! Let's show who we are and can be! 'I am an early career female academic and I have something to tell you' (Mandalaki 2021, 1008).

Word by word, sentence by sentence, page by page, toget-her, we begin building a new world.

Raysa's added response to my poem³:

*As I write, I create,
I transform, I regenerate,
I share, I renew.
Not just me, but we.*

Marjana's added response to both my and Raysa's poems:

*As I write, I let go
I sink into writing
I wonder what becomes of my writing
What becomes of me
Not just me, but we as Raysa reminds me
Maybe we always write together also when writing alone
Adding our voice, joining in
Sometimes muffled, sometimes strong, sometimes shaky
But being part of something
That comforts me*

Notes

1. Translated from the German original: 'Ein Käfig ging einen Vogel suchen' (Kafka 2019, 26).
2. Please see the section by Boris H. J. M. Brummans (643–644) in Taylor et al. (2021) for the Haikus I talk about here.
3. These responses to my poem emerged as part of the AOM 2022 PDW 'Writing together for change', hosted by Kristin Williams, Sara Persson, Marjana Johansson, Ella Henry, and Julia Storberg-Walker. We are grateful for Raysa Rocha's and Marjana Johansson's generosity of sharing their responses in this paper and letting us experience the beauty of writing toget-her with all our vulnerabilities.

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