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# Curating Learning Journeys

Transformational  
Experiences in the  
IR Classroom and Beyond

Erzsébet Strausz

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# Political Pedagogies

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Erzsébet Strausz

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*For my teachers: past, present, and future*

## *acknowledgements and appreciation*

About four years into the making of this book—one year before its completion and three years past its intended submission deadline—I found myself on the phone with my mother during one of our regular weekend check-ins.

I'm in Vienna, where I live and work; she's in my hometown, Ercsi, in rural Hungary.

'Mom, I'm worried that this book might not turn out very well, after all'. 'Don't you worry, darling', she replies, pausing for a moment before taking a long drag from her cigarette. 'There are so many shitty books out there in the world'.

We both laugh, and I have carried these words with me ever since. At the time, they were my mother's best and most sincere attempt to ease my deep anxieties and lighten the pressure I felt about writing a monograph from scratch. And indeed, they've provided me with reassurance—that, regardless of what the 'outcome' may be, life will embrace it, just as it has embraced the journey. The process itself will continue to nurture both the work and me. There is room for making, experimenting—and yes, even failing, if that's where the journey leads. Equally, there is space for play, ease, and the freedom to move around, and move on.

The encouragement and nourishment to create—and, ultimately, to finish this project—came in many forms, flowing through countless channels. Whatever this project has become, its very existence reflects the immense generosity of friends, colleagues, students, family members, and various other co-travellers. Their acts of kindness—often without their knowing—provided just the right amount of fuel to keep me moving forward, especially during times of pressure and when brighter horizons felt distant.

The words in the gratitude-archipelago that follow can't do justice to the scale of support and solidarity I received. Every iota of that support, however, has woven itself into the fabric of the micro-of-the-micro around which my writing revolves—into the currents of life that resist capture by language. My worst nightmare is to leave anyone out whose words, gestures, or mere presence shaped the contours and the many folds of this project. If, through my oversight, anyone is not mentioned in the lines that follow, their contribution—whether large or small—has been integral and invaluable to the evolution of the book and the learning

journey that preceded and unfolded through it. (This line is so I can sleep at night—and thank them in person.)

My deepest gratitude goes to the Master of Arts students at Central European University’s Department of International Relations who participated in the five iterations of the course ‘Knowing, Narrating, (re)Writing International Relations’ (KNR). Together, we explored various—and often improvised—modalities of writing-based reflection with trust and openness. Some of them graciously agreed to participate in research interviews and a collective collaging practice. Others supported me by keeping the project in mind even after their graduation, gently guiding me back on track. This book is the result of our exchanges and the profound enrichment of our pedagogical relations, which unfolded in ways that were always unpredictably generative, and where I learned a lot more than I could have imagined. I also thank my exceptional teaching assistants and collaborators at CEU—Idil Brand, Ceren Çetinkaya, Meredith Blake, Bernadett Miskolczi, Andreea Nicutar, Olga Ogula, Vladimir Ogula, and Mónica Lopes Tomás Da Silva—who helped co-create these experimental spaces and refine my approach to writing-based reflection.

The idea to translate these classroom experiences into academic form and the length of a research monograph was sparked by a conversation with Anca Pusca at Palgrave Macmillan, whose thoughtful guidance shepherded this project to completion through its many twists and turns. I am also grateful to two anonymous reviewers who recognised the vision and potential of a personal narrative on transformation within the discipline and higher education.

Randi Paige Guyton’s expert insight into the creative process and its challenges shed much-needed light on the mundane and often obscure aspects of ‘making’. The everyday struggles of writing, rewriting, and writing anew always found their silver lining through her wonderful mentorship.

I have been incredibly fortunate to have had a group of people whose eyes not only engaged with the text during its creation but also helped me see the project—and myself—in both our current form and in what we could become. I cannot thank enough:

shine choi, Andrew Bush, Alice Engelhard, Richard Freeman, Hannah Hughes, erica kaufman, Rahel Kunz, Candice Lowe Swift, Iain MacKenzie, Michelle Murray, Boldizsár Nagy, Eric Selbin, and Raluca Soreanu

for their compassionate reading and for easing this book's way into multiple worlds through their notes, expanding the planes of travelling together beyond my imagination.

Deep listening, sharp observations, conversations at critical junctures and on smoother terrains, holding and sharing space, writing together, writing about writing, exploring poetic possibility in and beyond language with

Erna Burai, Emet Brulin, Catherine Charrett, Orla Ní Cheallacháin, Angharad Closs Stephens, Andrew Davison, Gitte du Plessis, Kristin Eggeling, Cristina Yumie Aoki Inoue, Isabelle Kloepper, Timothy Koechlin, Veronica Korber Gonçalves, Joel Lazarus, Amy Lipman, Ibrahim Marazka, Trevor McCrisken, Himadeep Muppidi, Marijn Nieuwenhuis, Samson Okoth Opondo, Elina Penttinen, Quỳnh Phạm, Ryszard Piotrowicz, Akta Rao, Anna Selmeczi, Shelley Sacks, Samuel Speers, Tamara Pataki, Andreja Zevnik, and Griffin Werner

shaped the trajectories and sensibilities threading through this book in profound and often unexpected ways. Whatever shape the text has taken in the end, it has come closer to what I had always hoped for but wouldn't have been able to achieve without these exchanges.

Co-creating experimental spaces beyond the classroom with Muriel Bruttin and Kerry Harman affirmed the power of travelling across seemingly separate planes. Moving in and out of the normalised sensibilities of academic work helped normalise doing otherwise for me.

Articulating the ethos and cultivating the practices that infuse this book were greatly enriched by Shelley Sacks's Connective Practice Approach, her generosity, and our conversations over the years.

Creative spaces and collaborations played a crucial role in nurturing the initial spark and propelling the writing forward. My immense gratitude goes to the organisers, directors, members, and participants of the Gregynog Ideas Lab Summer School, the Center for Liberal Arts and Sciences Pedagogy (CLASP) at Bard College and the '25 Fellows Program Cohort, the FREEPSY project at the University of Essex, the CAMAMAZON project at Aberystwyth University, the Writing Politics group, the Social Sculpture Lab Learning Community, the 'Mobilizing the Feminist Imaginary' summer university course at CEU, writing retreats at the Conférence Universitaire de la Suisse Occidentale (CUSO), as well as the Conversation Dinners and the 'Collective Writing, Mutual Flourishing' workshop at Vassar College. Special thanks to the Office of Inclusion, Diversity, and Equality, and to Natália Nyikes, along with the Student Services Office at CEU for supporting and regularising my Attention Lab workshops.

I am deeply grateful to Central European University for enabling the open access publication of this book, ensuring equitable access to ways of knowing and transformational practices that will undoubtedly travel more freely in this format. I thank my colleagues, and my home unit, the Department of International Relations for growth opportunities that would not have been possible elsewhere.

Bard College hosted me during my research leave in the Spring of 2025 as an OSUN Mobility Fellow, providing the most stimulating and supportive environment for completing the manuscript. Co-teaching the course 'The Political Life of Hope' with Michelle Murray has opened truly hopeful horizons in the midst of challenging times. Being a CLASP '25 Fellow at the Institute for Writing and Thinking reshaped my earlier understanding of both why we write and why it matters to encourage others to write.

Nicholas Gribble's careful reading of the project—attuned to both language and meaning—offered an invaluable reflective space, making the work more coherent while also more confident in embracing the imperfections it inhabits and evolves through.

I thank Katherine Jetto for helping me locate key index terms, and Geetha Chockalingam along with the production team for their support and for accommodating the text's special features and design.

Dear friends—near and far, beyond the academic field and within my everyday worlding—have been the anchors of this journey and the keepers of my own processes of becoming. My writing writes a more elevated life into being in the company of

Eszter Domokos, Orsolya Cseprekál, Anna Csíky, Zsófia Entz-Tóth, Denise Hungerford, Zsuzsanna Kovács, Tamás Leél-Óssy, Ágnes Makáry, Tamás Molnár, and Krisztina Szalai.

Café Schopenhauer in Vienna and The Corner Counter in Red Hook, NY, have been second homes where the writing could unfold.

I thank Ron W. Rathbun and Rebeccah T. Patonay for opening the wisdom of other dimensions for me.

I thank my family, ancestors, and my more-than-human and human companions for keeping me grounded in plural worlds and languages of care. May the love we share in liminal spaces and across broken lines continue to nurture us all.

*competing interests* The author has no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this manuscript.

PRAISE FOR *CURATING LEARNING*  
*JOURNEYS-NOTES FROM CO-TRAVELLERS*

“With this profoundly thoughtful and thought-provoking book, Erzsébet Strausz has shifted the balance in the study of International Relations from the international to the relational, thus giving her work the widest possible relevance—for which field of inquiry, from the subatomic to the environmental, passing through all of the human sciences, is not a study of relationships? She achieves this new balance by offering a fine-grained account of a brilliant pedagogical innovation by which she invites her students—and now her readers—to reflect on the writing process as a means of bringing daily experience, including the experience of the IR classroom, to a level of attentive awareness that enables them to re-map the international in the interpersonal, and the interpersonal in the international. The book is, all at once, a theory of writing, of teaching and learning, and of International Relations, lucidly conceived and beautifully written.”

—Andrew Bush, *Professor of Hispanic Studies, Vassar College, USA*

“*Curating Learning Journeys* changed the way I teach and write, which means it changed me. Erzsébet’s book maps out her experience of creating, curating, and re-iterating a course on ‘Knowing, Narrating, (re)Writing International Relations’ in conversation with students and other interlocutors. By narrating specific writing practices, the book demystifies processes of learning and teaching writing. These practices provide openings to bridge ‘global politics’ and students’ worlds through

writing, while leaving spaces for not knowing, and for knowing otherwise. In doing so, the book unfolds a philosophy of knowing which is theoretically precise, experientially grounded and intuitively insightful.

This book is for anyone who is interested in feminist and decolonial work on the classroom as a transformative space, and in exploring their own practices of learning, knowing and becoming through writing.”

—Alice Engelhard, *Department of International Relations, The London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK*

“How should we relate to ‘International Relations’? For in doing IR we’re always doing relations: relations between ourselves and the world, ourselves and our discipline, ourselves and our students, all sorts of relations ordinarily lost in the acronym. Erzsébet Strausz’s *Curating Learning Journeys* is a double helix of a book, showing that what we know of the international is entwined both in these other relations and the way they are formed in writing.

Strausz reflects on her own professional formation, inquires attentively after that of her students and wonders whether international relations might also be inner, internal as she and they go looking for ‘another IR’. She learns to write differently, the increasing indents of her paragraphs giving a sense of descending deeper into relations – not least between writer and reader – than we’ve been taken before. Her students begin to write together, in interaction with each other and with the authors of the works they read, learning a new relation to the international ‘invested in life’. The promise of her writing and teaching is no less than to remake our relations, both international and personal.”

—Richard Freeman, *University of Edinburgh, UK*

“I write this reflection from myself, but I feel it may be true for many. I have designed a new MA course that aims to enable me and students to examine the social, political and economic orders that are productive of, carried by and transposed through global forms of knowledge. I taught it for the first time last year - students got it. But it was the mode through which they had to apprehend it which bothers me. Somehow, the module wasn’t quite doing what I meant it to do because somehow, the practices of knowledge in the pedagogy were the very practices that I had aimed to reveal through the content. The problem I am left with is how to change the how.

Erzsébet's book offers a pathway for re-examining how. In her writing, she brings the reader into the fold of how she has transformed her pedagogy. Her text is so beautifully welcoming, simply laying a pathway and inviting you to walk along it with her as she traverses a truly unique journey and method for untethering the pedagogical power of writing. She shares these experiences so generously and leaves the reader with classroom exercises that have co-developed with and alongside her own students and course development. But there is more to the book to, because Erzsébet doesn't just invite us to change our classrooms and transform its possibilities and potentialities with our students, she opens space and provides a medium through which we may self-consciously open to and embrace our own transformation. Through the spirit of her writing you gain the sense of the necessity of this as constituent and component of learning and teaching the world. Erzsébet's writing and framing of her work make clear the importance and power of this inner-work in (re)making collective relations."

—Hannah Hughes, *International Politics Department,  
Aberystwyth University, UK*

"Part ethnography, part pedagogical treatise, Erzsébet Strausz's *Curating Learning Journeys* is a lyrical exploration of the perennial questions we ask ourselves as educators, learners, and writers—questions that delve into the 'unending interplay of demands and possibilities' we navigate as participants in 'the modern university.' Through a careful examination of 'knowledge practices' and 'pedagogical processes,' intermingled with rich literacy and learning narratives, Strausz invites the reader into a discourse community that exists beyond disciplinary fields in order to reflect on the design of 'learning environments' and the potential creative, embodied, and reflexive practices bring to these oft disembodied and charged spaces. Readers delve into the lived experience of Strausz's Masters-level International Relations course, 'Knowing, Narrating, (re)Writing International Relations,' while also learning of a range of writing-rich tools that can transform any course (with enough intentionality and planning) into a vibrant participatory experience for students and faculty alike. Strausz's caring and carefully conceived pedagogical toolbox includes epistolary projects, routine guided reflection and metacognitive writing, and collaborative, communal writing, to name a few. What makes *Curating Learning Journeys* a truly revelatory and necessary book for today's faculty

is the ‘ethics of care’ (Nel Noddings) and attention to joy that permeates each page.”

—erica kaufman, *Director, Bard College Institute for Writing and Thinking, USA*

“Are you ready for a fascinating exploration of the lived realities of international relations through the wonders of writing? Erzsébet will be your guide on this fantastic journey to experience writing as a site of learning, experimentation, transformation, reflexivity and self-exploration. Off we go!”

—Rahel Kunz, *Université de Lausanne, Switzerland*

“Companionship does not always require us to be side-by-side. Rather, we become aware of our companions when we sense a shared direction of travel across recognisably common landscapes of experience. For all of us in the academy who have been worried about, felt excited by, and simply wondered how to foster meaningful relations between our research, our writing, our teaching and let us never forget, the learning we hope to achieve for our students and ourselves, this is the companion book to have at our side.

As we experience the many and varied norms, obstacles and silos that prevent us leaning into and exploring or experimenting with these connections this book is the friend we’ve been looking for who can pick us up, help us through, keep us on our journey. Such companionship, of course, is an act of resistance: both a critique of the hidden values underpinning the institutional imperatives that keep us separate from ourselves, our becoming and each other, and a wonderfully creative expression of how ‘learning about learning’ is the terrain upon which the multiple is made, so the allegedly essential can be forgotten, and upon which new relations are fashioned, so institutions yet to come may emerge.

As with people, so it is that companionship between nations is always possible and between fellow travellers new forms of relationship are always possible, even or especially when we think we have tried everything. This book invites us into creative acts of resistance not so much against but beyond what we think we know about IR.

Look at the vista and feel the earth in our toes at the same time; begin here and now, wherever we are, to learn about the potential already under our feet as we move on through our open landscapes. And as we take each step, let us also remember that the journey is a chance to pause with our

companion, ‘break bread’, take stock, nourish and replenish ourselves; ‘turning to the richness/already here/in all of us’.”

—Iain MacKenzie, *Reader in Politics, University of Kent, UK*

“In *Curating Learning Journeys*, Erzsébet Strausz invites us to rethink what it means ‘to know’ international relations through a series of pedagogical explorations that center on the creative potential of writing as a way to uncover new ways of seeing, noticing and understanding the world around us. In doing so, she not only opens up the historically rigid disciplinary boundaries of International Relations to new voices, texts, and experiences, but also empowers her readers with the skills, tools and confidence to see themselves as theorists of international relations. The result is a thought-provoking and generative book that reimagines what it means to be a scholar, and invites new voices into that conversation.”

—Michelle Murray, *Associate Professor of Politics, Bard College, USA*

“Can a journey lead to two directions simultaneously? Inwards, to the self and outwards, towards a goal, that is not yet defined, but still attracts the traveller? A double discovery, continuously in the making? Is the journey the travel itself, or is it the transformation of the ‘travel’ into words, sentences, rhythm and metaphor? Do we end up with three parallel movements – the self-discovery and understanding, the curated action of teaching students to discover themselves and the ‘outside’ world, and finally the effort to report on all of this, that has to take a shape and thereby retroactively transform what happened, by additions, omissions, comments, reflections?”

—Boldizsár Nagy, *Professor Emeritus, Central European University, Austria*

“Erzsébet Strausz’s experimental book takes the reader on a journey, while opening up many worlds of politics, of care, of resistance, of critical pedagogy. Writing otherwise unfolds in this well-crafted and epistemologically adventurous book as a strong practice for social transformation. The reader will experience many scenes of teaching International Relations, of being in the everyday and of theory-making bound together as a landscape. ‘Archipelago writing’, as the author calls it, does not shy away from wanderings, turns, liminality, porousness and water-like sensibility. While inhabiting the many islands of this archipelago-book, the reader

will be transformed, and will be invited to ask new questions about what it means to keep learning about learning.”

—Raluca Soreanu, *Professor of Psychoanalytic Studies, University of Essex, UK*

“First, I deeply appreciate how *Curating Learning Journeys* weaves together theory, techniques, and everyday life-work practices so seamlessly and beautifully. The prose itself is very inviting and often poetic. It feels like hugs and an oasis of respite for this reader’s heart-mind. Secondly, one aspect of this work that I found to be quite unique was that the author gives readers multiple opportunities to think about how working with, and learning from, our more-than-human kin, such as plants and canines, can contribute to our learning journey and to the writing process in particular. What an intriguing prospect! As a teacher and scholar more broadly, I found that certain questions that arose in me made me feel vulnerable in ways that I think will help me become more attuned to the impact of my pedagogical practices on students’ experiences of writing.

For example, the text revealed some of the ways in which I, in passing along to my students some of the most cherished routines and habits of mind that I learned as a student and writer in and for the academy, may have unwittingly contributed to a sense of imposter syndrome among some of my students. I believe that *Curating Learning Journeys* has provided me with some concrete ways to invite my students to work with (and not against) resources from their ‘inner ecologies of knowledge’ as they pursue their interests in the academy (and beyond). I am now asking myself more questions not only about what some of my more conventionally structured assignments and activities enable my students to do, but also what these assignments might disable in terms of supporting my students’ ability to ground their academic inquiry in their experiential and ancestral bodies of knowledge and even wisdom. Using the methods from this text, I feel more confident that I can help my students experience writing as a process of discovery and transformation, of connecting the familiar and the unfamiliar, and of locating one’s self in what may initially feel foreign or unrelatable. In many ways, the approach to pedagogy and methodologies that I learned about in this book are a great complement to the method of participant observation that we, in anthropology, value in the process of conducting field research. This book made me think about how writing can become a type of multi-sited fieldwork in which my students can experience a fuller and more joyful learning

process! *Curating Learning Journeys* will be a treasured companion as I revise my syllabi and rework my relationship to writing. (Almost like reintroducing myself to writing in the wild!)”

—Candice M. Lowe Swift, *Professor of Anthropology, Vassar College, USA*

## CONTENTS

### **folding in**

<b>living, writing, learning</b>	3
<i>reclaiming writing</i>	4
<i>locating writing in practices and presences</i>	9
<i>locating learning in plural sites and sensibilities</i>	14
<i>learning through writing</i>	18
<i>living across locations</i>	25
<i>moving on</i>	29
<i>signposts (whenever needed)</i>	30
<i>references</i>	34
<b>new angel</b>	39
<i>references</i>	51
<b>pedagogies of the folds</b>	53
<i>writing experientially</i>	54
<i>spatial emergences</i>	58
<i>writing relations</i>	62
<i>inventing method(s)</i>	67
<i>writing to transform</i>	76
<i>folding with awareness</i>	77
<i>travelling alongside the folds</i>	81
<i>references</i>	84

**folding out**

<b>affective landscapes of IR</b>	89
<i>at the edges of articulation</i>	94
<i>staging an encounter with the felt discipline</i>	97
<i>building IR-scapes</i>	102
<i>questions fall apart</i>	105
<i>lifescapes for learning: 'you are not alone'</i>	109
<i>references</i>	115
<b>learning about learning</b>	117
<i>depth of field</i>	120
<i>archipelago writing</i>	125
<i>interview islands</i>	131
<i>IR in doubt</i>	132
<i>embellish island</i>	136
<i>islands of knowledge politics</i>	141
<i>references</i>	147
<b>curating learning journeys</b>	149
<i>inner formations</i>	151
<i>mastering otherwise</i>	155
<i>teaching oneself</i>	161
<i>curating the work of attention</i>	167
<i>references</i>	175

**folding over**

<b>letters to authors</b>	181
<i>'Who are you in conversation with?'</i>	183
<i>modes of address</i>	187
<i>languages of intimacy</i>	191
<i>'writing for yourself'</i>	193
<i>note</i>	197
<i>references</i>	197
<b>the living document</b>	199
<i>anonymous distillations</i>	201
<i>affective learning</i>	202
<i>iterations: three lives of the living document</i>	206
<i>poetry of one-liners</i>	206

<i>'I am living'</i>	210
<i>somatic politics</i>	215
<i>gifts of emergent forms</i>	219
<i>references</i>	220
<b>writing for writing</b>	223
<i>living-theorising</i>	224
<i>becoming world-travellers</i>	225
<i>self-curating our learning journeys</i>	227
<i>writing and rewriting</i>	230
<i>expanding writing</i>	232
<i>in the spaces opened by questions</i>	233
<i>inhabiting the frames</i>	237
<i>writing as moving</i>	240
<i>'pairs of eyes' travel</i>	243
<i>working with poetic possibility</i>	245
<i>encounters</i>	246
<i>travelling alongside the limits of compassion</i>	248
<i>knowing, narrating otherwise</i>	251
<i>references</i>	253
<b>folding back and forth</b>	
<b>writing as transformation</b>	259
<i>everyday transformations</i>	262
<i>'political writing'</i>	265
<i>references</i>	268
<b>index</b>	271

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Erzsébet Strausz** is an Assistant Professor in the Department of International Relations at Central European University, Vienna. Her research explores critical pedagogy, alternative knowledge practices, more-than-human encounters, and the politics of everyday life. She engages creative, experimental, and narrative research methods to study world politics as lived experience and collaborates with artists, NGOs, and communities to co-create empowering processes. Her work investigates and facilitates relational, plural, and more democratic approaches to social research. She is the author of *Writing the Self and Transforming Knowledge in International Relations: Towards a Politics of Liminality* (Routledge, 2018) and together with shine choi and Anna Selmeczi, co-editor of *Critical Methods for the Study of World Politics: Creativity and Transformation* (Routledge, 2019). Erzsébet was also the recipient of the British International Studies Association's Excellence in Teaching International Studies Prize and the CEU Distinguished Teaching Award.

# LIST OF FIGURES

new angel

Fig. 1 New angel 45

affective landscapes of IR

Fig. 1 IR girl 106

folding in



## living, writing, learning

At twelve, I entered what was still considered as a new experimental study scheme at a prestigious high school in the capital. I commuted daily to Budapest from Ercsi, a small town in rural Hungary where my family lived. As the new environment began to rub off on me, I noticed a subtle shift in my conversations with my grandmother, who had spent just six years in school her entire life. Our exchanges became strangely constricted. She asked about school. I answered. There was no follow-up. It might have seemed like there was somehow less to say—had we not already known how to fill the space between us with pure love. Over the years, that heart-to-heart connection proved stronger and safer than any other channel. We celebrated the good grades, and I could see that knowing I was doing well put her at ease. But somewhere else, on another plane, the kind of knowledge I was being trained in and the mode of being I absorbed along with it was quietly creating distance where once there was none. With hindsight, it took repair work, and a different kind of knowing, to mend it.

Twenty-five years later, I travelled back to Hungary to see my family over Christmas. By then, the geographical distance had grown—I was working at a British university. My first research monograph, *Writing the Self and Transforming Knowledge in International Relations: Towards a Politics of Liminality*, had just been published. It

was a long-awaited moment, not just for me but for everyone close to me. From the outside, it looked like this might finally mark ‘success’—maybe even the end of years of anxiety and relentless overwork. At dinner, I notice puzzled looks. My brother’s partner musters the courage to speak. First, she congratulates me, then adds, ‘Well, we looked up all the words in the title. We thought our English was good, but we still couldn’t make sense of it. So, if you don’t mind... could you tell us what it’s about?’ ‘Not even the title makes sense’, I think to myself, pausing for a moment before trying my best to ‘translate’ the project. I manage moderate success. The air grows lighter, but still, we aren’t quite getting through to each other. We talk mostly *around* the book. ‘At least you’re going to be rich now, right?’ my brother looks at me earnestly. There is no irony, just genuine anticipation in his voice. The abyss between his good will and the actual reality of academic publishing makes my heart sink. I don’t know what to say. I shake my head with a smirk. In the end, we all laugh. The awkwardness lifts. We move on, enjoying the meal—as if nothing had happened.

The questions of knowing and becoming haven’t left me since—nor have the lessons and evolving wisdom of relating, of connecting beyond acquired categories, ways of seeing and ordering experience. In living and learning, turning such frictions into sites of exploration and generative, life-enhancing opportunities has become the kernel of my practice. Writing has been a vital channel for this work of transformation, even though it has long been used as a tool to create and uphold conceptions and habits that divide rather than connecting forms of life. In these efforts, the continuous present tense became my companion amidst continuing tension—both in creative making and in navigating the everyday stresses and pressures of the discipline, the modern university, and the life that unfolds through uncertainty, change, and the unending interplay of demands and possibilities.

## **reclaiming writing**

I came to writing out of play. At the age of ten I wrote my first short story for a competition in elementary school. It had to be built around a bunch of pre-given words teased out of Hungarian country life under socialism, the meaning of which we were supposed to

look up in the dictionary. I remember laughing out loud as I found myself composing scenes where archaic layers of meaning got transposed into contemporary scenes. The power of language also shined through the plot when the fate of a family miraculously changed as they took up a new surname suggesting both abundance and coolness in teen slang. I had a lot of fun imagining absurd conversations and witnessing how the story pretty much wrote itself. It then won the first prize and as a reward, my best friend and I performed it at the school's end of the year talent show in the local cultural centre. Our audience, mostly parents, teachers, and family members, laughed at the jokes, and so did we along with them on the stage, shaking with excitement, barely holding onto our dog-eared scripts.

If I re-enter this experience from the present what is still remarkable is that there was a direct channel between thought-images and words. There was ease and joy in creating and sharing. Ideas flew onto the page and were received in the trails of the same flow, or so it felt. It was all so alive. No explanation was needed. The frames set for the exercise not only sparked wonder and courage in exploring unknown terrains but also embraced and rewarded what may have transgressed their intended scope.

With hindsight, the further I progressed within the ranks of formal education the less frequently events like this happened. As writing became tangled up with mastering academic language and interacting with disciplinary communities, it took on a different sensibility. Critical events—meeting assignment deadlines, submitting dissertations and application packages for scholarships, jobs, and later, research grants—became nested in long stretches of stress, struggle, and a recurring questioning of my own abilities. Overcoming subtle and more explicit forms of procrastination and wrestling feelings of ‘not good enough’ turned into regular features of disciplinary habit. Success appeared as the fast-paced, nearly automatic hammering out of words when nothing got in the way of doing. spurts of ‘productivity’ were satisfying as short-lived exceptions to the rule, even if the compulsive rumination over ‘Is this any good?’ never quite left the equation.

By the time I began teaching International Relations a lot less joy remained in public speaking, too, especially in tiered lecture theatres. I don't know when and how exactly writing and sharing stories amassed a certain heaviness, culminating in recurring episodes of severe exhaustion. It took me a long time to recognise the disciplinary power of what Henri Giroux refers to as the ‘hidden curriculum’ within my daily routine and how I used to think about work in higher education. The micro-effects of ‘those unstated norms, values, and beliefs transmitted

to students through the underlying structure of schooling' that shapes subjectivity more profoundly than the 'official curriculum' (1978, p. 148) persisted throughout my academic socialisation, taking on new forms in different roles and institutional environments. The 'unstated norms, values, and beliefs' of research and teaching transmitted through the professional milieus I traversed tacitly moulded my relationship to what was possible and desirable when it comes to 'knowledge' and the processes of finding things out and communicating about them. Many of the disembodied, compartmentalised working modalities that I learnt to perform within neoliberal and market-driven university settings sat comfortably with what I had internalised as a student.

Pockets of care, togetherness, pleasure, and humour nonetheless still exist within the structures and trajectories of academic worlding. Open, vulnerable moments continue to punctuate knowledge cultures that have been designed to perpetuate disconnection from other ways of knowing and being. When hearts fill with gratitude, compassion, solidarity, whether in the classrooms, on the corridors or off campus, the memory of connect-edness—both with oneself and with others—endures, however fleeting these experiences might seem. Even when we revert to the default patterns of institutional life, what once felt freeing and inspirational can be reactivated. As bodies, atmospheres, affective, and intellectual processes keep circling back to their familiar rhythms, they also hold space for being prompted and steered in other ways, over, and again. I might not be able to recall the exact words of my elementary school story, but the landscape of feelings in writing and sharing I vividly remember.

Since my PhD I have been looking to multiply and expand such opportunities to inhabit the university, the discipline, and the continuum of 'learning environments' that host us across social and institutional planes *otherwise*. As Jenny Edkins reflects on her own struggle to 'articulate or unearth alternatives and forms of resistance' in academia, she notes that 'the tools we have at hand to attempt this move can be precisely those that have produced and hence continually reproduce what we are trying to escape' (2019, p. 1). A key orientation of my efforts has been to transform academic practice by finding alternative pathways within its normalised sensibilities. Seeking out life-affirming horizons in academic worlding called my attention to the actuality of what there is. I started to look closer into how we make things, how we perceive what we do and who we are in relation to others and the plurality of worlds, and equally, who we become in these processes.

I seek to recover and reclaim fundamental skills that are central to our work—such as writing and telling stories—beyond their instrumental, logistical use, reconnecting with their creative and communal potential. Within what Sara C. Motta and Anna Bennett pinpoint as ‘affectivities that imbricate smoothly with neoliberalism’ (2018, p. 631) and contribute to the constitution of subjectivities ‘grounded in individualisation, infinite flexibility, survivalist competition and personally profitable exchanges’ (2018, p. 634; Motta, 2012) I look for pathways of knowing, relating, and becoming that facilitate integrative, sustainable, growth-oriented spaces and practices. Following Motta and Bennett, countering the ‘multiple micro-practices of bureaucratisation and professionalisation’ (2018, p. 634) that perpetuate disembodied, disconnected knowledge forms and the corresponding genesis of ‘knowing subjects’ (see Foucault, 1994, p. 256) calls for centring care, solidarity, and collaboration in democratising higher education. It also requires nourishing an integrative perspective subverting the aesthetic divisions that position teaching and research, mind and body, thinking and feeling as separate and hierarchically arranged realms. What Motta and Bennett describe as ‘care-full pedagogical practice’ embraces ‘the whole student’ and by extension, the whole teacher. Actively engaging the affective dimensions of knowledge practices a ‘holistic sense of education’ opens ‘as a relational dynamic’, one that ‘brings attention as much to the experience of joy, vulnerability, empowerment and powerlessness, for both students and teachers and their role in pedagogical processes of both “reproduction of hegemony” and its contestation’ (2018, p. 631).

Within these complex entanglements reawakening a sense of embodied aliveness in the mundane aspects of how we sense and make sense, relate, express, communicate, build relationships, move between abstract concepts and lived realities can be a gateway towards finding a remedy for atomisation and cultivating more wholesome and sustainable affective ecologies across teaching, research, and the everyday.

These processes are still ongoing, on multiple planes.

Writing this book about learning journeys in the IR classroom and beyond is an integral part of these endeavours, also encompassing my own.

These concerns with writing, telling, relating, and becoming are gestures of care that continue to adapt to shifting needs and circumstances. Writing differently and telling other kinds of stories to what is normalised and validated within the institutional structures I navigate has been anything but straightforward. My learning has been unfolding both through small, incremental shifts in daily routine and by taking bigger risks and making bolder statements while manoeuvring occasional sanctions and various forms of (in)visibility. The journey has been non-linear, demanding courage and perseverance, and often evolving through moments of strain and holding ambiguity. Over time, recovering writing as a skill not only changed what writing can be like and what it can do. As I write about writing, teaching, and teaching through writing I move in the spaces between experience—what has been worlded and what is emerging in the moment—and my capacity to work with it, transforming both. Honing my ability to observe and reflect on whatever may be taking place both within and outside helped me become more present to myself, others, and my surroundings. Writing-based reflection is thus not only a technique I frequently use in a range of pedagogical settings, but it has also turned into a way of knowing and becoming. Moving myself out of repetitive thought patterns and towards states where new insights might slip into language with more ease and joy, I have come to see it as an ever-evolving method of living and creating with awareness.

Experimenting in and through writing at the thresholds of my social science training and the poetic possibilities within plural, multiple worlds that constantly thread through the recognisable frames of the ‘academic’ has unfolded in parallel with staging writing-based reflection processes in educational contexts. Kate Schick and Claire Timperley note that ‘*all* pedagogies are necessarily embodied, relational, and performative – they are not simply about the transmission of knowledge but, instead, must be understood as responding to and shaping our ways of being’ (2022, p. 3). Through developing an experiential writing practice I have been tuning into and nurturing that dimension of ‘being’ that transpires through and also, despite the subject matter at hand. Naeem Inayatullah observes that ‘we teach with our moving bodies and with little else’ (2013, p. 153). There is also an air—a field of information—that we carry with ourselves that precedes speech and movements and lingers on even when bodies are no longer present. I believe that even on a small scale, practising what I

encourage students to explore—using writing as a vehicle for discovery—strengthens their trust in both the process and the imaginative horizons it reveals. With every gesture of connecting personal experience, academic skill, and the capacity to make our own sense, the ‘hidden curriculum’ is fed and nourished with unanticipated possibility. The embodied proximity of lived experience—the sense that something is not only thought or spoken about but also felt within the shared space of exchange—exerts a compelling pull. At the same time, the deeper I go into unmaking and remaking what it might mean to be a knowing subject through my own writing the more intentional and concise the writing prompts I craft turn out to be. The thought-images of what I would like to enable in these processes and the words expressing them come closer to each other. The gap between academic language and the irreducible multi-dimensionality of experience somehow shrinks, without damage to the latter.

### locating writing in practices and presences

I have been lucky enough to have friends as travel companions in transforming the seemingly separate aesthetic divisions between research, teaching, and the life that embraces all these distinctions (see Choi et al., 2020; Nieuwenhuis & Strausz, 2023). This book grounds itself in collaborative and biographical continuities (see Strausz, 2018) as much as it branches out into the yet unknown. Within these trajectories, which position writing as a site of experimentation and intervention punctuating conventionally conceived planes of teaching and research, defining this undertaking can thus only ever be provisional and incomplete, with boundaries that remain fluid, adaptable, and sometimes fractured. Yet acts of locating, however fleeting, can mark and acknowledge formative elements of the boundless context within which content—such as these pages—emerges.

Locating myself and this project starts from and returns to a sense of deep relationality.

‘This sounds good’, a friend remarked not that long ago, ‘and on that note, you should also tell the readers that the insights you share in the text haven’t come through the writing experiments only’. I am grateful for this observation and the honesty it invites. I should certainly note here that my efforts to inhabit writing as a medium of contemplation and

(self-)transformation in academia and elsewhere, and whatever these efforts might have resulted in and are yet to bring forth, have been ‘in constellation’ with other practices, and mostly, people and more-than-human others that nurture and nourish vital dimensions of being that are inseparable from academic knowledge making. Alex Brostoff and Jamille Pinheiro Dias, translators of Ailton Krenak’s *Ancestral Future*, note that ‘unlike being “in conversation” or “in community”, being “in constellation” highlights our interdependence on each other, as well as on other forms of life beyond the human – both visible and invisible to the human eye’ (2024, pp. xv-xvi). When it comes to constellating practices, another friend posed the question: ‘Why writing?’ If the aim is transformation, reflexivity, and an attentive relationship to ourselves, others and our surroundings could be heightened through other activities, too. ‘It could be drawing, gardening, baking bread. We can stop and pause and change our thinking while doing something else’. By extension, we could also work with other skills in academic life and find their transformational edges: reading, listening, collaborating, giving presentations. Writing, nonetheless, remains a special mode of worlding. Composition scholar Janet Emig highlights the correspondence between learning and writing, where writing can be seen as a multi-representational, integrative learning modality that synchronises the left and right brain hemispheres, and enables connections between language and abstract thought while making available self-provided feedback, rendering ‘the complex evolutionary development of thought steadily and graphically visible and available throughout as a record of the journey’ (1977, p. 127). Writing as ‘process-and-product’ is also an active, ‘self-rhythmed’ activity (1977, p. 127) that records the unique pathways of making sense within our own paradigms. I have come to see and experience writing as both exploring new ground in the terrains of my sensorium and a simultaneous construction of a living archive of traces that can be re-entered for further insight.

Yet, this is not the relationship to writing that I—and most of us—have been encouraged to form. The author Verlyn Klinkenborg highlights how the default school model centres the extraction of meaning in reading and installs a corresponding disposition to making texts. When reduced to transactional acts of transcribing thought into language, writing shifts from being a gesture of genuine communication and the poetic appraisal of other ways of thinking and expression. It becomes an act of managing ‘the evidence gathered from other authorities’ instead of ‘cultivating one’s own authority’ (2013, p. 31). Klinkenborg helps us recall the familiar

instructions that prompted attention to go outwards, away from our inner processes of sense-making:

You were repeatedly asked to persuade or demonstrate  
 or argue,  
 To reiterate or prove or recite or exemplify,  
 To go through the motions of writing.  
 You were almost never asked to notice or observe,  
 witness or testify (2013, p. 31).

For Klinkenborg, one pathway to reclaim ‘the living tissue of a writer’s choices’ (2013, p. 33)—the appreciation that ‘every sentence could have been otherwise but it isn’t’ (2013, p. 32)—and with that to restore the plurality of relations and possibilities leads through becoming more discerning readers of our writing and environments. Learning to notice *more* may become a form of self-authorisation to (re-)assign significance to whatever enters perception, as part of what he describes as the ‘writer’s real work’:

The effort, over and over again, to see in what you started out to say  
 The possibility of saying something you didn’t know you could (2013,  
 p. 14).

My preoccupation with writing as a skill that can be reappropriated for discovery and creative remaking revolves around what I have come to describe as working with attention. I understand becoming a ‘better reader’ in an expanded sense that doesn’t stop at the edges of the page. I practise noticing, looking closer and deeper on as many occasions as I can throughout the day. I meditate multiple times daily as a way of clearing my mental desk and opening to the yet-uncharted terrains of my mind. I walk a lot and I dedicate time to walk attentively, even for a few minutes, focusing on the shifting interfaces between my feet and the ground. I look after more houseplants than what might comfortably fit in the one-bedroom apartment I currently rent in Vienna. I make observations about their life cycles, the processes of growth, recovery, and decay and relate them back to how I think about practices of care in and beyond the classroom.

Freeing writing from its trained constraints so that it can serve the open-endedness of learning rather than the social reproduction of knowledge as a ‘search for certainty and security’ (see Edkins, 2019, p. 5) requires the continuous training of reflexive awareness. The distinctive feature of writing that lies with the graphic recording of the traces of sense-making offers an open invitation to look more closely at what is within and right in front of us.

The written text is both a personal archive of a journey—of choices, possibilities, and the rhythms of working with them—and a process of remaking lived experience through articulation.

The vibrancy of these intensities

—the ceaseless flux between structured form and formless potential—

resonates more powerfully for me in the act of writing  
than in any other pursuit.

Other practices that enhance attentiveness—off the page, sometimes off discourse—help me attune to transitions across boundaries. As I am noticing more in a variety of contexts—observing unique shapes, textures, and juxtapositions—I am also becoming more aware of the spaciousness around each thought, emotion, step, touch, or the water sinking into the soil. I began to pause regularly, reflecting more deeply on the meaning of the words that arise, as I acknowledge and appreciate the unformed potential within the embodied, material realities revealed by the constellation of leaves, the movements of my body, and the pathways of attention. This can mean a lot of tinkering until a sentence feels right. Somewhat surprisingly, I have learnt how to take better care of my plants through the same method.

All these and other ways of knowing that weave in and out of the economies of sense-making inform whatever hits the page in this book and may be staged in the classroom. Yet constellating practices are always already embedded in constellating presences. Richa Nagar powerfully asks: ‘Whom do we bring with ourselves onto the page or stage?’ (2019,

p. 7). She turns attention to the erasure of ‘millions of others whose knowledges and words we stand on’ in academic research yet only appear as ‘objects or subjects who must be researched, represented, discussed, and at times, “uplifted” by the experts’ (2019, p. 7). In the classroom I invite students to think about who is not here as we introduce ourselves, reflecting on the forces of global coloniality that make up spaces of privilege such as ours and render others’ presence through their absence. Aligning with attempts of ‘affective decolonisation’ in higher education (see Zembylas, 2022), I seek to transform habits—equally in how we write and what we write about—that drive attention outwards in an instrumental fashion without seeking an inner, embodied connection, emptying out both self and other.

Part of this effort is to make visible and felt our relational being and interdependence with others beyond the masks of atomisation that also makes ‘knowledge’ appear as product, object, and commodity. What I bring to these pages and through that, stage as possible encounters are nested in the warmth of friendships, cosmic kinships, and earthly alliances, here and afar. The relationships that sustain and profoundly shape the experiential trajectories of my academic work, along with the investment of giving an account of them, have fostered a healthier, better regulated nervous system. Reminders of co-presence disarmed the survival mode and made accessible more hopeful, resourceful, and adventurous epistemological horizons. I felt more confident wandering off the edges of established disciplinary aesthetics because of others’ support and encouragement. Taking risks came with less fear. I trusted my intuition more when I felt seen, and I could see myself more clearly in what has been mirrored back to me by someone else.

Students often think that I’m joking when I ask them to picture their future Master of Arts certificate, bearing their name alongside the names of everyone, across all times and places, who in some way contributed to their success. The layers of co-creation threaded into these pages are hard to pin down. Exchanges with students, colleagues, friends, strangers and other beings, random acts of kindness, the atmospheres of a places, listening to the silences between sentences, one good word at the right moment, sharing meals, checking in over coffee, holding space when nothing seems to be happening have all been integral to the making of this text. The sequence of generative micro-connections is endless yet effective, transcending their real-time unfolding. I have learnt one of the most helpful techniques to shift between mindsets from a dog. I observed how

often he would shake his fur after meeting other dogs in the park. ‘That’s a transition’, his owner said. I figured this is how he not only shakes off dirt but also releases energy that he doesn’t want to carry forward. I started to move my body in-between writing stretches and other tasks. Dancing, jumping, and shaking my arms and legs, even for a few seconds. It miraculously worked and the inspiration coming from another creature’s routine greatly enhanced mine. Your reading of these lines, too, is part of the dynamics of being and creating ‘in constellation’. It expands the field of imagining, collective making, relational becoming, and a range of other gestures that called this project into being and continue to propel its energy forward. ‘I’, no doubt, is inherently plural, both within and beyond itself.

### locating learning in plural sites and sensibilities

In the past seven years or so, I have been moving across changing inner and outer landscapes in the university and beyond. Writing, teaching, writing about teaching, writing about writing, and teaching about writing have traversed different institutional and affective planes. I first devised the 4 US/ 8 ECTS credits Master of Arts course ‘Knowing, Narrating, (re)Writing International Relations’ (KNR) for the academic year 2018–19, when I returned to Central European University (CEU), a US-chartered private university in Central Eastern Europe, as junior faculty. It was listed as one of two core elective introductory courses in IR theory, from which students were required to choose one. This course, along with its subsequent revisions, became a pivotal site for experimentation within what my co-authors and I described as the ‘conceptual triangle of teaching, research and transformation’ (see Choi et al., 2020, p. 13). The design of KNR sought to highlight, embrace, and encourage epistemic plurality in how we think about and relate to I/international R/relations both as a field of academic knowledge and the living practices of making sense of world politics and our insertion within it.

Thinking alongside relational, feminist, and decolonial approaches, one pathway into making accessible other ways of knowing vis-à-vis hegemonic framings was to foreground diverse critical voices from non-mainstream pockets of the discipline as an alternative approach to ‘theory’ that directly addresses the political imbrications of knowledge. My goal was to illuminate *another* IR and with that, possibilities for ‘another politics’ (see Edkins, 2013) emerging from inclusive, multiple, vulnerable yet

creative, resourceful, and forward-looking gestures, negotiations, ways of being, acting, and being together within and outside academia. I set out to do this not only through what Michael J. Shapiro describes as the ‘textual itinerary’ of the syllabus (see 2025), but also as the lived experience of studying and embodying international relations in their moment-to-moment unfolding. I wanted to bring to the fore ‘relations’—one of the two anchor words that make up the name of the field—not in abstract terms but in their mundane, experiential realities. By these realities, I also meant how we, in the roles of ‘student’, ‘scholar’, and ‘instructor’, enact, perform, and possibly rework relations as we think, feel, and write our ways through the curriculum.

I spent considerable time reflecting on how to bring the dynamic, co-creative properties of relations, relationships, and ways of relating into the structure of the syllabus and the progression of weekly themes. I knew that how we entered the course mattered greatly—setting the tone, shaping our collective approach to learning, creating an atmosphere that encapsulates the intended directions while leaving ample room for free exploration. This was a crucial moment, too, to evoke the relations that frame our lives in the space of learning, in their immediacy, and as unapologetically as possible. For ‘International Relations’ to move from abstraction to the lived realities of ‘international relations’, we had to emerge as embodied knowing subjects ourselves. Walking through the gateway had to make the traveller ready for the journey. I have resolved to start this IR theory course with the ‘narrative turn’ of the field, marking our point of departure at the intersections of the personal, the academic, the political, and the ethical. I have selected a pool of readings that invited connections with the life journeys present in the classroom, centring them as the living ground of our emerging learning community. The power of stories and autobiographic accounts that problematised the ‘academic self’ in how they related to the focus of their study unlocked courage to reflect on our situatedness as knowing subjects in the field and our times. It also authorised the ‘I’—not as subjective bias but as a distinguished site of meaning making. Experiences of fragility, failure, unexpected strokes of luck, resilience, and solidarity—displacing the myths of control and certainty in academic research—spoke to everyone in some way regardless of their prior knowledge of the subject area.

Besides staging encounters with what L. H. M. Ling describes as hybrid, ‘multiple emotional worlds’ (2014, p. 580) in and through the discipline I have also been formulating questions that directly probe into

the complexity of our own social and political making as we think and write about other peoples' lives, elsewhere. Ling's 'worldist dialogics' suggests that 'being is always interbeing, for there is already an Other within the Self and a Self within the Other' (2014, p. 581). I have put prompts in the middle of blank PowerPoint slides to direct attention to the transpersonal entanglements of worlding and narration, and left them on the screen longer than any substantive point about the course material:

'Where are we, who are we in international relations?'

'How has the "international" shaped our biographical, transgenerational trajectories, and the ways in which we relate to others and ourselves, in getting here and being here, in this classroom?'

'What possible presents and futures are we able to see and envision through what we carry in ourselves about "global politics"?''

Open-ended questions like these were intended to encourage the affective and poetic labour of seeking out resonances rather than aiming at definitive answers. They also invited reflection through the emotional currents of regional histories, inherited struggles, and personal aspirations transgressing the colonial imprints of the social sciences that separate the thinking and feeling, and the 'knower' from the 'known' (see Shilliam, 2014, p. 353). 'We' implied a prefigurative ethical possibility rather than a homogenous entity. It served as a placeholder for constellations where the 'I' and others connect through their plural composition and irreducible otherness, both to themselves and each other. Every time, the life material cropping up in our conversations held the power to surprise with the echoes it set off, even the storyteller.

We spent the first four weeks—a third of the course—exploring what it might mean to navigate the discipline of International Relation through the imprints and imaginations of international relations that already live in and through us and our bodies, in dialogue with texts that encourage thinking, feeling, and imagining, all at once. Working at the interstices of knowing-narrating-(re)writing in the rest of the term organised around a selection of introductory themes—such as selfhood and otherness in post-colonial, gendered relations, aesthetics, affirmative ontologies, and planet politics—became a mode of travel that gradually appeared less foreign. Especially the aspect of (re)writing promised hopeful horizons not only

in listening to other voices and how they remake the intellectual and affective terrains of IR but also in finding one's own.

I understood early on that personal reflection and the kind of inner work these questions call for had to be carefully accommodated in an academic environment geared towards 'information transmission' (see Timperley, 2022, p. 110). Postgraduate students, particularly at the start of the academic year, seemed to carry a strong expectation that the method of acquiring specialist knowledge would primarily be an intellectual transfer. Exposure to other ways of knowing, introduced through the course's framing devices and texts, can be compelling and encourage exploration beyond familiar terrains. Yet this course is one alternative among many other courses operating within more conventional academic sensibilities, competing for students' (already limited) attention. The Cartesian mind/body divide ingrained in trained academic habit runs deep in all of us, and to pluralise and *authorise* other modes of sensing and sense-making in the classroom I have been looking to find practices and protocols that honour the bodymind connection, allowing us to engage with the totality of our being experientially—and, when circumstances permit, to share aspects of this wholeness with others.

This was the first time I intentionally incorporated writing-based reflexive processes into the curriculum as parallel learning sites to familiar modes of interaction, such as the individual processing of readings and group conversation. Finding voice called for making space for private exploration in a group setting and opportunities to share with peers—not necessarily the written text but rather, the experience of thinking through writing and the insights arrived at in this way. It was also essential to present what felt like unconventional learning modalities to many in ways that minimised performance pressure and expectation for a specific outcome. Initially, I underestimated how frequently reassurances needed to be repeated for the (self-)critical intellectual faculties to relax. 'You don't need to write anything clever right now. Just let whatever comes to mind flow onto the page. Maybe it will be nothing, or maybe something unexpected. Either way, please just keep the pen moving or keep on typing and see what transpires'.

## learning through writing

Ultimately, I sought to make ‘relations’ in ‘international relations’ felt and accessible in their plurality and fluidity on three intersecting pedagogical planes in the design of KNR:

thinking through the arc of the course, with special emphasis on our moments of ‘entry’, affirming our situatedness in multiple worlds, with no predefined ‘end’;

selecting the framing devices for the journey: texts, references, inspirations for pluralising ways of knowing, lived experiences and narrative possibilities;

incorporating embodied learning processes to open up modes of relating experientially and holistically – uncovering otherness, hybridity, nodes of interbeing and creativity within, in everyone’s own sensorium.

Writing remained a distinguished site in the latter.

Across the five iterations of the course, I have experimented with various approaches to reflexive writing in the classroom, adjusting prompts, timing, and the sequence of tasks to refine the practices each term. In this book, I discuss three writing modalities that grew out of a series of attempts to ‘try something different’ in class, with multiple variations in their continuing development and responsiveness to changing needs and circumstances. In ‘letters to authors’, students write letters to the authors they enjoyed reading, cultivating a more empowered and intimate relationship to knowledge, authority, and themselves as writers through the epistle-form. ‘The living document’ starts out as a blank, online shared document that members of the group are invited to populate with reflections anonymously in each seminar, creating a communal discussion space free of competition and hierarchical ordering (as much as it can ever be) while it also records the imprints of twelve weeks of thinking-together. ‘Writing for writing’ blends private free writing with guided reflection, delving into the embodied, felt dimensions of how a given topic, event, or concept resonates with us personally. These practices provide containers for seeing, meeting ‘the other’ within, encouraging a relationship to writing as a mode of discovery—an inherently generative act that can also feed into more formal academic genres and assignments.

Yet the role and orientation of writing processes had to evolve to meet participants where they were and adapt to the context of instruction. Besides the standard contact time of two hundred-minute-long sessions over twelve weeks, both the format of classes and the composition of the student body have undergone several changes. The university, having been forced out of Budapest, was still settling into a new building and social environment in Vienna, when the global pandemic hit. Moving across state borders and from the physical to the virtual called for attuning to different realities and possibilities in engaging the politics of knowledge, on the spot (wherever it may have been) and through participants' unique needs and journeys. The groups I have worked with varied between ten and thirty-five students, coming from both Global South and Global North countries. Cultural diversity has been a defining feature of the learning experience—one I have cherished since my own time as an MA student at CEU. The burden of extensive paperwork and repeated visits to the immigration office to secure a residence permit in Austria operated along the EU/non-EU divide, which, as I gathered from informal conversations, significantly affected several students' ability to settle into the program fully throughout their stay. Time scarcity and limited emotional bandwidth to connect, participate, or broaden horizons, let alone go further into the unknown, manifested in a range of predictable and unanticipated ways.

'Borders' took on different sensibilities during COVID-19 with first online and then hybrid classes. Within complex personal and academic negotiations at the edges of personal and communal well-being, I recognised a creative opportunity to forge and deepen links between atomised 'home offices'. I developed writing processes specifically designed for the pandemic classroom, many of which stayed with the return of in-person teaching and even travelled beyond its spaces. The need to prioritise connections—both inwardly, in the face of social isolation, and outwardly, with others in the virtual realm despite fragmented and distorted information—helped me solidify the integrative ethos of writing-based reflection. The online course linked to this book, *Political Writing as Transformation* (Strausz, 2024a) continues the spirit of these experimentations, problematising and rewriting borders. It offers writing-based reflection as an everyday (academic) practice for curating learning journeys, including our own, inviting a compassionate and curious look within as we navigate ways of knowing, being, and becoming within and outside the university.

Pedagogically, thinking with and through writing practices as integral components of the arc of sessions meant shifting focus to enhancing capacities rather than increasing substantive knowledge of the subject matter. The sparks of other ways of knowing and writing offered by the syllabus needed translation and nourishment within everyone's personal paradigm. Foregrounding voices, lived experiences, ethical considerations, and creative expressions from what are often deemed marginal subfields in the discipline stimulated discussions on the hierarchical structures of academic knowledge production. Yet these conversations also circled around how to foster more equal, caring, and open horizons and narrate fragments of the multiplicity of worlds within international relations that inevitably imply and implicate the lives of others. Reflecting on my role as an educator, I started to see my task as mediating between the limits of familiar knowledge forms and the innate potential to think, feel, imagine, and create otherwise.

In our quests to find voice, democratise knowledge, and explore pathways towards transformational practices and more plural political imaginations—each year taking unique forms—writing-based reflection contributed to learning journeys in several ways. Mid-term feedback and end of the year course evaluation forms mirrored back what was effective and what fell short in each cohort, which gave me plenty of insight regarding what I could change. I remained mindful, however, that the same prompts might yield entirely different outcomes in the next group, which often turned out to be the case. I am still in the process of distilling down how writing-based reflection works in diverse contexts, from both an epistemological and a pedagogical perspective. What are, where are its empowering properties, and how have participants used and inhabited the frames they were offered to their benefit? What kinds of experiences emerge from the conjunctions of technical instruction, the making and holding of space, and everyone's own way of engaging and staying with the process?

Two years ago, I was privileged to join a professional development fellowship at the Center for Liberal Arts and Sciences Pedagogy (CLASP) at the Bard College Institute for Writing & Thinking (IWT), which promotes student-centred teaching methods, writing-based teaching, and experiential learning. Conversations with peers and facilitators in the program have been invaluable as I move back and forth between guiding writing processes at various educational sites and reflect on them. My circular efforts of experimentation, articulation, and refinement, which

now also encompass invited writing workshops and retreats, have gained new dimensions through the program, and discovering the academic fields of Writing Studies and Writing Across the Curriculum. Through our collective work I have encountered new vocabulary, sensibilities, and possibilities within ‘thinking through writing’ and ‘teaching through writing’ (Vilardi & Chang, 2009, pp. 4–5). What began for me as improvised and improvisational interventions in the classroom and beyond, gradually taking on a more structured form, have now evolved in dialogue with a field of practice and a body of knowledge that helped me both break down intuitive practice and create more intentional spaces for exploration.

Reflecting on years of ‘doing’—staging processes and continuously revising them—my initial insights into how an IR classroom might benefit from writing-based reflection emerged from observing where and how interactions had grown more spacious, curious, and caring. How have different iterations of writing letters, co-writing with others, responding to a sequence of questions, alongside other collective and individual practices of personal reflection, infused the study of world politics with a sense of aliveness, creativity, and more hopeful horizons? I delve into the distinctive sensory, affective, and intellectual ecologies formed around these practices and the details of their design in separate chapters. I have noticed at least three key dimensions at this stage though where writing beyond the trained academic modality has been gradually rewriting relations.

### *critical affective literacy*

Experiential, rather than purely abstract understanding of concepts helped to transform feelings of hopelessness and disillusionment that reading *International Relations* regularly leaves students with (see Penttinen, 2019, p. 43). Instead of pulling back to observe distant realities from an ‘objective’ vantage point, writing-based reflection encouraged a shift in attention towards what is immediately present. Guiding questions invited exploration of the entanglements between theory and life, thinking and feeling, relating *International Relations* as text to the international relations emerging as embodied ‘inner relations’ (see Strausz, 2024b, p. 422). As the richness and inexhaustibility of personal archives in the classroom made an appearance, their intertextuality with other archives—including lives that are otherwise erased in disembodied disciplinary thought—also

became apparent. Uncovering complex emotional connections with and within the subject matter at hand certainly didn't offer solutions to global crises, but it facilitated the cultivation of 'critical affective literacy' (see Ahmed, 2015). Re-grounding conversations in the living matrix of efforts, struggles, acts of creativity, and in solidarity both everyday life and theorising makes our immersion felt at the intersections of multiple worlds and with that, our ability to draw on the wealth of interpretative resources we already possess. Acknowledging emotions as integral to the making and unmaking of world politics (see Hutchison et al., 2024; Hutchison, 2016; Bleiker & Hutchison, 2008) and learning to read them as 'repositories of multiplicity' (Ling, 2014, p. 580) fostered what Anwar Ahmed describes as 'affective equivalence' (2015, p. 391) with other lives, subverting the superimposition of the social science observer's gaze and system of classification. 'Victim', 'perpetrator', 'researcher', 'collateral damage', or 'environment' regain their phenomenological depth as living entities.

### *enhanced perceptual awareness*

As writing activates both the left and right brain hemispheres, alongside analytical thinking space opens for intuitive ways of knowing. Encouraging non-linear, analogical, and associative modes of sense-making in what has been trained as an outward-looking mode of synthesising information—by simply staying engaged in the process and alleviating pressure on the outcome—also unveils the multidimensionality of our sensorium. Going further inwards, in and through writing, I sought to stage encounters with our sense-making processes and their unique properties. While engaging theoretical perspectives as 'lenses' through which different aspects of the social and the political become visible, I wanted us to become more aware of the 'lens' through which worlds appear to our senses in the first place.

The power of experiential writing threw light on the affective landscapes we carry and enabled a generative relationship to them. It brought to the surface biases, assumptions, images, conditioned thought patterns, revealing economies of thinking, feeling, and ordering sensory information while it also provoked new realisations and ideas, uncovering surprising conjunctions and poetic resources in walking the edges of the (un)known. Not-knowing—the liminal state from where any articulation or sense of orientation might arise—was

also frequently acknowledged and expressed. Someone once showed me three passages they wrote, the first repeated ‘I don’t know what I am doing’ three times. Then something shifted, they said, and two new streams of reflection transpired. In encountering our inner making—in Deleuzian terms, the ‘fold’ of the outside within (see 2006, pp. 97–98)—and the yet unknown, bit by bit, solidified perceptions of knowledge opened into ways of knowing.

By understanding more about how we see and perceive, we can move beyond familiar frames and expand our ‘vision’—both in what we notice and in what we imagine. I have come to describe the expansion of our capacity to reflect on how we process what enters our sensorium as enhanced perceptual awareness. Gaining subjective insight into the inner making of ourselves as subjects of our times is one possible pathway to resist and transform what Jacques Rancière calls the ‘distribution of the sensible’ that ‘determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience’ (2004, p. 13). The ‘delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise’ (2004, p. 13) not only configures bodies, voices, and capacities in relation to each other but also the grids of their intelligibility and the horizons of the possible.

Attuning to how others appear in our affective landscapes and how we feel our ways through the sites and structures we navigate beyond intellectual categorisation not only reveals the limits of empathy and connection but also the openings towards feeling and thinking otherwise. Seeing more of the ‘lens’ through which we world might help to reconfigure it. With greater awareness of the constructed, impermanent qualities of aesthetic forms, concepts, categories, and social orders also become visible and their normative hold loosens. Ruptures into normalised sensibilities—even if at a micro-scale—may give way to more egalitarian and (self-)reflexive modes of being and being together.

### *democratising relations*

Scaffolding writing prompts into the arc of sessions and as tasks to be completed independently rewired the tone and texture of class discussions, too. Providing students with the opportunity to first write out their thoughts and feelings about a theme or question before sharing their reflective process with peers not only made their responses more specific—capturing the living practice of working

through ideas, concepts, and experiences—but also eased competition and strengthened collaboration between them. Writing before speaking turns attention inwards before it engages phenomena outwardly. Contributions that arose from a connected state became more thoughtful and less confrontational, holding space for other voices to interweave. Inner openness also extended outward. As students shifted their focus towards one other and away from the ‘instruction’, I felt the ever-present gaze of expectations—what they think learning should look like and anticipating what I might expect them to do—began to soften. They performed the rehearsed ‘student’ roles less in competing with others and crafting an individualised relationship with the instructor, and I too could afford to ‘teach’ less as per the same aesthetic design. Exchanges grew more open and accommodating to unchoreographed gestures and what was emerging in the moment, in all directions.

I have been using writing prompts to make accessible a plane for autonomous meaning making mobilising our capacity to make observations about the inner landscapes we inhabit. With dedicating time and space for inner work beyond yet still within the normalised sensibilities of education, I aimed to encourage the formation of embodied, integrative learning habits that can fold into and enhance other realms of life. ‘Whenever you feel stuck in whatever you are doing, you could take five minutes and write out what’s on your mind, just like we did in class, and see where it takes you’. I can’t tell how far the practices of thinking through writing might have travelled outside the frames of the course. Within the course, ‘learning outcomes’—as intended by the course design—have remained heterogeneous. Following a selectively curated, hope-oriented and in any case, felt (counter-)map of the discipline coupled with in-class writing experiments students with previous background in the field often wondered: ‘How is this IR?’ Consistency in incorporating writing processes and normalising plural knowledge forms in the classroom, little by little, overwrote the anxieties of leaving secure ground, most of the time. In each class, even if just for a few minutes, we practised some modality of writing-based reflection. Without doubt, I haven’t fully convinced everyone of the significance of seeking out the yet unknown in themselves and the many worlds they study and traverse. My aim was simply to illuminate alternative epistemological pathways, make available techniques for exploration, and offer my companionship along

the part of the journey we share. Those who engaged took away something important and relevant: at a minimum, greater clarity about their choices and appreciation for other ways of worlding, even if they decided to wander back into more familiar terrains. Feelings of gratitude were palpable every time as we wrapped up KNR. I couldn't always pinpoint it, but I had a distinct sense that something meaningful occurred, even if it resonated differently for each of us.

### **living across locations**

With each iteration of the course, the practice of writing—its politics and transformational potential—came to the fore even more. I found myself delving deeper into ‘processes’: writing processes, learning processes, and their conjunctions. Thinking with and through processes rather than outcomes, not only in my own practice but also in the classroom, shifted my focus even more from disciplinary knowledge to experiential ways of knowing grounded in the actuality of relations. The global pandemic highlighted the pressing need to nurture connections across disjointed physical, social, and psychological spheres, simultaneously revealing that cultivating attentive and compassionate relationships to each other and ourselves is nothing straightforward. It calls for dedicated effort and the invention of new methods. I felt that while ‘learning’ should remain open-ended, it also needed to embrace this desire to build a sense of community—both with others and within oneself—amid constraints that laid bare the inequalities within the groups more starkly than ever. I pondered what it might mean for ‘knowledge’ to be genuinely useful—relevant, relatable, and impactful in the here and now. How might ‘knowledge’ transform into understanding and, in doing so, serve healing, growth, and flourishing? How could it bridge divisions and mend separations, enabling us to access and envision more caring presents and futures?

I thought I should begin by checking my own assumptions about learning and what I thought I already knew against the intricacies of its lived experience. Once back on campus, I conducted research interviews with students and guided a creative process—a collective collage—to find out more about where and how we might meet at the intersections of IR scholarship and personal histories. I was also curious to explore how my role as an instructor and its institutionally designated authority

could be reimagined in a more democratic, collaborative, and growth-oriented manner. Krenak describes being ‘in constellation’ with human and more-than-human others as just being ‘a person in flux, capable of making affective bonds and meanings’ (2024, p. 50), beyond socially constructed identities and categories. While this freedom and ease in relating and interacting may never be fully attainable in the modern university or within any institutional structure, I have been searching for ways of working together that could enable such openings. The seeds of authentic being, I insist, despite the pressures of marketised education, might still be found and nurtured in the classroom. Echoing bell hooks, I continue to envision the classroom as a ‘radical space of possibility in the academy’ (1994, p. 12). Not by default, however. hooks writes that ‘theory’ is ‘not inherently healing, liberatory, or revolutionary’ and we have to ‘ask that it do so and direct our theorising towards this end’ (1991, p. 61). The spaces of learning, too, must be shaped and infused with a life-affirming orientation. We need to learn to ask theory, each other, and ourselves where and how (self-)transformational horizons might be found. We also need to learn how to listen to and await what emerges along the trails of asking, as we pose questions and call upon the wisdom of the yet-unknown.

What possible forms might then learning, invested in life, take within an IR curriculum?

For many years, I had been addressing barriers to learning, developing a wide-ranging toolkit to overcome these obstacles across various institutions and postgraduate programs. Yet my new practice of ‘learning about learning’ necessitated to go beyond the problem-solving mindset. I started by listening more. Conversations and art-based practices uncovered the intricate landscapes of navigating the discipline and the learning infrastructures of the university that had eluded me previously. Students’ accounts—on some occasions, drawings, and cut-outs—depicting personal and academic challenges, fears, hopes, dreams, and aspirations within the context of ‘international relations’ brought to light the tapestry of their shared and simultaneously, unshared realities. Critical and poetic moments surfaced that had little to do with the discipline, which someone described as a ‘foreign language’. Life events, chance meetings, intergenerational trauma, childhood recollections, fragments of memory, and inspirations arising from each person’s unique perceptual

realm revealed the non-linear, rhizomatic pathways of knowing that have accompanied us long before we stepped into formal classrooms.

Relaxed postures, tentative smiles, spontaneous laughter, clinking coffee spoons and the silence around the edges of words were weaving another storyline besides the biographical ones. The questions, from time to time, got turned back to me: ‘and what about you, Professor?’ In the university café and wherever these meetings took place, unexpectedly, I found myself having to reflect on what brings me to this field of knowledge and what keeps me here. I don’t know if I ever offered anything useful or interesting in response. But I made sure to show my honest appreciation for the momentary window to appear as I am, risking ‘authority’ and awkwardness in the long pauses I could no longer control.

Holding space for not-knowing, going in circles, going off on tangents, circling back, stopping, rephrasing, starting a sentence over felt liberating as students and I contemplated some of the barely asked meta-questions of the curriculum and the program. Through listening for how something took on expression rather than trying to pin down meaning ‘Why do this?’ slowly morphed into ‘How are we doing what we are doing?’ in my mind. In both my writing and teaching approach, I have decided to incorporate these seemingly anonymous yet constantly generative currents—the fluid, fleeting yet effective micro-movements of sensing and making sense—that coexist alongside the dominant aesthetic sensibility of flawlessly polished scholarly output. Highlighting the plurality of perception and interpretation, as well as their processual nature, creates room to unravel and reimagine the creative aspects of academic work. It breaks ‘the making’ open. This not only demystified academic knowledge production but also released much of the stress tied to linear projections of productivity. A dear friend, whose PhD years culminated into nearly a decade, said to me once that it could have saved her years of struggle and self-doubt had she been let into others’ worlds as they work things out. For someone to say: ‘Look, this is how I grappled with this. I can’t give you the answer, but I can show you what I have been doing to figure it out’.

I took seriously the call to learn to see and find ways to share more of the dynamic unfolding of our attempts to make sense. I have also adopted this investment into making visible the contexts within which content appears as solidified knowledge as a methodological commitment to nurture diverse epistemological foundations in both teaching

and research. Foregrounding processes—the messy, often circular, and serendipitous ways in which we come to insights and make choices about how to render them in words—became a pivotal location for thinking about transformational practices in the IR classroom, academic research, and everyday life.

As I keep on writing and invite others to reflect through writing, working on this book and the articulation of ‘curating learning journeys’ as a pedagogical approach have evolved side by side. Drawing on critical and feminist curatorial studies, the concept of ‘curation’ unhinged from the museum space reshapes critical praxis by redirecting focus from preserving art objects and the status quo to caring for sociopolitical processes and the making of publics composed of (empowered) knowing subjects (see Bailer, 2020; O’Neill & Wilson, 2010). For feminist curators and scholars Elke Krasny and Lara Perry recovering ‘care’ in curation ‘asks of curators and theorists to confront themselves with what their work “cares about” and how they “care for” what they “care about”’ (2023, p. 9). Reclaiming fundamental skills—such as writing and telling stories—in the discipline and the modern university expresses care for what kind of knowing subjects emerge as we inhabit social, political, and institutional structures. Re-centring (academic) subjectivity to unmake and remake it, what could be the new orientations of ‘recrafting’ academic habit (see Blaney & Trowsell, 2021) as we perform it and pass it on to new generations? What everyday efforts are needed to foster expanded, enhanced capacities that support personal well-being and growth, care for others and creative self-expression?

Staging encounters with our sense-making processes in and through writing, as a gateway to seeing more about how we see, and through that, to come to know, feel, think, and become otherwise within and beyond the frames we navigate have been vital components in what I describe as the dual processes of experiential diagnostics and creative remaking. Working with attention—attending to how we direct the psychic energy at our disposal daily—is a placeholder for this project and the many parallel threads of learning that run through it. ‘Discipline’, when we refocus on the micro-movements of our worlding, shifts from being the pulling force of a scholarly community’s expectations and imaginations to becoming the ongoing labour of showing up to ourselves and honing our ability to look closer, feel on an expanded scale, and return to the present moment whenever we slide into disembodied thought.

The pages you turn are repositories of traces of these processes that document as much as they continue to explore and seek to understand. A living, shifting mind map co-created by interacting bodyminds (see Price, 2015, p. 269) that doesn't seek to pin anything down: here, mapping is moving, exploring, marking to remark. To think with and through 'learning journeys' that started well before and carry on well after our time in formal education aligns with the continuity of moving between lived experience and conceptual language, as a practice of living-theorising, and a mode of travel across locations, always in some state of flux.

### moving on

The writing style and organisation of this project reflects and amplifies the processual dimension that not only underlies academic study but also how we inhabit life. It remains a forever draft. It also carries the sentiment of what Brian Massumi charts as the working principles of an 'anarchive' (2016, p. 6). Among other features, he notes that 'the anarchive is a technique for making research-creation a *process-making engine*. Many products are produced, but they are not *the product*' (2016, p. 6).

Besides attention to the graphic archiving of thinking, the creative arrangement of spaces and shapes enhance

the pictorial aspects of writing.

They keep the dynamic relationship open between meaning and possibility, encouraging us to pause and tap into a wider plane of awareness by interrupting the trained impulses to write and read in a linear fashion.

The chapters of this book  
 my reflections in and through writing  
 the writing-based reflection practices I document  
 students' accounts of writing and worlding  
 the online course that lives in constellation with this text and  
 the experiential field around it  
 the folds of perspectives  
 the spaces held for more folding



and share ways of working with them—as acts of curation—in the classroom, academic research, and everyday sites of worlding through practices of autotheory, autoethnography, collage, writing-based reflection, and creative writing. Epistemologically, methodologically, pedagogically, and ethically, these lines of inquiry and intervention arise from a deep sense of care for our becoming as knowing subjects. They seek to uncover plural ways of knowing, transforming solidified perceptions of knowledge and opening towards experiential understanding with a life-enhancing edge.

Fostering embodied, affective modes of engagement—alongside intellectual framing—and developing enhanced perceptual awareness of both how we see what we see, and what is unfolding in the moment, are key mechanisms in the processes staged and offered to be experienced. Politically, working at the registers of how we sense and make sense may transform the aesthetic sensibilities of how worlds, others, and ourselves appear to us, facilitating connection and compassion rather than separation across diverse planes of being, thinking, and feeling. Zooming in on the micro-dynamics of perception not only reveals more about our complex immersion in and entanglement with whatever we study and navigate in life, destabilising simplified images and representations. It also creates opportunities to hold ambiguity and embrace not-knowing, moving beyond the conditioned impulse to seek safety in certainty and with that, reinforce normalised social sensibilities and their limiting, hierarchical ordering function.

What pathways of becoming, forms of community and modes of action may follow from working with our attention and expanding (self-) awareness in a reflected, curated manner: I do not know. This book is an invitation to experience these micro-processes as ways of acting in the world already, and attune to the new constellations of presences, practices, ways of knowing, and political imaginations that may emerge in this way, at however small scale. Looking closer, feeling deeper, noticing more, and staying with unfamiliar places as we write, tell stories, and go about everyday life are the vehicles of experimentation.

*Experientially,*

I suggest journeying with this book intuitively: starting, stopping, pausing wherever it feels right. Trusting your sensorium and where the attention goes. The insights shared have evolved over years in a fragmented, non-linear manner and so did the writing. Textures of language and spatial expressions in the text's formatting serve as repositories of worlding and

processing, reflecting their contextual imbrications. What Klinkenborg calls ‘the living tissue of a writer’s choices’ (2013, p. 33) comes alive as ideas, half-baked thoughts, unfinished storylines, hesitant framings, and conceptualisations recur in a spiral-like fashion, a bit differently every time, threading through possibilities, skirting around the edges of the (un)known.

*Structurally,*

In making this book I have arranged these chapters as processes of ‘folding’, building on Gilles Deleuze’s notion of how the social lives in us and we live in and through it, folding in and out, moving between the inner making of subjectivity and lived experience.

This, of course, is one possible pattern to create with fragments that gradually coalesced over the timespan of six or seven years, carrying the imprints of different academic concerns and life situations. It is an attempt to tease out and make visible some of the orientations that make up the complex experiential terrain of learning journeys in the IR classroom and beyond, following conceptual-imaginative design that foregrounds the processual properties of knowing, becoming and being together. The word ‘folding’ can only ever be a snapshot of movement and so is the constellation of a series of moments held on these pages, appearing as ‘chapters’. These traces, once reactivated in your and others’ sensoria, will stimulate the formation of new, unique compositions.

**folding in**, through this chapter already I invite us to turn inwards.

The story of ‘**new angel**’ narrates my own quest for finding voice for this book. I trace pathways of inspiration arising from relations—a conversation with a friend, the making of a paper figure, a series of conceptual associations and continuous personal reflection—culminating in snippets of text and spatial moulding that feel aligned with how I process life.

‘**pedagogies of the folds**’ is my writing manifesto and methodological statement. I revisit the trajectories of the experimental writing practice that first gained articulation through the notion of the ‘experience book’ in my PhD. It situates this project, the stakes and politics of writing, the evolving methods of writing as discovery, and the shape this text takes within disciplinary, pedagogical, and ethical considerations. Writing appears as a vehicle for travelling alongside the folds of experience and perception, enabling everyday transformations.

**folding out**, we enter pedagogical relations in the IR classroom and beyond.

I witness the ‘**affective landscapes of IR**’ in a collective collage practice with students and faculty which sought to uncover motivations, challenges, and ways of worlding within the field of International Relations through reflexive prompts. This chapter gives detailed description of the design of the process, revisiting key moments that brought to light the felt dimensions of how we inhabit the discipline, its knowledge forms and politics.

Intrigued by the rich intellectual, affective, and imaginative horizons uncovered through the collective collaging ‘**learning about learning**’ sets out to delve deeper into learning journeys. I conduct research interviews with students registered for KNR, focusing on their educational trajectories and learning experiences in the course, the MA program and International Relations. I seek to map out what blocks and empowers across resonant and equally, discordant realities. I ponder questions around creating representations of ongoing working relationships. I discuss a draft version of this chapter with a student. The modality of archipelago writing emerges.

I continue to listen to the interviews, attuning more to students’ side comments and minor remarks on how they navigate institutional structures, workloads, and pressures at the university. A comment about ‘mastery’ makes me rethink my pedagogical approach. Drawing on Jacques Rancière’s figure of the ‘ignorant schoolmaster’ (1991) and insights from critical and feminist curatorial praxis I describe ‘**curating learning journeys**’ as a curatorial sensibility in pedagogy and research that stages encounters with our sense-making processes in the IR classroom and beyond, in search of life-enhancing ways of knowing that can transform what students identified in their experience as the making of logistical subjectivity. Insights from the discourse on curation infuse an evolving ethos of openness, care, and attention to the relational and holistic dimensions of lived, living experience. My own practice unfolds as curating the work of attention in and through writing.

**folding over**, the perspective shifts to how students inhabited three writing-based reflection modalities and their iterations in the course.

The chapters ‘**letters to authors**’, ‘**the living document**’, and ‘**writing for writing**’ share the evolving design of these practices and how different

cohorts lived in the frames presented. They illuminate insights, growth moments, and realisations as well as ambiguity, doubts, challenges, and learning from ‘failure’ as participants reflect on world politics and their immersion in it through writing.

**folding back and forth** invites co-creation on these very pages and offers a bridge to the online course linked to this book.

‘**writing as transformation**’ reflects on the folds and the emerging method of enabling everyday transformations, following the trails of experiential diagnostics and creative remaking. The online course, *Political Writing as Transformation* (Strausz, 2024a) accompanies learning journeys beyond the IR classroom, reconfiguring writing-based reflection as an everyday (academic) practice of meaning making and (self-) transformation. It offers frames and techniques to curate our own processes as we work something through or look for inspiration to get started or move forward. Working with attention translates into techniques to quiet critical voices, reshape emotional landscapes, and reconnect with purpose, uncovering new insights.

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## new angel

I am sitting in Café Schopenhauer in Vienna with Andreea, who arrived a couple of days ago for her PhD defence. I am sitting in admiration of the newly minted Dr. Nicutar as the light and lightness of ‘completion’ wraps around her. The magic, that almost unthinkable register of things finally happening after many years of hard work and perseverance, infuses the air. I recognise the sentiment, the vibe of wonder over creation: how countless efforts, often of a titanic scale, and on worse days, what feels like Sisyphean labour, result in something tangible. I let myself be absorbed in this glow, celebrating both what has been accomplished, the words on the pages that make up an academically recognisable shape, and the omnipresent potential to bring the formless into form,

*that* which constantly slips out of the hold of language.

I had the chance to accompany this long and unique journey for various intervals, which has now reached the kind of ‘end’ that instantly morphs into a new beginning. Arriving is already moving forward. The dissertation, ‘Witnessing Body and States of Terror’ (Nicutar, 2021) was highly praised by its readers while the ‘witnessing body’—witnessing her own presence and performance at the event—also made an appearance. ‘What a wonderfully self-aware viva’, I thought to myself. Andreea’s gentle reflections on time, space, and the discomfort with which she inhabited the role marked out for her by the regulations encouraged everyone present to interact with her at the same thoughtful and unapologetically

honest register. The concept of the space of witnessing, as developed by Andreea, suggests the possibility of bearing witness to ourselves—our own bodies acting and reacting—which also enables an encounter with the other from the same space, transcending the boundaries of identity and social conditioning. Invoked by discourse, ‘the space of witnessing’ brought a sense of ease to the room. It invited us not only to think but also enter that mode of presence with our whole bodies. It did so even if it derived from a particular context of investigation, an immersive fieldwork in Israel-Palestine and in response to a research question, asking:

‘How is it possible to bear witness to terror while being in a state of terror?’

We are sitting in front of each other at a densely packed coffee table and the spaciousness of presence within and around our bodies lingers on. As I am writing this, I am thinking that Andreea might object to this arbitrary recontextualisation of her work, the sudden move of witnessing the horrors of armed conflict to the sharing of joy in a friendly conversation. Yet the making of anything, be that a text, an image, a paper boat, or a dish, unfolds through an intricate landscape of thoughts, feelings, and moods that we carry and equally, we are carried by. Uncontainable and always in motion, the creative process grows through the cracks of the known and the predictable. At the interstices where multiple life worlds weave in and weave out, the complex in the simple and the simple in the complex are gradually revealed, and so is their proximity. Besides pain, fear, and suffering—whether as an object of study or the researcher’s own experience—there is also care and the practice of other positive emotions that nourish life (see Penttinen, 2013). As Andreea compellingly shows, even in enormous pain there is awareness. Both the practical task and the philosophical question are how to access this dimension of experience, how to tap into the transformational power that lies in being present to ourselves and others, and not only in states of emergency and trauma, but also in the mundane, seemingly unremarkable and non-political instances of our everyday lives.

Such as our coffee and my writing about it, here, in this moment.

I have often meditated on the ways in which spaces of (self-)presence and the recognition of shared vulnerability can be opened and expanded. What new possibilities might arise in this way for sensing, meaning making, being together and being otherwise—especially within our comfort zones and habitual ways of inhabiting life, including academic research? How can we break through the invisible straightjackets of the taken for granted, of what we no longer question and no longer wonder at?

Now Andreea turns to me with a question, asking what I have been working on recently.

I take a long sip of my coffee.

My unease must be palpable.

I could tell her about the writing of this book and my struggles to find the voice that will—eventually—narrate it. I had journaled over 120,000 words in the past year in preparation for the ‘actual’ writing to happen. This book is intended to be about pedagogical practice, and I had been doing exactly what I teach and encourage in class: to use the vehicle of writing to explore what we already have in ourselves or what may be forming in our minds, at a not fully conscious level. The process itself, of letting myself freely write out whatever comes to me, has been immensely rewarding. I journaled after class, in moments stolen from what I compartmentalised as the precious ‘productive time’ of next mornings and sometimes in transit, on the train, jotting down random thoughts on my phone, of whatever stayed with me as the affective residues of classes. Whenever I noticed feelings, thoughts, or questions arising, I wrote them down. The noticing often took longer than the writing. I paused from time to time just to feel and remember more. I sketched out moments—micro-scenes—that harboured intensity of any kind which I couldn’t pin down and fully process in the flow of interactions. I made the choice of staying with what presented itself in this inner space with as little judgement or intellectual manipulation as possible. Moments opened up beyond their memory-shortcuts. I was struck by how much more detail and nuance resided in fleeting gestures, offhand remarks, spontaneous reactions, and what appeared as background

noise in the classroom that might have otherwise escaped my conscious awareness.

I am grateful for everything that hit the page, and especially for those thoughts and emotions bubbling up to the surface of this self-generated discourse that I found difficult to face. Sticking out in black against a white background, right in front of me, I could no longer avoid them and those parts of myself that didn't quite fit the images of the 'good' or 'competent' teacher that I crafted through my academic socialisation. The process has not been always pleasant, but its honesty paid off. This journaling practice took place almost daily throughout the teaching terms and I have been humbled by the unknowns of the life form that I enact with relative confidence on other occasions. Thinking with and working myself through classroom events and interactions beyond their dedicated time frame has certainly made me more grounded as a person and an academic. The layers of experience and meaning making that the practice of writing revealed—in me, in my relation to others and within the entanglements of the worlds we traverse—left me with much fewer 'single stories' (Adichie, 2009), of both international relations and my own life. As I have been working with the archive of traces, revisiting their origins and continuing resonances in making (new) sense, my attention turned towards stories that repair, humanise, and empower: restore as *re-story*, one (heart)beat at a time. I knew deep down that the journaling practice in its fragmented yet persistent unfolding, too, was one such story of many, micro-level transformations.

With the passing of time free reflections accumulated into a lot of raw material, yet the confidence to begin to mould it into 'academic' form, or any form that would feel right or presentable, was still somehow lacking. There were attempts to write up smaller sections with a view of them potentially becoming 'book material'. On all occasions though, after what seemed like an encouraging start, the process somehow froze a few paragraphs later.

I decide to share something different with Andreea, something that might lead us to a more uplifting place and help me break free from the state of pacing in very small circles. I catch myself feeling slightly embarrassed over not knowing yet where the

project would go despite all the energy invested into it. I spent hundreds of hours searching and researching, diving into some of the obscure, unreflected layers of my pedagogical practice and class interactions that I would otherwise not even register. ‘What if the book might still not happen?’ I am already a good decade out of the PhD, often in a mentoring role to junior scholars. Something in me feels anxious about disclosing this: I still haven’t cracked the process of creating a solid piece of text from scratch. I do not have an established method for making something out of nothing.

‘This is time to celebrate’, I remind myself, and it strikes me that there is, indeed, another story to tell. A few weeks ago, scrolling down a university newsletter, I stumbled upon an online course titled ‘I Love My Ideas’ led by the uniquely talented Hungarian singer-songwriter Bea Palya. I have been a great admirer of hers and the effortless swirl of lightness and depth, love, loss, healing and humour threading through her lyrics and soundscapes. The vitality pulsing through her art always touched some dormant spark within me and I thought that just being in her aura, even if across the screen, will do good for my quest of finding voice. And it did. I go on to tell Andrea about that.

A task I prepared for Bea’s class proved to be a game changer—something I had been avoiding for quite some time. Using any material of our choice, we were asked to create what Bea called a ‘just do it angel’—a fairy-like figure imagined to be sitting on our shoulders, endlessly and unwaveringly whispering, ‘you can do it’. ‘Sure, I can picture this angel!’ I liked the idea, but there was a halt—a part of me wanted to keep it as a pleasant thought. The energy remained stagnant, never quite moving towards action. I was reluctant to spend time on making something without a clear immediate outcome. ‘There wouldn’t be more words on the page, after all’, said a voice in my head, although sitting on hundreds of pages of unedited auto-prose already, I clearly didn’t need more words.

I needed wisdom to guide the words and steer them into a shape that could both capture what was forming through the strings of jottings and reflexive streams and hold space for the yet unknown. I was looking for a language to narrate what I came to think about as the *micro-of-the-micro*—the myriad unspectacular moments and movements that make up our everyday experiences at the university and beyond.

‘There is great power in what we barely notice’, I said many times at diverse platforms. The more I heard myself say this, the more committed I became to engage that power and bring it forth, making it visible and sensible beyond what may be readily apparent to our senses. ‘We can always look closer and feel deeper’. That felt right as a place and a direction.

But what would it look like and sound like, in actual practice?

‘Why don’t you make the angel?’

Bea somehow discerned in the last session that there was still no angel perched on my shoulder. Before we disappeared from the frame of Zoom and the course ended, she gave me one final nudge. The story of a fellow participant who works in IT struck a chord with me. He, too, was at first hesitant but when he finally did it, he burst out: ‘This is stupid nonsense, but it works!’

‘So how did you end up making it?’ asks Andreea, who figured out that by the time of telling the angel had slipped into material existence (Fig. 1).

I tell her that I was sitting in my office on a Saturday afternoon, meticulously scanning and sorting documents for the immigration office. Breaking through the rare precision I seldom see erupt in other areas of my life, I found myself staring at a pile of scraps left behind after a collective collaging session. Earlier in the fall I designed ‘Affective Landscapes of IR’ for the departmental community as a research practice and ritual to mark our new journey together. It sought to explore and expose how we—students and faculty—navigate the field of International Relations in that moment. It illuminated the intertwined states of mind—fears, uncertainties, aspirations—that are co-present as we step into our roles with the beginning of the new academic year. Using collage as method of inquiry we staged an encounter with what was already there and in the same process, gave it new articulation. Cardboards, colouring pens, stickers, marker dots, glue sticks, snippets of paper, and linen rope covered one part of my table as the six collages, carefully placed on top of each other, lay on the other side. I picked up an amorphous, rainbow-colored cardboard piece.

An hour later, what was looking back at me was this:



**Fig. 1** New angel

The angel turned out to be something entirely different from my expectations. I initially googled for a fragile fairy silhouette that I thought would adequately represent my creative inspiration. The form that emerged at the end was something else. My superhero-esque companion with golden shoes and a golden cap must have come through another channel. I was watching in disbelief as an odd-looking figure began to take shape in front of my eyes. Then I surrendered to the simple joys of tracing, cutting, and folding. Bending sticky stars into garments was a lot of fun. The shoelaces cut out of star material were my last additions before the new angel was ready to enter the world. I admired the independence of this beautifully strange yet still familiar creature. ‘Now where did this come from? Has it been there somewhere all along, without me realising?’

‘Just do it’, responded the angel, and it was not a whisper.  
It was a loud and confident call to engage and embrace the  
authorisation for which it was called into being.

I learn that the angels serve as mirrors for our own creative method. The whole process—from the moment the figure enters thinking and imagination, activating the body and the senses, and then all the way to its emergence as a material object—reflects something about how we make things and make things happen. Some take weeks to stitch it, sculpt it, carve it, others do it in less than five minutes, by clipping together two cheese papers or FFP2 masks for wings. I read these icons as embodying and externalising an innate generative process that is present in all of us, suggesting that once unlocked, it takes care of itself. Carrying the touch of their maker and reflecting these marks back make the unconscious conscious, but there is more. The mirror is never just the image reflected in it: it is a function, a vehicle, a heterotopia (see Foucault, 1986). It is a gateway into other worlds within the familiar, transforming our perception. ‘No doubt that it’s a mirror for me too, though I am yet to decipher what I have been observing through it’, I tell Andreea, and I begin to tally what I picked up on about those mostly intuitive gestures that the making of the angel brought to light.

I note the long hesitation before I could sit down to doing it, and the sudden shift that happened once I put my mind to it properly. Out of commitment flowed movement. I note the unexpected when my attention settled on a template that, contrary to what I was looking for, was everything but fairy-like. I can’t explain why I went with that. I note the recurring self-doubt. I also note the thrill of being ‘in the zone’ and how uplifted and energised I felt once the process took on its own rhythm and I trusted it. I stayed in that state for hours. I note my wonder at the result: at both the flamboyant physical form and the ease and straightforwardness with which it appeared, out of the void. I note how it absorbed the mental noise that was there before, leaving me with a quieter brain and a fuller heart. I note the striking simplicity of the production: the materials, the shapes, the technique, the skills. Everything was there in the room, it just had to align in the right constellation. The angel is now sitting on the windowsill right in front of me. Whenever I look at it, the same warm feeling runs down my spine. How did the unthinkable come into being?

I have no idea.

I can’t stop smiling.

I note all that.

‘I guess, this is how I create?’ I look up and pause. ‘But the angel is already collective’, responds Andreea, softly diffusing the ‘I’s’ claim to authority by pointing out that it was made from what the departmental collaging process left behind. The body of the angel was indeed composed of what was no longer useful or needed for another creative process. The memory of more than twenty people working together, upon closer inspection, lingered on. I ponder the implicit collective dimension of making anything. While I was cutting and folding paper designated as waste, in the field stretching between skin and paper, I was also working with the invisible traces of a group I had been previously part of. The energy of creation and the trails of lived experience didn’t stop at the edges of the cardboard sheets that framed the visible outputs of the experiment. What remained after, and yet, still within the affective landscapes of IR, bubbled over into new expression, yielding a muse-like symbol to nudge another kind of labour into fruition. Not least, so that this book would be written and shared.

The angel snapped the burden of endless, mostly abstract ruminations over what form this text should take, and even more. It became a transformational device through which the practice of writing acquired a voice and settled into a track, even if temporarily, with directions yet unknown.

Both you and I have entered the thinking and feeling space of this project through it, long preceding the final sequence of words that make up the body of this text. These pages may touch against the fingers of some of the members of the group, too, who once came together as a collective, collaging their way into the new academic year. While the trajectories of creative processes, once bound to an hour in a classroom, have stretched onto the global plane since, in what I have been noticing as a series of such spills, flows and expansions neither ‘I’, nor any sense of a ‘we’ have remained the same (see Foucault, 2009, p. 19).

Andreea’s observation of the collaging scraps’ continuing life cycle made me reflect more on the locations of meaning and value. How can something that is perceived as carrying no value, travel—in space and in thought—and become value-able again? I intuitively saved the bits and pieces of paper laying around, thinking that if not for anything else, I will use them for making to-do lists and other notes, which tend to appear lighter and more entertaining in colour. These snippets, had they not been

placed on top of an office table, indicative of a special status, would have landed in the bin already. Mulvey's comments on the practice of gleaning come to mind. In her discussion of compilation films using found footage, gleaning, she writes, 'gives a cultural lineage to the process of collecting, accumulating, sifting through and recycling discarded materials' (2017, p. 4). She renders it as a feminist practice that not only 'refers to what was, once upon a time, a specifically female task (collecting the unwanted residue of an agricultural harvest) but also evokes the kind of apparently trivial things, personal or emotional, collected and saved, in which women invest value' (Mulvey, 2017, p. 4). What makes up the angel's body is not exactly found material, yet it had to be discovered—seen as adaptable and open to being repurposed and reimagined. It required the work of attention that registered the possibility for something to change shape, texture, function, properties, meaning and context, and affirmed both the potential and desirability of transformation. Investing value into something thus entailed seeing beyond its apparent physical identity, recognising that invisible grid within which both composition and meaning could be otherwise. It also necessitated taking the risk of not knowing what transformation would yield after all, trusting that the very process of picking up and reworking collected material is already worthwhile and generative, even if it may result in more 'waste'. Seeing value is finding value and once found it can be found again. I made this a guiding principle of my creative method: nothing that exists will be easily discarded or excluded. If I need to cut,

I should cut to connect.

The new thing surprised with their appearance, and at a more profound level, with how they came along. Andreea nods and smiles as I show her a picture: 'It's like *Angelus Novus*. A bit scary but with a gripping presence!' The curly hair, the small, dysfunctional wings, and sharp teeth of Paul Klee's angel-image float into my mind. Walter Benjamin, who owned the picture, treated it as a companion that continued to inspire him even when he embarked on what turned out to be his last exile. Being already separated from the artwork, he revealed that he saw in the image 'the angel of history', caught up in a storm, being pulled backwards into the future while facing the past. The 'storm blowing from Paradise' is what he called 'progress' (Benjamin, 1989, p. 258).

Yet Benjamin's angel exhibits the work of other forces on its body as well. Klee created the painting with the oil-transfer method, an 'improvised system of making' that he invented himself and used for the mechanical reproduction of his own work (Trodd, 2008, p. 77). Klee would turn an almost dried, black oil-painted sheet onto a fresh sheet of paper, then he placed a drawing on the back of the oil paint, tracing its contours, which then appeared on the blank sheet at the bottom. What happens in the 'transfer'? Tamara Trodd describes the process as an 'apparatus' that operates at two registers. Tracing the lines of a drawing 'train(s) the body in the labour of "memorizing"; drilling and routinizing the hand in a synchronized series of gestures' while it also becomes 'the vehicle of a reprocessing and a remaking that alters even as it preserves, like that recasting and transformation to which memory's processes subject its original material' (Trodd, 2008, p. 89). Klee's method discloses an embodied practice of simultaneous archiving and creating in which memory, the body and the already existing lines of an object are transformed as they give rise to another object. The creative process is recorded in both objects and the body. On a related plane, his continuously changing personal archive simultaneously acts as a system of production that multiplies images and serves the public consumption of his work.

Caught in-between past and future, the 'angel of history' alludes to a resonant sense of liminality. The state of being still yet in motion, looking at the debris in front of him while shifting towards the yet invisible and unknown, opens onto a dynamic aspect of the present where in a moment of self-awareness there is already movement. The archive of the senses and what we may be able to receive and perceive at any given point are recreated in the same gesture. It strikes me that this may be the case the other way around, too: in movement there is already self-awareness and stillness, the possibility to notice and be with what is on its way to become otherwise.

This feels like a full circle, or more like a spiral that has been evolving through various acts of witnessing. I have explored some of the entanglements of knowledge and becoming before (see Strausz, 2018) but embracing *knowing as becoming* as actual, embodied practice has been an ongoing learning journey. It keeps calling for more witnessing, more noticing. Making the angel and unravelling what the rich textures of

both tangible materials and the affective, energetic trails of co-creative labour carried activated a range of unexpected possibilities for sensing and making sense. Moving between experience and observation, thinking and conversing, making and writing opened a flow of new associations and inspirations. These moments have been my guides towards turning into a more attentive reader and narrator of micro-scale events. Through the writing process I have been practising how to feel deeply into what may first appear as unremarkable: the subtle layers of the barely sensible, what would otherwise evade the conditioned, habitual pathways of attention. Erin Manning locates the ‘minor gesture’ with its inexhaustible inventiveness and variability in a state of indeterminacy, where an event or experience ‘has not yet fully become this or that’ (2016, p. 2). Part of my efforts—and struggles—have circled around finding, and in some ways, inventing language for exposing such states of liminality and processes from within, through the fluid and ephemeral movements of the inner field, by showing and sharing the labour of figuring things out. It has been unavoidably messy but also serendipitous. From time to time, words and phrases too have been found, and concepts collaged. Not as monuments but rather as placeholders: until new form emerges.

The writing of this vignette unlocked that register of articulation, that mode of address and ethical relation from which this book materialised. Within a long, ongoing process of reflection I journaled about the angel and meeting with Andreea, not knowing at that time how either of these encounters would shape this project and unblock some of the conditions of its emergence. Before free writing got transferred into nearly final yet never conclusive form, I wrote:

‘This could be a prologue to the book. Pro as “for” the book and everything that seeks expression through it. It is not an introduction. It is preparation. An affective, emotive being-with the potent energy in me which is struggling to find articulation as text. Through writing this I want to find that voice which will feel right, which will sound true for this piece.

Also an invocation. Of the muse. Within’.

At the time of writing this iteration of ‘new angel’, this of course is still wishful thinking. Yet what is certain is that, looking back from the future, if this book exists, it is because of the work that started

somewhere unknown

and became manifest,  
gradually

as sparks travelled

from uncut cardboard sheets  
to discarded scraps

shifting shape  
changing texture  
merging into

a new figure,  
then

words and images on the screen

words and images on printed paper

spiralling forward

if someone notices it:

forever in the making

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## pedagogies of the folds

Through writing this book I have also been writing my life. These are big words but still some of the most fitting ones I could locate. What started as an experiment at one point—a book proposal conjured up as a line of flight during the global pandemic—turned into an institutional necessity, and a threshold. A pending ‘right’ of passage, which, in fact, is about staying. Ever since this shift, part of my energy has gone into keeping the ease and playfulness alive that first sparked this project into being. Recovering and nourishing the ‘rite’ in passing and passing through, for both the integrity of the creative process and my own well-being.

Writing, thus far,  
has been both site of struggle and a vehicle of transformation.  
The means of academic production and a mode of travel across worlds.

A medium that holds ambiguity, tension, creative potential, and  
a lot of mixed metaphors as I’m grappling at the edges of  
language and experience,  
philosophical concepts and nameless emotions,  
sensing and making sense.

The transformational dimension of writing became even more pronounced as the points of contact between life and the structures of power I navigate intensified. As their edges grew sharper with the passing of time (and still no finished book on the table), at some point, the persistent ebb and flow of tension in my nervous system signalled the need

for deeper attention. At heart, what was truly required was a gentler, kinder way of being. Since there hasn't really been a clear 'outside' to my academic life lately—or perhaps, ever—where I could fully detach from 'work' as a regular part of daily living, rather than in rare moments of exception—I knew that this other, more caring mode of being and creating had to unfurl from within academic practice itself. Slowly and organically, and with a force.

Like a new monstera leaf.

### **writing experientially**

I noted earlier that writing this book about learning journeys and pedagogical practice has become a distinguished place of my own ongoing learning, too. It presents a new opportunity to 'recraft' academic habit (see Blaney & Trowsell, 2021) as I think more about what matters in work and life and carry on experimenting with how I inhabit their entanglements. I have been attuning more to the affective landscapes through which institutional structures and forms of knowledge live in us and we live through them. This is the register where—as I found out from the research interviews with students that followed the collective collaging session—students' trajectories and my own fold into each other beyond the performance of formal roles and normalised disciplinary knowledge practices. The ecologies of 'transformational experiences in the IR classroom and beyond' that this project seeks to highlight and share unfold from the junctures where 'international relations' also translate into 'inner relations' (Strausz, 2024, p. 422)—as relationships to self, others, and worlds.

Holding on to the original motivation of the book amidst other pulls and constraints, I found nourishment in engaging more with the productive properties of the process of writing that I came to understand broadly. While writing for a mostly academic audience in a genre that I intend to keep recognisable as 'scholarly' I have also been practising different modalities of writing freed from such expectations. I have come to see writing both as craft, mobilising a set of trained skills to produce a specific outcome, and discovery: an open, curious, also vulnerable relationship to the yet unknown. Besides serving as a vehicle of knowledge production and professional progression in the modern university, it also happens—in

fact, it happens *in this way*—that writing has given rise to rich, multi-dimensional experiences that generated their own wisdom. As I stage writing processes in the classroom and write about them, I write from within relations that extend beyond the institutionally defined boundaries of ‘learning’ yet feed back into and shape whatever may happen in these spaces. On all counts, writing is an already relational practice that also *writes* the realities it touches, even if at a micro-scale, even if we might not even register them at first.

The stakes are still high, but the fruits of finding meaning in the making have been hanging lower. In moments of doubt or exhaustion I kept reminding myself of the curiosity and urge to design pedagogical practices that bridge life and theory, and my desire to share them with others while making the acts of bridging felt and accessible. This helped me cultivate and embody a mindset of seeking connections and a practice of thinking, reading, relating transversally. After a while—that is, years of slow, granular and non-systematic work on the manuscript—I realised that I not only wanted to convey moments of connectedness where life reads theory, and concepts take on new significance through the irreducible complexity and poetic potential of lived experience. I also wanted to share the process of search: the persistent, engaged labour *to* connect and stay connected with what there is as a remedy to hierarchically disposed sensibilities that separate life forms and realities, fracturing worlds within and outside.

I came to see that ultimately, the key to bringing together what otherwise appear as disjointed epistemological and ontological realms lies within my own sensorium. Coming closer to what there is called for connecting with the realities of my own sensing and sense-making first, beyond their academic training and social conditioning. It felt like a window of appearing ‘whole’ (see Motta & Bennett, 2018 p. 636) where thinking and feeling were no longer separate. I wanted to render all this experientially, as continuous unfolding—creating and conveying another sensibility to ‘knowledge’ as multiple, heterogeneous ways of knowing that weave through everyday life and are co-present with abstract, analytical thinking as we know it and practice it in academia, re-positioning it as one possibility among many.

Glimmers of

noticing

catching a spark

‘aha’

‘hm’

on the bus

while brushing teeth

watering the plants

peeling a potato

gestures of

witnessing

circling around

staying-with

sharing space while

holding space

for the unknown

and also,

for those

transitory mind-states

that plug me into

the vastness

of a fragment

of a second

the fullness

of a pixel

on a white page

the softness of their truth

the ones that may not have a name

in the languages

through which I world

the ones I don’t know how to describe in words

and their generative power,  
which I can feel, *nonetheless*.

Micro-movements of perception and the zigzagged pathways of attention would have remained ephemeral to my thinking and writing as per the intellectual training I received, even though my mind and body have registered them all. Tapping into these sparsely visited or yet-uncharted terrains of sense-making uncovered abundant possibilities that I—and every one of us—already carry within. As formerly separate planes connect in my mind and I no longer censor out the diverse, idiosyncratic ways in which I process information and navigate my surroundings, I noticed that theory and life reveal more of their entanglements, too.

The desire to share the search in its aliveness that underlies both the pedagogical practices I developed and my writing about them called for embracing modes of writing that emanate from such ways of knowing that keep on unfolding beyond the classroom and the time of working on this book.

Writing experientially meant attuning more to the rhythms and textures of lived, living experience,

the messiness of  
                           the plural,  
                           often broken  
                           circuits  
 of exploring,  
 working things out  
                           while  
                           surrendering to  
                           the serendipity  
                           of insight  
 and right before that  
 the moment  
 when things are *about* to  
   click

The novelist Haruki Murakami describes a ‘personal chest of drawers’ where he files everyday inspirations in his memory as he goes about life (2022, p. 77). I think of inner pockets, islands, plant-like ecologies—as places

of both storage and dwelling—where the raw material for intellectual and emotional processing lives.

Writing with a sensibility grounded in the multi-dimensional processes of sensing and making sense no longer confines thinking to disciplinary form: it frees its expressions. When permission is given to depart from and stay close to what there is, writing might evolve in a non-linear, spiral-like fashion, following the movements of thought and encouraging their dance. Ideas bubble up, float around, drift away, and then return, changing slightly each time, inviting different words or shuffling the same ones. As they circle and recurse, so does writing. Threads start without me knowing when and how they may end. Some keep on pulling for decades. Others weave in and out. Memories, associations, random observations enter. Sometimes they come in waves. Some branch out. Some diffuse without a trace. The fabric of the text is punctuated with marks—placeholders—that are gateways to other realms. Nothing is conclusive yet somehow it all belongs. Everything on this page right now is a snapshot of a constellation that was once present within, as relations without language.

### spatial emergences

In writing this I seek to embrace the porousness of knowledge and the fluidity of plural, often intuitive and accidental ways of knowing that tend to resist control and capture anyway. The form this book is taking—whatever it may turn out to be—arises from the intention to allow a different sensibility to surface from within but also transgressing academic practice and its familiar aesthetics. Neither writing, nor thinking, and certainly not *feeling* followed a linear path to this place.

The social sculpture practitioner Shelley Sacks and the philosopher Wolfgang Zumdick describe a relationship of ‘allowing’ as a mode of being and inquiry that helps us remain close to the complexity of life worlds and lived experiences without trying to change or manipulate them (2013, p. 5). Instead of trying to pin something down in language and framing it through concepts, by ‘allowing whatever we encounter to disclose itself in us, in a mode without predetermined language’ we enter a poetic relationship (2013, p. 5). In ‘the artistic mode’ (2013, p. 5) the urge to know is disarmed and space opens for the yet unknown. ‘Allowing’—as a way of being, relating and

knowing—doesn't promise specific results but it offers opportunities to see some of the 'undivided and indivisible realities' (2013, p. 6) of whatever we are perceiving, be that inner or outer phenomena, beyond their socially and academically inscribed properties.

I have been practising 'allowing' as one modality of being with whatever I am attending to while engaging the unique complexity of how I sense and make sense at the same time. This has been a methodological and ethical choice, and a poetic one. The implications of these choices and their practical consequences are still unfolding through fragmented, sometimes embryonic, at other times more elaborate articulations, scattered in this text and elsewhere (see Strausz, 2022, 2024).

Claudia Aradau and Jef Huysmans write that methods are 'within worlds and partake in their shaping' (2014, p. 598). Seen as devices, they enact social and political worlds, but as acts they can also disrupt and remake them. At one register methods 'connect and assemble ontology, epistemology, theory and worlds by putting them into knowledge generating action' (2014, p. 605). At another they shape what kinds of assemblages are composed and what worlds transpire through the design of inquiry and the pathways it follows. They act upon what there is and bring a version of 'truth' attainable through their lens into being.

Working backwards and departing from the effects—the worlds already present—I ponder the methodological implications of our knowledge practices, even if they may not be driven by an explicitly formulated method. There is a gaze, a relationship, and gestures of ordering in making sense. An organising logic is already in place in what Aradau and Huysmans characterise as the 'experimental, messy and possibly failing process of assembling' (2014, p. 605), which may or may not result in connections, academic, and other. In making sense there is also a sense to making.

Going further, what may appear as the building blocks of 'knowledge' in the first place are already the results of intellectual and affective processing. Following Rancière, Tyson E. Lewis notes that 'before cognition, there is

*already an aesthetic partitioning of the sensible*' (2012, p. 4). As the worlds we enter reveal and obscure certain realities, we learn what and how to see, and equally, 'unsee' (2012, p. 4), as an unreflected, default way of inhabiting the social assembled and shaped by others' knowledge practices. Breaking through habit and revealing the invisible design that governs perception and how information is processed—the uncoded 'methods' of knowing—appears as an ethical and political act. So does a commitment to recovering other sensory, intellectual, affective possibilities of knowing that enable connection rather than reinforcing disconnection from ourselves and others, including the more-than-human sphere.

Audra Mitchell foregrounds the transformative and co-constitutive aspects of a multi-sensory practice she calls 'eco-lalia', describing it as 'a way of communicating, relating, co-creating, and literally resonating with ecosystems' (2023, p. 1231). Depicted as 'meaningless repetition' in dominant, neurotypical discourses, Mitchell cultivates echoing from within Autistic ways of worlding as a mode of rendering themselves 'more porous to the violently "backgrounded" ecologies' (2023, p. 1243) that are central to her worlding. I take inspiration from locating the 'eco' in 'echo' as a relational and integrative, interpretative process between the bodymind and its surroundings. Making accessible and nurturing the connections that already exist across planes separated out in neurotypical normativity is not only an act of resistance but an embodiment of hopeful, life-enhancing horizons. Mitchell writes that echolalia—reframed as 'resonating with other beings' (2023, p. 1246)—may 'hold potential for elaborating solidarities across violently imposed and maintained lines of species, race, gender and (dis)ability to support the thriving of (bio)plural worlds' (2023, p. 1243). I read the poems and lyrical textures unfolding from Mitchell's sensorium—where eco-lalia, she writes, is 'as integral to me as my heartbeat' (2023, p. 1246)—as encouragement to explore, appreciate, and embrace the creative opportunities arising from the innate properties of our worlding beyond normalised social and academic sensibilities.

Sacks and Zumdick note that a receptive and open attitude, when we allow the outside to expand in us without foreclosing on the relationship and who we and the other might be in relation to each other, engenders respect that enriches both self and other. Undoing

the colonial separation between knower and the known, ‘the poetic dimension’ of shared existence may come to light. They write that ‘coming closer to the other is also a coming closer to oneself’ (2013, p. 6). Perhaps the reverse also holds true when we practise openness towards our inner landscapes and the yet-unknown and continue to look deeper. Coming closer to oneself may well be a coming closer to the other: the ‘other’ within and outside.

Rendering states of openness experientially in writing through which more plural and intuitive ways of knowing might become sensible prompted experimentation at the thresholds of knowledge, language, and expression. Besides trying to make felt the varied textures of sense-making processes across a continuum of analytical and poetic modalities I also wanted to make space—literally—for spaces of emergence and (trans)formation. For both the irreducible diversity of form and the inexhaustible potential of the formless. I not only aim to create placeholders in language that gesture towards multiple planes of thinking and feeling but also space-holders on the page that attest to the spaciousness within which shifts in perception and new understanding may arise, inviting awareness of its immense transformational resources.

Maybe in the blanks that hold these fragments as they take shape in,  
 through and *around* discourse  
 your mind and mine

can meet each other

and the

i f i n e  
 i t  
 n

## writing relations

This is not the first time in my academic trajectory that writing has shaped life in a rather direct, unmediated manner (see Strausz, 2018a, 2018b). Over the past fifteen years, turning the habitual use of a trained skill into a process of discovery, particularly in the face of risks and pressures, has been both a coping mechanism and an ambition to emerge out of challenging situations with greater self-awareness and a stronger sense of creative agency. My doctoral research and first research monograph are both products of circumstances where research on the subject matter necessitated exploring my own making as a ‘knowing subject’ in relation to the ‘objects known’ (see Foucault, 1994a, p. 256). Delving deeper into the personal unravelled knowledge’s imbrications with the academic, the political and the ethical, and the general—also generative—messiness of the process. In both cases, following the conventional academic approach—isolating the task from the density of life matter that nests such endeavours—would have made for a more streamlined and less strenuous working agenda. Yet within my own personal paradigm I would have seen, learnt, and grown less. The psychotherapist Bert Hellinger once noted that ‘the specific weight of the soul is equal to the sum of what has been dared’ (2002, p. 49).

I needed courage and perseverance to engage fully in, and, despite pulls to more ‘sensible’ directions, continue writing experientially. Freely writing out in the first person whatever came to me and whatever I carried in myself in the moment felt liberating, most of the time. Those moments were frustrating when nothing hit the page but then writing about the ‘nothing’ with unabashed honesty helped to find sustenance in the unabashed honesty with which nothing shows up, moving the process forward. This is what sensible meant for me: what I didn’t only think but also felt, and especially what I felt but couldn’t put a finger on intellectually. What didn’t make sense that way, but it still did in another, and writing enabled me to see and recognise that.

L. H. M Ling writes that ‘to decolonize IR, we must not only recognise the role of emotions but also treat them as repositories of multiplicity’ (2014a, p. 580). Ling’s worldism calls for appreciating the complexity of lived experience and the ‘hybridities’ of multiple emotional worlds as ‘knowledge arises from time, place, and—significantly—feeling’ (2014b, p. 44). Through our emotional entanglements in ‘modes of thinking, doing, being and relating’ we become complicit in the making and

remaking of worlds. Complicity is both intimate and generative. In Ling's Daoist approach 'life unfolds through processes', giving rise to many, continuous 'becomings' (2014b, p. 43) that reveal and grow through the porousness of anything solid-looking.

In a resonant sentiment Patty Sotirin describes Deleuze's 'positive ontology' as a concern with 'unfettering possibility to experiment with what a life can do and where a life might go' beyond 'the avenues, relations, values and meanings that seem to be laid out for us by our biological make-up, our evolutionary heritages, our historical/political/familial allegiances, and the social and cultural structures of civilized living' (2005, p. 99). This invites attention to 'becomings that can only be felt or sensed or conjured, that require us to take risks and experiment in ways that affirm the vitality, the energies and the creative animations of existence.' (2005, p. 99)

Since my PhD, I have been reflecting on ways of knowing as processes of becoming. I have been intrigued by the shape of the knowing subject that emerges through the mundane, repeated enactment of knowledge practices and equally, where alternative pathways may open towards less compartmentalised, more plural modes of worlding. On an afternoon that felt unproductive—when, lacking focus and other distractions, I found myself meditating on the formation of clouds—I jotted down in my notebook 'How do we know what we know and who do we become in the process?' This was my day's work then, which incidentally, turned into a personal research question that has stayed with me ever since (see Strausz, 2018a, 2018b, 2022). The real-life conjunctions between the 'how' and the 'who' became more apparent as I started to think about the lived, living experiences of academic life and the knowledges that arise from the normalised sensibilities of disciplinary expectations. In trying to produce 'good scholarship' as per what I internalised as the conventions of International Relations, little by little, I lost sight of the 'who'—myself as a person—in the process. I noticed a shared interface between these worlds drifting apart, however: it was writing, as both a trained professional skill and an everyday mode of expression.

I began experimenting with the transgressive properties of writing at the edges of accepted knowledge forms, exploring the cracks and liminal spaces in writing down 'I don't know' and the textures of feeling I

associated with the academic subject matter at hand. The inspiration to write myself back into academic prose with the intention to transform academic subjectivity came from Michel Foucault's scholarly ethos. Scattered remarks in interviews and less spotlighted essays exposed Foucault's investment in limit-experiences, constantly seeking out opportunities to experience the already familiar otherwise. I traced his subtle observations about his practice of transforming himself through writing in whatever he set out to study, subverting the common position of producing knowledge as something external to the researcher's self. 'I am an experimenter', he wrote, 'I write in order to change myself and in order not to think the same thing as before' (1994a, p. 240). I have been fascinated by the parallel processes of 'diagnosis' and 'poiesis', social critique and self-fashioning that not only unmask the structures of government in their operations but also incrementally craft a form of subjectivity in continuous detachment from them (see McGushin, 2007, p. xviii). The performative dimension of Foucault's 'critical attitude' spoke to me: 'the art of not being governed like this' (Foucault, 1997, p. 29), along with the etho-poetic moments of transforming ourselves beyond the grip of entrenched power structures, opening possibilities for new ways of being and acting (see McGushin, 2007, p. xvii). As understanding loosens the grip of power relations, it creates space for new formations of the self and the pluralisation of ethical and political horizons.

I have translated 'attitude' for myself as an open-ended relationship to self, others, and the social with a radical orientation to freedom. It took me a long time to figure out what my own ethos of self-transformation would look like under the circumstances I was navigating. 'What kind of writing would make me feel freer, and more hopeful, in this moment?' Initially, I engaged in free writing to gain greater clarity on my own thoughts. Then each stretch—even if it lasted only for a few minutes at a time—became a way of attuning to a wider range of narrative and linguistic possibilities from another place and mindset. Over time, the spurts of free, unedited writing that centred personal experience generated an embodied modality of 'thinking through writing' grounded in feeling through writing. The explorative journey of the 'I' revealed and affirmed another way of sensing and making sense, knowing and making knowledge. Importantly, it juxtaposed an imperfect and vulnerable living voice to what Naeem Inayatullah describes as the 'fictive distancing' of social science prose where 'the scientist only pretends to be absent' within the writing (2011, p. 5).

Undoing the ‘myth of objectivity’ and reaffirming the presence of the ‘I’ became both an inquiry into the social construction of subjectivity and a practice of cultivating self-presence beyond the performances of the ‘academic self’ (see Stephen J. Ball, 2015). As my awareness expanded, the ‘I’, inextricably immersed in relations within and outside the university, kept on changing. During the PhD, as I sought to craft a sense of habitability for myself as a Second World subject and make space for personal experience as a source of knowledge and creativity within the discipline, writing about sovereignty gradually evolved into a practice of ‘writing sovereignly’ (Strausz, 2013, 2018a, 2018b).

Lauren Fournier describes the feminist practice of ‘autotheory’ at the interstices of autobiography and social critique as

an artist’s or writer’s way of working that exceed existing genre categories and disciplinary bounds, that flourish in the liminal spaces between categories, that reveal the entanglements of research and creation, and that fuse seemingly disparate modes to fresh effects. (2021, p. 2)

Autotheory as a modality of ‘life-writing’ is both integrative and provocative. While it brings together ‘the personal and the conceptual, the theoretical and the autobiographical, the creative and the critical’ (Fournier, 2021, p. 2), it also negotiates those social structures that perpetuate these separations. Inhabiting liminal spaces through writing may turn into a special kind of leverage in this way. The weight the soul acquires by risking recognisability in disciplinary discourse and seeking life-affirming resources within the cracks of normalisation might allow our being to bend a little less to violent gazes and constraining expectations. Fournier further describes autotheory as ‘an impulse, practice and generative force that reconfigures fields, genres, and canons, proposing new relations between selves and theories’ (2021, p. 272). I noticed that what emerged as my evolving practice of life-writing that not only studies but reconfigures the ‘auto’ towards freer states, in fact, already *enacts* new relations.

Working full-time as precarious labour in the neoliberal university made the deep relationality of everything—and my entanglements within it—even more apparent. The everyday realities and negotiations of what and how to write, what writing does and for whom, what it can and should (not) do, and equally, being able to write at all under manifold pressures, let alone in a sustained and sustainable fashion, revealed the need to look

even closer and deeper into the invisible tapestries of disciplinary life and the modern university. Skirting around the edges of burnout multiple times, the search for the interstitial spaces where cross-boundary travel might flourish took a new direction. I started to shift my attention to *how* I was doing what I was doing in turning the dissertation into a book. What are the qualities and properties of the moments, hours, and places from which I write? Care and self-care became central concern in making and unmaking texts, and especially, *relations*.

My first research monograph, *Writing the Self*, turned out to be a compassionate rewriting of the PhD dissertation. Actualising and reanimating Foucault's original notion I have written both the book and the thesis as an 'experience book' (see Foucault, 1994a, 1994b, p. 243; O'Leary, 2009) with the intention to create transformational experiences for both reader and writer, in and beyond disciplinary knowledge practices. Yet, transitioning from dissertation to book—and from postgraduate student to full-time academic—required renewing the ethos of experimentation in response to the new circumstances. I wasn't sure what shape my new modality of 'life-writing' would take, but there was a persistent urge to keep on writing and let it take its own path in a different context. The process began with 'doing'—following the trails of what felt meaningful and nourishing—before turning to reflection and developing a more conceptual sense of the practice. Rather than making functional edits to mould the text into the 'book' genre, moving mechanically paragraph by paragraph, I attuned myself to the sentiment each section carried, amplifying what felt affirmative and enriching in its intellectual and affective textures at the moment of re-entering it. I adjusted emphases, often seeking softer, rounder, more ambiguous, and multifaceted words around philosophical concepts—words that could hold emotions and mind-states without foreclosing them. So that language could continue deepening experience.

During these years of near-constant exhaustion, writing became an everyday practice to break through numbness and reconnect with my capacity to feel. Practising writing in a mode of allowing expanded compassion towards myself and everyone I encountered. Teasing out and amplifying what felt life-enhancing formed the etho-poetic moments of transformation. On a micro-scale, it unlocked multiple worlds within what was already present, revealing poetic possibilities in who 'I' and 'we' might become, within and despite the social and institutional structures we navigate. Following Foucault, I saw the 'we' not as something

pre-existing but as a possible relation that emerges with ‘the question’ itself and ‘the work’ (to be) done (1994b, pp. 114–115). In my search for embodied practices of inhabiting academia otherwise—ways that foster well-being, creativity, and solidarity—this modality of compassionate (re)writing became both a method of inquiry and a transformational practice, inviting others, too, to connect and find connections beyond the confines of social and institutional habits and identities. At that point in my life and professional trajectory, this was how I travelled the path of the subversive intellectual, as Fred Moten and Stefano Harney describe it—‘to be in but not of’ the modern university (2013, p. 24).

### inventing method(s)

What I came to understand as the process of ‘writing the “self” from a liminal place, at the threshold of no longer and not just yet’ (2018, p. 25) illuminated how the contours of writing and being may never have been truly separate. Whether we write about the lives of others through research—maintaining a fictive distance that reinforces the coloniality of knowledge production or, following Shelley Sacks, embracing ‘connective distance’, where we recognise the being and integrity of all life forms (2013, p. 8)—or whether we ‘fabricate’ the neoliberal academic self through ever-expanding CVs, personal statements, or annual reviews (see Ball, 2015, p. 259), we engage the same act of writing, though each with distinct vectors of becoming.

Relating to writing as *writing relations*—to myself, others, and worlds—and investing in the processual properties of the practice with awareness and a clearer sense of purpose has unfolded gradually and it is still evolving. Rather than attempting to define ‘relationality’, Amaya Querejazu urges us to focus on ‘relations relating’, that is, ‘the constant and ongoing interaction of co-constitutive and transformative processes that create realities’ (2022, p. 877). Shifting from writing as a mere instrument of knowledge production to inhabiting it as a medium for observing, experiencing, and creatively shaping gestures of world-making called for an approach that is responsive to the ephemeral inner currents of moment-to-moment perception—the intricate ecosystems of what I earlier described as the micro-of-the-micro. Honing this responsiveness is an ongoing practice, one I consider as integral to my daily work as the parallel task of finding language for lived experience—language that sustains and nurtures, rather than flattens, its complexity and messiness.

While a pattern seems to surface in negotiating the imbrications of writing and life, the practices that ultimately give rise to a text—and with it, to transformed senses of selfhood, knowledge, and possibilities of worlding and co-creating worlds with others—must be reinvented each time. Method(s) arose from needs and circumstances. Finding things out, rendering them in discourse experientially and with a transformational orientation—whether crafting habitability in the discipline or embracing (self-)care in the neoliberal university—led to new modalities of writing and writing relations. Experiments in first-person writing, compassionate (re)writing and the current, yet-to-be-named writing practice that propels this book forward grew out of what I came to recognise and describe as various acts of writing for writing. Journaling, free writing (timed or unbounded), jotting down thoughts on the tram, or responding to structured prompts were initially meant to support what I conceived of as the distinct category of ‘academic work’. Yet these seemingly low-stakes practices that mostly occurred spontaneously, following other spontaneous moments of sense-making—from epiphanies on the train or while folding clothes to flashes of insight in a grocery aisle, even dreams guiding me back to passages in books—began to seep into the organised rhythms of labour. Eventually, I started carving out intentional time for exploratory writing in spaces once reserved for ‘serious’ writing. I made it a habit to show up for writing and see what transpires in the spaces stretching between pen and paper, or my fingertips and the keyboard. It worked nearly every time: I started to make marks on the page and more followed, even when nothing seemed to have prompted it. Presence engendered process—by making space for something to emerge, movement began, and by gradually leaning further into the process, the presence deepened. Over time, the hierarchical superimposition of these modes collapsed, and writing for writing became simply writing again, now embracing these small etho-poetic shimmers of thinking, feeling, and being otherwise, at however small scale.

As these moments accumulated, the discipline and university structures revealed more room for breathing and movement, even joy. These micro-experiments also brought new layers of insight to the surface. In these crossings, at the frictional meeting points of institutional progression and personal growth, I became more attuned not only to the space-holding and world-making resources available but also to the distinctive qualities of the writing practice emerging under these conditions, shaped by the unseen currents that ‘life-writing’ attends to. As I have been working

on this book about pedagogical practice, the intersections of theory and life, my entanglements in learning and accompanying others in part of their own journeys I noticed that an embryonic sense of ‘method’ began to take form. This time, I wanted to explore understanding itself—the pathways that not only help us accumulate information but also lead to insights capable of reshaping our perceptions and, in turn, our relationships with whatever we study. I sought to redirect attention from solidified conceptions of knowledge and modes of narration that create or reinforce disconnection from their points of reference in the living world, towards ways of knowing that allow us to see across an expanded spectrum, and to tap into life-enhancing registers of experience and the experiential wisdom of encounters. I was searching for more holistic, embodied, and integrative knowledge practices that reflect and care for—rather than try to control—the irreducible multiplicities of being and becoming.

Noticing what is emerging and putting words to these micro-methods of sensing and sense-making started to render them more visible. Three key gestures—modes of attending—started to stand out as my go-to practices whenever I felt stuck, lost, overwhelmed, or in need of fresh insight.

These ways of relating to writing, the work material and myself, in the present moment, included:

*slowing down and staying with what there is*

Pondering how to enable connection over internalised aesthetic divisions that delimit what can be seen and felt, and move towards knowing, writing, and speaking from within the deep relationality of more-than-human existence, I found myself drawn towards a commitment: to stay with and tune into what is accessible to me in any given moment. I made it my practice to work from and with what is present, moving through the affective landscapes of everyday life, both within and beyond the university, writing out whatever arises, without knowing where it might take me. To notice and feel more in the interstices of language. To look closer and see deeper in the classroom and beyond.

Finding a location of inquiry and transformation called for rethinking my relationship to time, too. Zooming in on mundane micro-events and my surroundings felt at odds with the normalised sensibilities of the profession. Crossings across institutional and social planes, and investment in liminal modes of worlding take time and time away

from embodying the familiar grids of academic productivity. They call for what Jasmine B. Ulmer writes about as ‘alternative rhythms of inquiry’ that ‘run counter to the systematic beats of the academic metronome’ and the mode of ‘hurried, mechanical, assembly-line writing’ (2017, pp. 202–201). Ulmer suggests that a practice of ‘differently productive’ writing may engender ‘Slow Ontology’, guiding us not towards ‘how we can find a slower way of *doing* scholarship, but how we can find a slower way of scholarly *being*’ (2017, p. 202).

Slowing down and embracing slowness as a way of sensing and making sense takes the pressure off the outcome. Re-entering experience and the zone of writing without anticipation lowers its stakes. Time opens up: the hours and minutes available, in however limited quantity, expand. I have made it into a habit to look around wherever I am—even in a small room or surrounded by empty walls—and take a few breaths consciously to craft a more embodied relationship to the present moment. Once I timed these small interventions. Some took 30 seconds only. Remembering to do them was more of a challenge than doing them.

I used to think that I needed big chunks of undisturbed time to write or create anything meaningful. Yet knowing that my ‘raw material’ of study is right here, and my job is to find a register of attending where both the ‘other’ and ‘I’ may expand in how we appear to perception helped me appreciate what might become possible within limited frames and with a focused mind. However elusive it felt sometimes, the inner work of exploring the multi-dimensionality of what there is—in both an inward and outward sense—and holding ambiguity without trying to resolve it is manifested in more light bulbs and fewer circular thought patterns than before.

Sometimes this means revisiting material that I have edited out earlier. Recognising moments when I am forcing something—an argument, a conclusion, a course of action. On other occasions I sit with the frustration of not having a ‘clear structure’ without trying to escape it. Going off on a tangent of distraction and coming back

to the same place would likely take me longer anyway.

I still catch myself drifting away in monologues and abstract ruminations. That's when I pause, re-centre attention on the here and now, and see what movement is possible from a more grounded place. It's also OK if there is none: I acknowledge that. With that, something already moves.

*attuning to life-affirming orientations*

Robbie Shilliam describes 'knowledge cultivation' with reference to its etymological roots as 'to till, to turn matter around and fold back on itself so as to encourage growth' (2013). The practice 'infers habitation, which means that knowledge is creatively released as the intellectual enfolds her/himself in the communal matter of her/his inquiry' (2013). While 'knowledge production' carries forward the logic of the imperial production line and accumulation—of receiving, consuming, extending produced ideas—cultivation calls for attending to one's own 'living knowledge traditions' as relational, autonomous ways of knowing and being otherwise. I ponder the distinctive energy of cultivation as a practice of care that arises from and returns to relations which has never ceased flourishing at the limits, thresholds, and edges of modern science and government. I read it as ways to tend to the process of growth daily, as everyday tending and attending to.

The life-affirming orientation of cultivation takes me to, takes me through processes of healing: restoration in moving forward. bell hooks describes her desire to turn to conceptual thinking as a location of healing. She writes that 'I came to theory because I was hurting', seeking to comprehend the wound and 'make the hurt go away' through understanding it (1991, p. 59). She also notes that a relationship to theory that fosters healing is not a given—it is intentional action directed towards this end (see 1991, p. 61). Thinking alongside her, I have been sitting and walking with this call:

what does it mean to *ask* theory to heal?

Embracing ‘healing’ as an ongoing endeavour and ethical approach to knowledge took various forms. I have been moving back and forth between my intellectual grasp of concepts and their embodied, felt experience in my own life. Recognising what has become inhibiting, allowing space to see it without feeding it. Observing the ‘mentality’ aspect of ‘governmentality’ as I slip back into the numbness of ‘cognitive mastery’ (see Cohn, 1987, p. 704), leaning into the trained impulse to produce academically good but lifeless analysis. Nodding to the internal critics in my head: hearing their voice without abandoning the path I am charting. Recognising, too, what enables new possibilities, allowing space for it to grow. Observing what bell hooks writes about as the circuits of ‘eros’ (1991, pp. 198–199), the ‘moving force’ that works through the body and our being, pulling us towards ‘self-actualization’ in our learning processes, transgressing the remit of ‘skills’ and the set of ‘learning outcomes’, always in excess of the formal architecture of education (see Strausz, 2018a, 2018b). Critical pedagogy for hooks makes space for eros as it ‘dares to subvert the mind/body split and allow us to be whole in the classroom, and as a consequence, wholehearted’ (1991, p. 193). As another way of knowing, I also trace feelings of wholeness in the heart, in the body, wherever they may arise and diffuse in the complex affective economies of working things out.

In seeking out integrative, life-enhancing ways of thinking, feeling, relating, and creating I recall Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s figure of the ‘reparative reader’ who looks for sustenance—what may be ‘additive and accretive’ (2002, p. 149)—even in cultures, contexts, and milieus that may otherwise not be supportive of well-being. How do I inhabit the process of writing with reparative intentions (Strausz, 2022)? How do I become—and continue to evolve as—a *reparative writer*? How do I focus on what may grow while not losing sight of what may be limiting and damaging?

Elina Penttinen suggests practising ‘open-hearted curiosity’ with three modes of inquiry where we look deeply into both negative and positive emotions in the research process, as well as what may seem or feel neutral (2019, pp. 49–50). ‘Bringing mindful awareness to our own emotions, conditioning and beliefs’ proposes another plane of engaging lived experience in addition to the practice of feminist self-reflectivity that

focuses on the researcher's social situatedness. As a modality of meeting and relating to ourselves in a non-judgemental attitude: with kindness, curiosity and compassion (see 2019, p. 50), open-hearted curiosity helps us leave behind IR's 'ontology of suffering' and with that, connect to the 'aliveness and flow of the world of which we are part' (2013, p. 13).

Noticing whatever there is, on an expanded scale, and without excluding and judging, makes space for choosing what and how to feed with our psychic energy, be those personal feelings, or how we relate to social and institutional structures. Healing moments in observing the affective landscapes of writing, worlding and worlding through writing were found not only in recognising emotive states but also in reflecting on the relations they enact and sustain. Tracing the entanglements of what Lauren Berlant calls 'cruel optimism'—modes of attachment 'when something that you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing' (2011, p. 1)—in fantasies and imaginations surrounding academic 'good life' and the willingness to keep on investing into them. Tracing the related fears of saying 'no'. I am learning to recognise and detach from what shrinks possibility, even if it appears as opportunity. I should say: *especially* when it does so. 'How does this thought, word or idea feel to the bodymind, to my being as a whole? If I imagine holding it close, how do I respond—from the undisciplined, non-intellectualised terrains of the heart and the gut?' Simultaneously, I have been practising giving myself permission to turn towards where joy, ease, and passion resides. Following the trails of inspiration. Affirming that struggle and exhaustion does not equal 'good work'. Gently steering life energy towards what grows, expands, makes freer or lighter, even if by an iota at a time. Even if seemingly, none of it makes sense or promise anything in that moment.

### *embracing the unknown*

Penttinen proposes *Joy and International Relations: A New Methodology* as a *koan*, a Buddhist practice of using a riddle or puzzle for contemplation and to invite insights about the world and self from regions beyond the intellect. She describes it as a 'nonsensical or paradoxical question that can lead to a new insight' (2012, p. 122n6). A famous koan would ask us to

ponder: what is the sound of one hand clapping? Following Penttinen, we might ask: rather than trying to locate life-affirming niches in the field to counterbalance the aesthetics of fear and anxiety, what would International Relations look like from a place of joy, and through lenses attuned to the entire range of affective states? What would research and teaching, writing, thinking, making sense be like and feel like if we related to self, others and worlds from a state of open-hearted curiosity?

Asking questions and leaving them open-ended have been a key aspect of seeking out and staying with the ‘unknown’ without trying to overcome not-knowing. I seek to expand my capacity to hold myself open to the yet unknown, beyond internalised frames and language, as an everyday practice of becoming otherwise.

Shelley Sacks uses the method of ‘working with questions’ in her social sculpture practice for shaping the ‘invisible materials’ that underlie whatever may take material form, including ‘attitudes, values, questions or pathways of thinking’ (Sacks, 2017, p. 10). Sacks and Zumdick write that ‘a question is a gift and a danger’. It ‘initiates movement among the fixed forms’ (2013, p. 14) as a force that breaks through ‘all the information and ways of seeing we are socialised into’ (2013, p. 14). Working with questions is an improvisational practice interested in ‘shining light into unknown terrain’ (7000 HUMANS), rather than finding solutions to problems in any linear or instrumental manner. A question opens up multiple ‘trajectories’ for working with our imagination (see Sacks, 2023). It pluralises possibility in sense-making. In her Connective Practice Approach, Sacks invites us to ‘enter and inhabit’ questions. Her method encourages a specific ethical relationship that is one of ‘allowing’. In the ‘artistic mode’ of relating we may ‘let [the question] expand in us’ (Sacks, 2021).

Formulating questions came with a parallel, even if much slower, process of making space for insights to arrive. Entering a receptive mode and holding myself open to the unknown took effort, every time. Gently rewiring the ingrained sensibilities of capitalist production and the desire for logistical efficiency,

the spaces held by this book

besides reflecting the liminality of sense-making

also invite us to pause

and rest

rest some more

and see

what we might be able to hear

and hear out

when seemingly nothing is happening,

attuning to

what may emerge—

if

*anything*

—from a more relaxed place:

maybe nothing.

awareness of ‘nothing’ may, in fact, be a profoundly powerful state

to be in

## writing to transform

Taking a closer look at what there is with as little judgement and as much honesty as I can muster in any given moment, feeling into pathways of connection and care while embracing not-knowing are, in fact, modalities of working with attention. They have generated a practice of writing *around* as much as about something, anything. I keep the pen moving. I keep on tapping on the laptop or the phone to explore more about what is present in me as the ‘fold’, the continuous ‘folding’ of the outside within (see Deleuze, 2006, pp. 97–98).

I tend to move in circles. Some intersect; some morph into spirals.

I record how I feel, and anything that comes to me regarding the working process. Things like: ‘I like this story but maybe not in this chapter’. ‘I am still figuring this section out’. ‘It needs more editing’.

Also:

‘I’m tired’.

‘I’m hungry’.

‘I’ve run out of synonyms’.

Whenever I don’t know how to move forward, I write it down.

‘I don’t know what this concept means anymore’.

‘No idea how to square this’.

‘I don’t know where I am going’.

In moments of feeling stuck, expressing not-knowing in writing helps thaw the inertia. Articulation is a kind of action—it shifts the energy. In the space that movement creates, I turn towards the possibility of ‘just one more sentence’, even if it means repeating the one I just wrote. Same sentence, different movement of the body, new experience at the register of the micro-of-the-micro. With these gestures I affirm a horizon beyond the grasp of the intellect. I attune to what Penttinen describes as the ‘aliveness and flow of the world of which we are part’ (2013, p. 13).

In these micro-movements, I acknowledge my inner state, becoming more attuned to the affective landscape I carry—the textures it holds and the space around them. Simply recognising what is already present transforms how I relate to what I see. Ultimately, the psychic energy once spent keeping something out of sight is now freed. Identifiable form—the thoughts, emotions, and images I map out—reveal their plasticity and impermanence. I note that what I am looking at holds the potential to become *otherwise*. This awareness feels like tapping into the vast,

unseen space between atoms. In this mode of writing, language unfolds as a plane of possibility, and words serve as placeholders—marking a moment without seeking to contain it. Space, both on the keyboard and in my mind, expands into spaciousness. The grip of unease and apprehension that often tightens at the thresholds of the (un)known begins to ease. I am no longer bound to what emerges in this process. ‘I don’t know’ and whatever I think I know arise as just two among many ways of (not-) knowing.

By giving thoughts, feelings, experiences—along with questions and concepts—new, momentary articulation and sensibility, writing continuously writes, rewrites, and writes anew whatever I am otherwise thinking through, including the very place of writing. The insights gathered feed back into the process, while the act of writing itself reminds me that, despite appearances, everything is in perpetual flux. I describe these intertwined processes as experiential diagnostics and creative remaking, where, in the light of awareness, acknowledging what there is makes space for transformation into what might yet become. Writing experientially is also experimental writing, where the vectors of new formation gesture towards the unknown. I call these subtle shifts in feeling, thinking, and perception—enacting new relations to self, others, and the world, however small—everyday transformations.

### **folding with awareness**

Observing everyday transformations in both my writing practice and the classroom, I have been reflecting on the mechanisms of working with our attention as we write, and how writing itself serves as a medium for this ongoing labour. Zooming out from a close of affective landscapes, I have been circling back to the political dimensions of the personal—the shape of knowing subjects that may emerge within social and disciplinary frames in this way, and the conjunctions between unlocking experiential ways of knowing and the trajectories of becoming. Moving between experience and conceptual thinking, following hooks, this felt like another opportunity to ask theory to help co-create a space of healing and repair—one that holds these registers of sense-making without constraining them, while expanding and connecting what might emerge at their intersections.

I revisit the philosophical inspirations of the ‘experience book’, now differently.

Gilles Deleuze teases out a ‘triple definition of writing’ from Foucault’s oeuvre: ‘to write is to struggle and resist; to write is to become; to write is to draw a map: “I am a cartographer”’ (2006, p. 38). While tracing historical formations in the architectures of the clinic, the prison, the government of everyday life and in practices of self-making Foucault keeps returning to the ‘blank space’ of both order and perception. It is in advancing ‘beyond familiar territory, far from the certainties to which one is accustomed, towards an as yet-uncharted land and unforeseeable conclusion’ that the historian might be left for analysis a ‘blank, indifferent space, lacking in both interiority and promise’ (2009, pp. 42–43). Encountering the spaciousness around historically constructed forms also appears as an inner space of possibility from where a ‘cautious, stumbling’ text unfolds, one that ‘at every turn, [...] stands back, measures up what is before it, gropes towards its limits, stumbles against what it does not mean, and digs pits to mark out its own path’ (2009, pp. 18–19). The blank spaces traversed in undoing the normalised aesthetics of the social order, along with the blank spaces of not-knowing as generative uncertainty in the writing process, reveal the porous thresholds of common sense and intelligibility. In the simultaneous (un)making of the social and the self, these blank spaces—of order and perception—are revealed as sites of both formation and transformation.

Writing as cartography maps out and dwells in the ungoverned, undisciplined terrains of the mind and the totality of life beyond social ordering. As I came to see the continuity across the blank spaces, and with that, the continuity of inside and outside, the ‘fold’ appeared. Deleuze writes that ‘to think is to fold, to double the outside with a coextensive inside’ (2006, p. 97). He identifies a distinctive feature of Foucault’s thought in the way Foucault ‘understands the doubling of the fold’:

if the inside is constituted by the folding of the outside, between them there is a topological relation: the relation to oneself is homologous to the relation with the outside and the two are in contact, through the intermediary of the strata which are relatively external environments (and are therefore relatively internal). (2006, p. 98)

As we engage with the ‘strata’—what Deleuze describes as the ‘sedimentary beds’ of our times, composed of ‘things and words, seeing and speaking, the visible and the sayable, bands of visibility and fields of readability, contents and expressions’ (2006, p. 41)—the folding of the

outside within us is continuous. Immersed in historically emerging sensibilities that shape our everyday realities, the processes of discerning the layered social making of subjectivity and of becoming otherwise within the same structures unfold in parallel.

Deleuze situates ‘the struggle for subjectivity’ in Foucault’s work as ‘the right to difference, variation, and metamorphosis’, as resistance to governmental pulls towards individualisation, attracting each individual to a recognisable, fixed identity (2006, p. 87). I conjugate this three-fold orientation of writing as acts of remaking subjectivity and claiming greater agency over our own formation by embodying another way of being. Tracing the blank spaces of potentiality within familiar structures loosens their hold over us. In the gradual unbecoming of what had previously escaped our attention in inner writing, we also resist—not through direct opposition, but by forging an alternative pathway of becoming.

The art of ‘self-fashioning’ (McGushin, 2007, p. xviii) that emerges from Foucault’s practice may not manifest in recognisable, spectacular change in an outward sense, yet with each iota of awareness, there is a subtle movement away from the unconscious inhabitation of social norms. We can no longer be ‘governed like that’ (Foucault, 1997, p. 28); something, somewhere, has already shifted. The experimenter drawing maps in and through writing is no longer the same.

Becoming aware of the fold—the ways in which the classroom, the discipline, the university, everyday events, places, relations, social scenes, and encounters with human and more-than-human others live within me, and how my perception of them has been shaped by the countless folds that have conditioned my bodymind and nervous system throughout my life—has been a transformational moment for both my writing and pedagogical practice.

In exploring the formation of academic subjectivity, Stephen J. Ball unpacks ‘the neoliberalism “in here”—in the head, the heart and the soul—rather than “out there” in politics and the economy’, shifting the focus away from traditional sites of analysis. I have long sensed the tensions of folding—the ‘in here’ of everything—even before I had the words to articulate them. Yet, recognising the fundamental co-constitution of inner and outer worlds expanded my capacity to study both more holistically. Centring their inseparability unlocked new terrains and creative possibilities within the same structures, accessed from a different place within.

Folding out, I have observed that sharpening my perception towards the blank spaces of order also ‘doubles’ within. Awareness not only recalibrates ‘knowledge’ but also reshapes experience, directing psychic energy in a new orientation. As I begin to perceive social structures in a different light—folding in—more mental space opens up to think and feel otherwise. At first, this might manifest as more frustration as the intricate layers of control and epistemic violence unravel. Yet, with a fuller, more nuanced understanding of how things are in what there is, a heightened sensitivity emerges—an attunement to the co-present ‘hybridities’ (Ling, 2014b, pp. 13–14) and the uncontainable currents, sometimes mere creeks, of life energy that carry ‘becomings that can only be felt or sensed or conjured’ (Sotirin, 2005, p. 99). These forces, modes of being, ways of knowing and acting are real and impactful, even if at a barely perceptible scale. Even if they must occur over and over before they reach the threshold of language and articulation.

Folding in, I notice a similar process taking place in reverse: cultivating a sense of spaciousness in how I perceive whatever presents itself to my sensorium allows for a more self-aware, less attached relationship to both the social and the socially crafted self. Whenever I catch myself entangled in abstract, disembodied thought an opportunity arises to connect with my body in the here and now. Returning to an embodied place ‘knowledge’ folds into delicate, experiential sensibilities. Through them I come to see more of the plural possibilities of inhabiting the social, too, within and beyond familiar frames. Folding out, as these inner capacities unlock, a more nuanced map begins to take shape, guiding me through the institutional, disciplinary, and everyday terrains of worlding and world-making. With that, the narrow corridors of socially induced anxieties make room for expanding landscapes of ease, creativity, and connection.

Tensions metamorphose into intensities to be unpacked.

Within these micro-movements of everyday transformations, what Ball describes as the ‘slow burn’ of the managerial altering of social connections into less democratic, less caring forms (see 2016, pp. 1046–1047) might, in turn, just become alchemy.

### travelling alongside the folds

In her Connective Practice Approach, Sacks employs the lemniscate as a ‘guiding image’ to engage with the embodied dynamics of perception as continuous movements ‘in’ and ‘out’ (Sacks, 2023, see Strausz, 2024, p. 417). Reflecting on her artistic practice, she notes, ‘each time I go out—beyond who I am now—crossing the middle point of the lemniscate, or come back in—with the fruits of new awareness—an expansion takes place, no matter how small’ (Sacks, 2023). She underscores that ‘unlike abstractions that stand for something, guiding images embody the realities of which they speak’ (Sacks, 2023). The infinity symbol not only draws attention to but also makes experientially accessible what she describes as the ‘continuum between inner and outer work, thought and action’, as well as the transformation of the ‘invisible materials’ within her social sculpture processes (Sacks, 2023). Language that evokes an image taps into what Foucault described as the inexhaustibility of the visible over the sayable, revealing a multiplicity of affective and poetic possibilities that exceed intellectual comprehension (see Strausz & Heath-Kelley, 2019, p. 171). Saying is not merely naming; it is an act of seeing beyond words, turning toward what is invoked within us.

I read the fold as a ‘guiding image’ that gestures towards embodied movements of folding, carrying within it the inherent potential for (self-)reflection and transformation within our inextricable immersion in the social.

Tom Conley notes that Deleuze refines the definition of the fold in a treble sense: ‘in a thetic movement folding resists itself; in an antithetical counterpart unfolding means becoming; and, finally, refolding—far from being a synthetic term assuring resolution—signifies the tracing of new maps and diagrams.’ (2005, p. 175)

Moving in and out, the rhythms and trajectories of folding have revealed themselves as manifold and simultaneous. Resisting, becoming, opening onto the unknown emerge in their entanglements—interwoven with one another and with what has yet to be named. Experientially, in the moment, without clear conceptual distinction.

I have been attuning to the places where movement feels possible, especially from within looping thoughts that kept me at a standstill. Allowing it to be there, as a first move, signals a shift. So does an occasional sigh. As muscles relax thinking and feelings expands. There is folding and unfolding, refolding and folding over, in small and large motions, fast and slow.

Following these micro-openings, I have observed two distinct pathways of attention.

The first is an expanding awareness of the fold of the outside within: the imprint of the social, both as sedimented layers of familiar sensibilities and as the ever-present forces shaping experience in real time. I imagine this as a circular path, one that situates my socially constructed self—deeply yet always imperfectly—within the grids of intelligibility and the density of social relations in their dynamic (un)making.

Within these relations, I have also traced a parallel plane: an awareness of myself folding, unfolding, and refolding the social. Encountering my own sensing and sense-making processes—both in their trained functions and in their unique properties that resist capture—has opened new dimensions of selfhood, otherness, and relational being. I envision this second pathway of attention as a circuit that continually returns to itself, in an open and undefined relationship. Within the awareness of folding, there is also an awareness of awareness itself. I see it as the dwelling place of the inexhaustible life force, eros, vitality, creativity, formless potentiality—that of the sparks that propel continuous becoming.

I have come to understand my practice as travelling alongside the folds, in and through writing—as both critical inquiry and (self-)transformation. Looking outward, into the outside within, and toward the within that always remains beyond the social. What I identified earlier as emerging

methods of sense-making have been evolving modes of travel: the slow, deliberate cultivation of an open, curious, and non-judgmental orientation to what there is and the yet unknown, seeking out reparative, life-affirming horizons. Writing this book and writing my life, harvesting insights through the pedagogies of the folds, has been a continuous process.

Consciously and unconsciously, the writing processes I stage in the classroom and beyond arise from my own, undisciplined and undisciplinatory learning, moving endlessly in spirals, across circles, connecting the dots in broken and unbroken circuits.

The expanding vocabulary of folding and writing—  
     writing as discovery  
     writing experientially  
     writing experimentally  
     writing relations  
     writing to transform  
     writing for writing  
     writing around—

emerge as ongoing attempts at conceptualisation that reflect the different times and places of the (re)making of both text and experience, sometimes years apart. Held within the medium of writing, these notions seek to describe, document, and continue to articulate what first surfaced as intuitive ways of knowing, without fixing them in place, encouraging

to look closer and deeper  
     as the beams of attention,  
     move in and out,  
         connecting life and theory  
     as living-theorising  
         folding on

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folding out



## affective landscapes of IR

Why study International Relations and how do we begin the current phase of our individual and collective journeys in the discipline? In this creative, participatory research process we set out to explore IR as lived experience that also includes our own relationships to the field. After a brief contextualisation of the ethics and politics of collaging, and the ways of knowing and modes of expression that it enables we will collectively compose a collage through a pool of anonymous reflections prompted by guiding questions. Our aim is to capture and make visible a snapshot of ‘international relations’ unfolding as affective landscapes of thoughts, feelings, associations in everyday life, constantly in the making.

For the collaging practice you are welcome to bring with yourself any image or text (such as a quote, an excerpt, and a news item) that you connect with IR and/or is meaningful to you.

(excerpt from event announcement, October 2021)

The event of the collective collaging practice unfolded by chance. The department was looking for an academic program before the first social hour of the term, where students, administrators, and faculty could get together for an informal conversation over drinks. As per the regulations, apart from two official social events per year, anything that involves the consumption of alcohol as part of a university activity should contain an explicit educational component. It was early October; the campus

was bursting with the excitement and anxiety of new beginnings. Across the multiple, often non-intersecting planes of the life worlds of those who enter—or at least temporarily cross—the space of the university, emotions swirled palpably. For some, celebrations of arrival signalled the end of pandemic isolation; for others, they marked the culmination of a long struggle to obtain a visa. Those still caught in immigration limbo appeared one by one on the screen as their peers settled into their seats in the hybrid classroom—chatting, fidgeting behind the silver wall of laptop covers. Some members of the community never received authorisation to join in person, while others, for various personal reasons, rarely switched their cameras on. On the plane stretching between the tight embrace of reunion hugs and the muted presence of grey icons without full names displayed, the new term was undeniably on.

The fifth iteration of my Master of Arts course ‘Knowing, Narrating, (re)Writing International Relations’—affectionately dubbed KNR by students—was slowly moving beyond the introduction phase. I was still adjusting to the hybrid teaching mode, which kept me on my toes, both literally and figuratively, in my attempts to ensure that I was visible enough to students taking the class online. They lined up on the giant tablet behind my back, as if peering over an invisible fence. Instinctively, my body leaned towards those physically present in the room, while part of me desperately sought connection with those who weren’t. Movements quickly lost their spontaneity as I became painfully aware of where and how I turned my head. I was afraid of losing the hard-earned, fragile threads of attention in moments when I was looking ‘away’—into the camera, into eyes I could only assume were there, somewhere faraway, out of reach of the pandemic infrastructure. I felt disoriented in both my old habits of in-person teaching and the new online ones that had quietly taken root over the past academic year.

Just like the year before for online teaching, this was the time in the new term when invitations to workshops and courses on hybrid instruction began filling my inbox. Having attended a few of these sessions before, I knew that simply showing up—even once—would already make a difference. Beyond the practical solutions offered for both real and hypothetical scenarios, there was something inherently valuable in collectively working through what initially seemed like a logistical challenge. The situation, in fact, had profound implications for pedagogical practice and higher education as a whole. At a particularly insightful workshop hosted by the university’s Centre for Teaching and Learning, I jotted

down the following notes, skirting around the complexities I had yet to fully confront:

Where and how does learning happen in the course?  
 Where and how does it *actually* happen?  
 Where does it happen for KNR?

I typed these questions up at the top of a blank page, leaving plenty of space beneath them. Instinctively, I knew they were far larger than they first appeared, cutting to the core of what I believed I was doing in the classroom as a teacher, whether in person, online, or hybrid. By then, I was already wrestling with multiple layers of displacement brought on by the new term. The more I tried to intellectualise what was happening, the more it slipped from my grasp. Familiar stories no longer seemed to fit the moment—my own included.

Narrating my ‘teaching philosophy’ across different genres in the discipline and the modern university—from job applications to journal articles and performance reviews—has been an essential part of my research and pedagogical profile. Over time, I distilled my core approach to introducing students to ‘international relations’ as both a knowledge field and a sphere of everyday practice, reflecting on how the entry points and resources I offer respond to their needs and the real-life issues that animate our discussions. At the heart of this evolving narrative has been an ethical sensitivity that aligns with what I have come to understand as a form of ‘engaged pedagogy’ following bell hooks (1994), foregrounding the questions of what kind of impact we might have on the world(s) we study through our knowledge practices and how we ourselves are shaped by them as knowing subjects. On one level, I have been asking how International Relations as an academic field and the epistemic lenses it provides relates to international relations as lived experience. What is the relationship between disciplinary knowledge forms and the unique life worlds they touch and engender? What life forms arise from working with and thinking through a particular body of texts, labelled as ‘IR’? On another, I have been pondering what is it that ‘we’—students and educators—already bring into the space of learning through our embodied histories, life journeys and perspectives moulded by the very forces that we seek to explore. I have been sitting with the opaque, layered entanglements of social and cultural conditioning, as well as the (im)possibilities of mediating and translating across different language archives and ways

of making sense of the world. How can we work with the unconscious imprints of how we see, feel, and perceive? How do we read, write, and walk with the traces of wounds and memories and seek out the generative power of desires, aspirations, dreams, and visions—the experiential wisdom we carry within us? Returning to the questions that surfaced during the hybrid teaching session, where and how does learning, and even more so, *understanding*, actually happen?

I began to notice that the narratives I have been constructing mostly centred on what I believed would *block* learning, and how solutions could be found to overcome these obstacles. At that time, I saw my pedagogical practice responding to two fundamental forms of separation—disconnection and a perceived lack of alternatives—both of which, through various iterations, I eventually formulated in the following way:

The literature on IR pedagogy documents two main sources of classroom failure. First, there is a lack of personal connection to the subject matter where a range of abstract concepts, data points, and distant considerations mark out the proper place of “International Relations” within the realm of “high politics.” IR taught and represented as the terrain of rational statesmen, soldiers, and diplomats (Drainville, 2003) seems far from the contingencies of everyday life and the actual circumstances of students who, despite what their training might suggest, experience, embody, and enact International Relations from one moment to the next. Second, the lack of alternatives in facilitating social change leaves students feel disempowered: while critical analysis throws light on what may be wrong with social and political structures, it often stops at projecting an even worse scenario without any indication of where more promising horizons and vistas of action may be found (Inayatullah, 2013, 150–1). (Strausz, 2021, pp. 72–73)

Responding to feelings of disconnection and disempowerment, I framed my ambitions around opening space for engaging ‘international relations’ in the present moment, as continuously unfolding lived, living experience. I had previously articulated this in ways that aligned more comfortably with conventional ‘learning and teaching’ language, but at its core, my aim was to liberate ‘learning’ from rigid notions of both ‘the discipline’ and ‘the classroom’. What captivated me was curiosity—the spark, the call, the stirring that sets attention into motion and where that energy could take us when unburdened by internalised notions of what ‘knowledge’

should look like and where it ought to be found. ‘Where has it taken me, though, in this very moment?’

As I’m sitting with my newly emerged questions about learning, I’m flipping through hundreds of pages of journal entries from previous iterations of KNR. The purpose of my journaling was to create a personal archive—something to return to, retracing the contours of how I made sense of classroom events and relations, and uncovering what I might have missed in the moments of their unfolding. I printed the journal out so that I could see and feel what was on the page with my whole body. Holding these fragmented trajectories—negotiations, glimpses of life worlds converging and diverging—I notice the zigzagging, circular, and often interrupted pathways of my reflections on what lingered on and stayed with me after each class. Some sentences trail off mid-thought, as if the appropriate language to express the senses of sensations was somehow still out of reach. Scattered words appear in unexpected places, perhaps as placeholders, or as space-makers for something yet to emerge. I can no longer intellectually reconstruct my exact thoughts every time, but affectively, I can still access the energy of the grappling—the relentless work of translation. That open plane stretching between experience, thought, emotion, and language—which, at times, feel more like a tangle of closed or broken loops—makes an appearance. It transports me back to the threshold of the sayable, standing with one foot in the terrain of the known and the familiar, and the other in the hum of what was on the verge of articulation, of intensities that come before and travel beyond the words.

In that liminal space the questions continue to morph.

‘Where do I think learning happens  
and  
where does it actually happen?’

The more I allowed these questions to expand in me (see Sacks, 2021), the more I realised how solidified my own narratives about my role in the classroom had become. Not that I no longer stood by principles and commitments I laid out in my teaching statements and publications. Working to turn disconnection and disempowerment into more life-affirming horizons remains central to my pedagogical practice. The question of how to foster connection and unlock resourcefulness continues to shape my daily thinking. So does the challenge of infusing familiar ways of study with openness and creativity in engaging worlds that

we also (re)make in the same gesture. I write and speak endlessly about these concerns. More than that, the processes, assignments, and tasks I have designed from these points of departure seem to have offered something meaningful and valuable to most of the students who have taken KNR over the past four years. ‘Solutions’ had, in some way, been found for the ‘problems’ I had identified. Yet thinking about the lines of rupture that the hybrid teaching mode foreshadowed for the new academic year alongside the general, also generative, messiness of my own sense-making made me wonder about the straightforwardness and ‘truth’ of the diagnosis. What was once experiential knowledge, distilled from years of observing classroom dynamics and student trajectories, now seemed to have congealed into an assumption—one that I no longer interrogated, only reframed and refined in the habitual performances of professional identity. What do I truly understand about the students I am just beginning to work with—their life experiences, educational paths, aspirations, struggles, the wisdom they carry within themselves, especially as they enter and navigate the discipline? How attuned am I to their needs—real, imagined, learned, internalised—and the ways they encounter a heterogeneous body of knowledge and field of practice? A body-field that, from one perspective, appears as an established, mappable canon, yet from another, exposes the porousness of such boundaries, always in flux, always in (re)construction.

But more importantly, I had to ask myself:

have I inquired enough?

have I continued to inquire?

### **at the edges of articulation**

When I first envisioned the collective collaging practice, these concerns—entangled with other anxieties—were already swirling in my mind. I wondered how often we might take the time to sit with and sift through these questions about relations, intentions, challenges, and our own moment-to-moment making as knowing subjects. Perhaps the affective micro-practices of moving through worlds and (re)making them in the same gesture tend to elude many of us as we pass through them. ‘There could even be a methodological edge to this!’ I made sure to highlight this aspect in the blurb for the invitation. I also saw this as an

opportunity to rethink what I had come to see as a limitation of the ‘solutions to problems’ mindset—one that, in its drive to resolve issues, often neglects to interrogate its own starting points. Perhaps what I had previously identified were not ‘problems’ at all—neither disruptions demanding intervention, nor challenges that could be responded to in any clear-cut, let alone instrumental manner. Instead, staging an encounter with what was already present within us, in that semi-conscious terrain, felt akin to looking into a reflection pool where overly neat, singular notions could finally break, allowing more complex realities to emerge. Maybe in dissolution there would be ‘solution’ of another kind.

The collaging practice proved useful for institutional considerations, too. About two weeks into the new academic year, the event created an informal yet distinctly ‘academic’ space, one that not only marked but actively facilitated ‘beginnings’ through individual reflection and collective making. It was framed as a bridging practice between academia and everyday life, as if these realms were inherently separate and needed deliberate reconnection, if only for the duration of the task.

That day, one member of the cohort arrived straight from a war zone. Upon landing in Vienna, he hurried to campus to attend his first in-person university event—this very gathering. I vividly remember the warmth in his eyes and the hesitant smile as he came to greet me. I also recall the weight in my chest, the sinking realisation: what kind of welcome and commentary on world politics is being offered here? The kind of beginning this experience might have signified for him—I cannot even begin to imagine.

Besides its role in community-building, the invitation to participate in collaging promised to open up interactions within and around ‘international relations’. It also provided an opportunity to meet and engage one another outside the usual institutional frames of instruction and the normalised, hierarchical aesthetics of teaching and learning in the discipline. I introduced the collaging practice as an art-based research method that could be experienced as both research training through the acts of collaging itself and a site of research. Here, we walk the edges of the yet-unknown, exploring what we carry within ourselves as we come together as a collective of learners. I wanted to find more out about what brings us here—to this space, to International Relations—when the hold of our

institutionally assigned roles as ‘student’ and ‘teacher’ are momentarily loosened.

Collaging has the potential to democratise processes of inquiry and meaning making in other ways, too. The practice that we engaged in only required the physical skills of cutting, pasting, handwriting, and imagination—none of which demand advanced academic training. Research through collaging transforms the normalised aesthetics of knowledge production in the social sciences and IR: it unfolds in a non-linear manner, highlighting the uneven, unpredictable, and inherently communal aspects of finding things out. Serendipity, surprise, and the relational character of knowledge itself become central to the journey. The practice’s epistemological fluidity is expansive—nothing is dismissed or excluded from the outset. As Saara Särmä describes it, it is an ‘ongoing and circular process where the analysis feeds into the collage making and vice versa’ (2020, p. 292). There is no benchmark to aspire to, no predetermined form that the outcome must take. The usual image and feel of methodological competence as a pathway to recognisable knowledge can be set aside. New associations and images of thought may emerge through juxtaposition and recontextualisation with unlimited possibility and iteration. An encounter can be staged with the not-yet conscious.

Collaging aims at ‘disturbing taken-for-granted divisions’ on other counts, too (Särmä, 2020, p. 294). The event drew on the porous boundaries of perception and performance. How does ‘world politics’ appear through an academic lens? How does it live in us as experience? And, importantly, how does *the lens* live in us, shaping the actuality of our sense-making processes? I designed the space to bring rational scholarly inquiry into conversation with play and improvisation—a space where divisions could dissolve between image and text, what is visible to the eyes and what exists in other domains of sensing, what may be thought and what was really felt. As Kangas et al. observe, ‘collaging is about working with gaps, overlaps, holes, absences and silences – or lapses and excesses of meaning’ (2019, p. 360). Working at the edges of articulation has a reparatory function. It affirms the creative potential and intrinsic value of the neglected, suppressed ‘other side’ of such divisions. Through self-reflexivity these ‘other sides’ could be accessed, embraced, and integrated through collective making. Asking, ‘What is my relationship to what I study and how I study it?’ turns our attention to the place from which the scholarly gaze emerges and how it touches its ‘object of study’.

What kind of touch is that  
 and why does it matter?  
 How can we work with such inner experiences that do  
 not already have a place and vocabulary in the discipline?

### **staging an encounter with the felt discipline**

‘Affective Landscapes of IR’, the official title of the collective collaging event, emerged from an earlier working definition. Initially, ‘affective life worlds’ sought to map out possible entry points into how personal and collective experiences take shape as we encounter and navigate the discipline. We come into contact with ‘the field’ not just intellectually but with our whole bodies and everything that the body knows, remembers, and even more. As Sara Ahmed notes, ‘contact involves the subject, as well as histories that come before the subject’ (2004, p. 6). What we bring with ourselves is also the entire archive of our formation and the imprints of forces that have come to shape us. Much of this may not be consciously known, yet somehow, *somewhere*, it is felt. Needs, wounds, transgenerational memory, ways of living, relationships to life, moments of revelation, accidental and hard-fought wisdom all participate in how we make sense of what we sense at any given point. At the same time, the knowledge field attracts, even though its terms and language are not of our making (see Butler, 2005). As we come together as a learning community of some kind—each of us arriving with our shared and unshared, often unshareable but always singular histories—one thing that we all have in common is that we are all here, present. Something has brought us here, into IR, for a time, however long or brief.

I have pondered many times what brings me to IR. I have been writing around the subject, over and again, in the hope of uncovering something beyond the familiar story I habitually tell about such origins. That story traces back to an unexpected moment—finding myself in a critical theory class as a law student, comparing Foucault’s and Agamben’s notions of biopolitics, and realising that my understanding of *the political* had shifted irreversibly because of that. This time I’m sitting on my own in Café Schopenhauer. I have come here intending to write for one hour, then catch up on emails—the usual plan, which, as always, seems destined to rewrite itself.

The coffee arrives. It's a humid summer evening on a weekday. Across the room, one other person sits reading, absorbed in their book. Leonard Cohen's *Old Ideas* is playing. As closing time nears and the doors are already shut, the waiter puts the album on again for me. We joke about which Cohen album is the best, and how there's always one that feels better than the best. A quiet ease settles in. The softness of rounding things up for the day fills the space around us. Knowing I only have a few more minutes left, I begin to write as 'Show Me The Place' plays. This feels like no-stakes writing outside the regimented morning routine of serious writing, done first thing in the morning, in silence, before emails and with a pristine mind. I glance up: a golden disco ball hangs overhead. The reflections of tiny mirrors are floating around on the wall. As flecks of light scatter, I close my eyes and tune inwards, with no expectation of what may surface on the page.

To my knowledge, two of my four grandparents evaded bullets meant to take their lives. They were in their teens and early twenties. Same war, different locations. My grandmother threw herself into the snow. My grandfather dove deeper into the Drava River, holding his breath a little longer. Had things turned out otherwise—had the constellation of bodies and objects shifted in that moment just by a few inches—neither my parents, nor I would have been born. My other grandfather had been a prisoner of war. His experience had been narrated in the family archive through my grandmother's recollections of his absence. What he endured in the camp, I never found out. I remember my other grandmother through her noble eyes, gentle touch, the silent power of a will of steel. What forged that strength: I never had the courage to ask.

As their progeny, I carry their DNA and whatever the cells remember, even if most of it remains beyond my awareness. Is this what brings me to IR? Could there be a direct connection? My academically trained, rational brain says no, but how do I honour what has reached me through a different channel? How do I even begin to explore it?

In the first week of their first semester, I used to ask my BA students about their aspirations in our IR theory class. Almost everyone wanted to become a UN diplomat, bring peace, and make a difference. I would smile as nearly identical answers

rolled out in slightly different words. And yet, I am now reminded that when I started university, I, too, wanted to be an international lawyer for the very same reasons. Looking back, I realise I couldn't articulate more beyond what my students said. This was what felt like the right path to pursue, driven by the unshakeable force of a conviction.

Peace. Difference. A better life.

Twenty-something years later the gaps—in histories, feeling capacities, between intentions and outcomes—have not stopped gaping. 'Show Me the Place' plays on repeat (Cohen, 2012). I wish I knew where and how, the suffering, the quiet numbness, began.

'Affective life worlds' invited an exploration of the imbrications between 'international relations' and 'International Relations' along the axes of personal experience, the nation-state system, and the academic discipline. It sought to trace the 'folding of the outside within' (Deleuze, 2006, p. 98)—or rather, the multiple and overlapping folds where personal experience intersects with the lines drawn by the nation-state system. These folds interact, folding onto the plane of 'science', then back into the conscious and unconscious crafting of subjectivity and the social, continually shaping and being shaped by encounters with other worlds. Relations emerge from such histories and histories continue to mould us, as 'emotions are shaped by contact with objects and in turn, emotions shape objects' (Ahmed, 2004, p. 7). Angharad Closs Stephens notes that working with affect is a way of directing attention to the relations between us—one that 'encourages us to attend to all that remains beyond our coherent representations and explanations of how power works' (2022, p. 9).

I was drawn to this non-material, psychic, affective, and emotive terrain—the inner negotiations of our relations to self, others, knowledge, and worlds—recognising these as both social and collective processes. Julia Welland describes 'feltness' as the 'overall embodied sense and feeling of emotion, affect, sensation, and mood' (2021, p. 61). I wanted to better understand how such embodied senses come together and their

dynamics in what I came to identify as the *felt discipline*. Challenging the solidity of my former assumptions about classroom experience, I sought to access this register—the undercurrents of learning journeys and other modes of travel through knowledge practices. Yet I knew that any such access to the felt discipline would be fleeting and fragmentary, offering only a snapshot with limited intelligibility. At best, it would capture a momentary *taking-shape* of knowledge—fluid, emergent, relational. It would glimpse the unfolding of ‘acts of knowing’ (Cowden et al., 2013) which otherwise remain invisible in graded papers, published text, polished lectures, and whatever may take on the appearance of finality. There is a porous, water-like texture of the unknown, the not-yet understood, and other liminal states that hover around neatly drawn abstractions and taken-for-granted ideas that knowledge can be acquired, possessed, transferred, or deposited. Yet it was precisely there—in the exposure to both what can be named and articulated as well as the gaps, silences, opacities and resonances that collaging brings to light—that my own possibility of learning about learning could be found.

I came to understand that the power of collective collaging practice lay exactly in its curated spontaneity and the permission it granted to ‘make sense’ beyond habitual frames. Yet the process of curation—the thinking and planning I saw necessary to foster ease and improvisation—brought a flood of old and new questions. These were not meant to be answered straight away. In hindsight, many of them felt distinctly academic, less attuned to what transpired as the lived experience of the experiment. Still, formulating and rewriting questions was part of the work – an exercise in contextual awareness, translating the idea of the collaging event into embodied practice. It required engaging both the material and immaterial architectures of learning: the university building, its affective landscapes, the energies that filled the space. In a way, I was preparing the ground—much like building a nest—padding it with open questions, soft enough to hold whatever might emerge.

My transdisciplinary research question from my PhD years resurfaced, too, with renewed actuality. ‘How do we know what we know and who do we become in the process?’ (Strausz, 2018, p. 1) What possibilities might this question open for learning journeys and pedagogical practice? Learning journeys weave through life and life weaves through us, presenting an abundance of learning opportunities. How might a small fragment of these be accompanied and looked after in an academic setting,

within the discipline of IR,  
 and through an approach that genuinely cares about  
*becoming?*

In staging an encounter with the felt discipline, I needed specific anchor points for mapping out how the discipline shapes us and how, in turn, we shape the world. Where should we begin? What should we attend to?

In looking closer, I have been asking further:

What does it mean to re-enter the worlds we inhabit through the discipline's lenses, concepts and ways of seeing? What are the interfaces – planes, junctures, meeting points – through which we emerge as knowing subjects in, and to some extent, also *of*, IR?

What distinct modes of thinking, feeling and being arise in us in conjunction with what we may perceive and experience as 'International Relations' as an academic discipline?

How do we inhabit the frames of knowledge practices that have been offered to us? How does it all feed back into our senses of self, identity, and modes of relating to self, others, world(s)?

Distilled and reframed:

what happens when lives,  
 in their richness and plurality,  
 meet 'disciplinary life' (Soreanu, 2010, p. 381)  
 through its global allures and allusions,  
 prospects and promises,  
 resources and extractions  
 and within  
 the local articulations of specific institutional cultures?

## building IR-scapes

By the time I set up my slides in the classroom where the event was taking place—meant as both ‘guidance’ and a nod to academic credibility—the title of the collective collaging practice has shifted to ‘Affective Landscapes of IR’. ‘Landscapes’ replaced ‘life worlds’. It was only much later that I came to understand the subtle implications this new framing. About half the cohort and several faculty members attended, including both one-year and two-year MA students, newcomers and continuing alike. I was pleased with the turnout, especially after overhearing someone in the corridor dismiss the session as ‘ah, that nonsense’. Participants were invited to bring something they associated with IR—a text, a quote, an image, an object. It could be anything personally meaningful or even something seemingly mundane—the emphasis was on the imaginative connection with the field. Though designed as a hybrid event, in the end, no one joined online. It became a fully in-person gathering, the first in a long time. A glimpse of the ‘old normal’, obscured by the presence of face masks and the mildly muffled voices emanating from behind them.

I found myself standing behind a desk piled with colourful stationery—rainbow-hued cardboards, Post-it notes, markers, and a scattering of dinosaur and unicorn stickers to highlight the particular kind of ‘nonsense’ the activity promised. I began with a brief framing of what we were going to do. I sketched out the plan of the session in quick and broad brushstrokes. I wanted to leave as much space as possible for the process to unfold on its own terms and be co-created through actual experience, rather than being shaped in advance by an intellectualised blueprint:

‘Our relationship to the discipline is heavily text-based. There is you, me, there is us, there is the text, there is interaction. It is through reading and writing that thoughts are provoked, ideas are exchanged. Yet no text exists in a vacuum. Meaning can only emerge through an experience of life: someone’s life experience. There is a relationship of some kind unfolding as you begin to read more and spend a bigger part of your day in the life worlds that IR offers to you’.

This is where ‘affective landscapes’ entered. The phrase came to me the day before, and it felt right. It didn’t take long to realise that these words had already landed elsewhere, carrying different resonances for others. In their exploration of ‘affective landscapes’ for theoretical and creative work, Christine Berberich, Neil Campbell, and Robert Hudson depart from

relations of landscape and affect. They open up ‘how humans interact with space and place: how they are defined by it, define it, and, in turn, might interrupt, alter, and reshape those definitions’ (2013, p. 316). These relationships are both material and virtual as ‘people attach themselves to and detach themselves from place in complex ways’ (2013, p. 315). If we consider the discipline as a field—mobile, elusive, yet still present in us—then, even if only momentarily and for the sake of the inquiry, it becomes possible to localise it as a place. In the context of the collaging, I emphasised that the making of the social—including our own experiences within the discipline—is always an affective and relational process.

‘If I asked you what going to university means to you, or how you imagine using “IR knowledge” in the future, thoughts and emotions would inevitably stir. We could think of this as a multi-dimensional, inner landscape that moves with us as we go through pretty much every moment of the day. How you think about world politics and your immersion in it will likely shift – a month from now, by the time you graduate, or a decade down the line. Maybe it has already changed from what you first expected when you arrived!’

Not many laughed, but I could feel the attention was still there, so I carried on.

‘If you wanted to study what IR life worlds look *like* and *feel* like – the lived experience of study, the ways of how you and your peers have navigated your journey so far – how would you approach it? What methods would you choose? How would you work with “research material” that is elusive and fragmented, always in the making?’

I suggested we find out together what collaging might reveal in this regard. I introduce it as a research method, racing through terms such as ‘epistemological fluidity’, ‘juxtaposition’, and ‘new orders of imagination’. I had no intention of unpacking any of these concepts in detail. I let them float into the room like kites flown between earth and sky—there for anyone who might need wings or a firmer ground. The PowerPoint slide on ‘collaging as research method’, I reassure myself, already ticks some boxes of academic recognisability. I move on to the rules of play, and take every opportunity to emphasise that even these, too, can be subverted.

The first phase of the process is about mapping the ‘affective landscapes’ present in the room through writing and introspection. Together, we set out to generate a pool of ‘text’ through expressing inner experience in material form. The result would be a fleeting archive of anonymous impressions, a snapshot of how we are navigating the discipline in this moment, which could then merge with and create new connections with the existing multiverse of texts and images. In front of each participant lay three paper strips in different colours: white, yellow, and blue. They were invited to respond to three questions about their ‘IR experience’ by writing or drawing, using the colour-coded strips to help surface patterns and connections later.

‘Reflect in a few words, or find a metaphor, a cultural reference – anything that comes to you, even if it doesn’t seem to make sense. Be as honest as you like. Let’s see what emerges when we step outside the scholarly personas we usually associate with studying and working in the discipline’.

With hindsight, this might have been more of a nod to my colleagues, who had generously joined in and played along.

‘Please write on only one side of the paper’.

I read out the questions and set a timer: one minute for each.

‘Question 1 (white sheet)

How do you relate to IR as an academic field?

Question 2 (yellow sheet)

What is your greatest aspiration within or beyond the field of IR?

Question 3 (blue sheet)

What is the greatest challenge or obstacle that you have encountered so far in studying IR?’

I catch myself wanting to explain the questions, slipping in bits of commentary. ‘It’s meant to be difficult in some ways’, I add to the last one—an attempt at reassurance, though perhaps tinged with an unspoken apology.

After jotting down or sketching their responses, participants could choose to keep their paper snippets, continuing to work with them, or ‘donate’ their insights to the collective ‘experience box’—a shared reservoir of thoughts and impressions, open for anyone to draw on for their collaging. Groups form, a DJ is chosen, and the cardboards I labelled as ‘ground’ begin to spread across the room. Just before the music rises and the last traces of hesitation melt away, I offer one final, perhaps overly pedantic, encouragement: ‘In building your IR-scapes, feel free to move beyond the edges of the sheet. Think three-dimensionally, if you’d like. Enjoy!’

### questions fall apart

The colours of ‘relation’, ‘aspiration’, and ‘challenge’ wove their way onto the cardboards, into the heart and mind of a figure shaped as ‘IR girl’, and into the ground beneath her (Fig. 1).

She stands on the challenge of ‘lack of practicability (sometimes)’ (sic), yet her linguistic creativity is already reshaping the condition—connecting lacks, whether of applicability, practicality, or some other constraint on ability. In her thoughts, she negotiates her relationship to the field: ‘I feel like the apple on the IR-tree (the same but different)’. Beneath her pink heart, she holds a quiet but resolute desire: ‘to improve the world a little bit’. Other paper snippets construct an image of a warm, eclectic salad, where things are both thrown together and undergoing a process of transformation on a heated plate. In an actual landscape picture, the ‘blues’ of challenge blend into the sky. A small, reversible happy-and-sad face emerges, and when turned, the smile, as the group points out, appears optically bigger. One participant spends her time tearing apart a magazine, exploring what might be revealed through random juxtapositions. She discovers something unexpected about women and protest in this way. ‘Women are in protest. Not only when they take to the streets, but in their whole being. It’s a basic condition’.

About forty minutes later, as we emerge from the heat of physical making, we return to our chairs for a round of reflection. Experience has taught me that, often, there is little to be said after such a process. The transition back to the academically conditioned thinking mode from collaging or other art-based experiments can feel almost violent, and more often than not—thankfully—it doesn’t fully take hold. What has emerged as an experience and mind-state, however fleeting, seems to carry



Fig. 1 IR girl

its own quiet resilience. By now I have grown accustomed to the long stretches of silence, the sight of relaxed, round bodies, the contented faces resting on the threshold of the academic 'normal'. Years ago, I would have felt the need to extract verbal reflections 'in conclusion'. 'How was the experience?' 'What did you think of the method?' 'What are you taking away from this?' I expected elaborate and articulate affirmations, insights that revealed a transformation, or at the very least, some unexpected observations about 'world politics' that wouldn't have surfaced

in a conventional classroom. It used to frustrate me that clearly, something was happening—there was engagement and intensity—yet whatever it was, it remained beyond the reach of language.

Over time, as I facilitated more creative practices, my insistence on verbalisation faded. I no longer wanted to squeeze anything out of our being together. I let go of the need to channel everything back into academic discourse. If it happened spontaneously, wonderful. If not, perhaps that was even more telling. The practice still works, and maybe at an even deeper register. I learned to trust what remains unspoken—what may not be sayable but still lingers, shaping thought and feeling in ways that may only surface later. Eventually, the transformation I sought through creative practice began to work on me as well, taking away some of the edges of what I associated with being a ‘teacher’ in an IR classroom. A former student, years later, told me that his approach to IR and the social sciences fundamentally changed when he participated in a cut-up practice in class. ‘I don’t think I said anything at the end. I hardly ever spoke anyway. But the experience stayed with me. It showed me that so much more was possible than I had ever been taught, and while actually having fun’. He added, ‘creative practice is a legitimate mode of study’.

We never truly know what seeds are planted or what might take root. My early fixation on spoken conclusions has since evolved into something else: the desire for a closing gesture, a ritual of sorts. Something that acknowledges the energy created, allows it to settle, and weaves it into the fabric of the ‘normal’—a process within the process, holding, marking, and preserving what has unfolded, both in individual lives and in the collective atmosphere of the felt discipline. This is, and will always be, a work in progress.

I sat with the cardboard pieces in my office. Larger and smaller sheets covered the entire work surface—the same table where, months later, the ‘new angel’ would emerge, bringing some much-needed light. ‘What am I learning from what is right in front of me?’ I would later discover that the first prompt about ‘relation’ hadn’t even made sense to some. Yet most students, intuiting my intention beyond its convoluted academic framing, responded to what was meant to be a simple, unassuming question: ‘How is it for you, right now, doing what you are doing?’

From the multi-dimensional shapes of the built IR-scapes, I worked my way backward, tracing the building blocks formed from affective landscapes—the raw material of sense-making present upon entering the process.

I began by following the yellow code of aspirations. Scanning the cardboards, I read: ‘to make a difference’, ‘a relentless pursuit to change the world’, ‘see and understand and be part of’ the change, ‘implement reforms’, ‘to build a fair future’. Desires surfaced—to ‘go North’, to become a scholar in security studies, a Minister of Foreign Affairs, to land a job that bridges theory and practice. Personal motivations intertwined with appeals to ‘power’ and ‘collective action’. But the phrase where my attention lingered the longest was this: ‘to get out as much of it as I can and still remain as happy as I can be’.

The white trail—expressing relationships to IR as an academic field—revealed a diverse spectrum of modes of relating. IR was described as ‘the big game’, ‘part of global society’, but also as a ‘salad’, a mixture of other disciplines. One metaphor stood out: an ‘iced lake’, where a thin layer of ice represents practice, and beneath it, ‘the big water’ of theory. Among these, there were also moments of ease—‘swimming in the sky’—as well as light-hearted connections to national and personal identity:

‘I feel like IR is the discipline that I can really relate to (even my personality is IR-ish)’

‘IR mirrors Russian ‘я’ (ja), which is I’

Someone drew the following equation:

$$\text{my only skills: } \frac{\text{read}}{\text{write}}$$

and someone else put

‘Uhm?’

above the drawing of a puzzled face.

Complexities and challenges surfaced in greater detail.

‘Relationships gone bad’

‘Creating more questions rather than answering existing ones’

‘I have both benefited from IR and have gotten negatively affected by IR’

‘IR tries to put the world in a cage. But the world is always trying to break out’

‘Just trying to figure out what the hell is going on around me. Who am I as a person from the core of empire? What does it mean?’

Some elements of the blue trail of challenges emerged from within disciplinary thought—questions of how to define the field, the struggle to move beyond the unitary actorness of the nation-state, or the difficulty of ‘achieving new findings’ in a discipline that ‘is not really a science’. ‘Universality’ also surfaced as a challenge, leaving me to wonder whether this referred to its perceived absence or the field’s colonial claims. On a more personal level, sentiments of uncertainty and disengagement appeared: ‘Feeling lost’ and ‘What’s the point? (doomerism)’, alongside the difficulty of ‘finding my passion’. In-between the ‘academic’ and the ‘personal’ lay a register that spoke to the nature of labour and knowledge practices in IR. Theory was described as ‘boring’ and excessive, while ‘super fancy words’ cluttered ‘complex texts that could have been written in simpler language’. The ‘struggle of reading’ also tied into the demands of coursework: ‘all of the reading, and writing, and unanswered questions’, and the feeling that there is ‘never enough time’.

‘No time to read and think about the readings. No time to reflect about what we are learning’

Repeatedly, participants noted a disconnect between ‘thought, action, and engagement’, between ‘academia and the real world’, between ‘theories, practice, and real cases’. One note read simply: ‘people of limited imagination’. I lingered on this one, thinking: ‘That might sum things up rather well’. But at that moment, I opened the ‘experience box’ and realised that none of my own donated responses had been picked up in the collages. At the bottom of the box, three snippets remained untouched:

‘Small changes, daily’

‘Finding the life behind the jargon’

‘Getting to know that part of me that brought me here’

As I transcribed these notes from their coloured paper strips, I saw how fluid the boundaries between these three questions had been all along. An aspiration is also a challenge, a challenge arises from an aspiration. And underlying both, there is always a relationship.

### **lifescapes for learning: ‘you are not alone’**

In a closing gesture, participants did use the vehicle of language—sparingly, yet deliberately—to reflect on their experiences. Only a few words were spoken. They emerged slowly, carrying a certain weight. I noticed

how softly they fell. ‘We can be artists’. ‘Now that we are not online, we could do something more tactile more often’. ‘Others also had difficulties’. ‘You are not alone’. A wave of nods rippled through the room. Beyond the satisfaction of physical making, the simple act of naming challenges and difficulties became a key takeaway for many. There was relief in this—also for faculty—offering a glimpse into the living experiences of relating, to both the subject matter and the emerging community, reassembled each September.

Since we had entered this space through the gateway of ‘research methods’, I felt compelled to guide us out through the same anchor. ‘If IR scholarship aims to change and improve relations, it should begin by fostering *connection*’. I paused, realising I had never quite thought of ‘relation’ and ‘connection’ in this way before. ‘You might consider research methods from this perspective: How does the method I’m using connect me more deeply to the subject matter? And how might it also connect others with each other?’ I let the questions settle before we began tidying up—gathering paper scraps, resetting the space, and slowly making our way out.

Looking back on where we wrapped up, I wondered if I could have said something more about how research methods might also connect us to ourselves. I could have drawn out these dimensions more explicitly:

connection to world(s)  
 connection to other(s)  
 connection to self

At that moment, the notion of ‘affective landscapes’ opened up, like a clam, revealing a pearl of quiet wisdom. I realised something important about my intuitive use of the term. In the collective collaging process, ‘affective landscapes’ had first signified an attempt to map inner experiences—to make visible what is usually felt rather than consciously thought. As a concept it wasn’t intended to define or delineate anything, but to invite awareness of the discipline of IR as a field of felt relations. The metaphor of ‘landscape’ suggested that we turn the gaze that habitually goes outward, inward, and find relatable points of reference. Yet the prompts on the slides also encouraged something beyond reflection. They invited to ‘build’: to work with and remake experience. ‘IR-scapes’ took shape from what participants brought to the table—feelings, thoughts, paper strips, and other raw materials, including the ability to perceive possibilities for new constellations and the energy of touch that brought them into being.

Shortly after the event, I found myself journaling, trying to distil what ‘affective landscapes’ had done in practice—both in the moment and in its wake. How did the concept translate into ways of knowing and acting? What had it made possible?

I jotted down:

‘I am using it as a metaphor to capture the multi-dimensionality of experience in each moment. Capture may not be the right word for my purposes: it is more of a gesture to notice and hold gently with my attention whatever may present itself.

The play of forms, its vastness, and blurry edges.

I also appreciate the allusion to the materiality of a landscape: something grounded, physical, felt, embodied. Yet the totality of which always escapes us.

Affective landscapes may change rapidly as if watching a time-lapse video of a natural landscape’.

Shelley Sacks and Wolfgang Zumdick describe the inner space, constituted in constant exchange with the outer world, as ‘the poetic continent ... not visible to the human eye’ but one that ‘lies within us and without. And because it only comes alive *in* us, it is often overlooked and unseen’ (2013, p. 5). The proposition to work with ‘affective landscapes’ sought to draw attention to this inner space of sensing and sense-making, inviting us to attune more to what the physical eye cannot see. The metaphor of ‘landscape’, as I came to understand, guided attention towards fragments—specific embodiments of the poetic continent—engaging the fleeting articulations of form as they take shape and place. It aimed at grasping the illuminations of the ‘fold’ of the outside within (see Deleuze, 2006). For the purposes of the collaging practice, it asked us to attend to instances of contact with the field of IR. A landscape emerges through a certain spatial sensibility—as both a location and a mode of connection to place—yet with soft, porous edges. Its contours remain blurred: where does a landscape begin, and where does it end? Shapes jump out and become perceptible from within a totality of forms. What is the frame through which we view the infinite horizon? And what offers itself to be seen through that frame? Marco Bernini observes that inner experience has an ‘elusive, underdetermined and vaporous quality’ (2018, p. 295).

When we turn inward and reflect on our relationship to the field, what becomes accessible to our own gaze in that moment—and how?

From a methodological perspective, working with inner experience first required the ability to *notice and hold*—even if only for an instant—before remaking. Yet to notice something that falls beyond the familiar coordinates of academic study, the conditioned scholarly gaze itself must transform. Sacks and Zumdick emphasise that the poetic continent can only be encountered and entered ‘in a poetic mode’ (2013, p. 5). Ingrained instrumentality must be reworked to cultivate openness in how we see, making it possible to explore what does not yet have a name. Our attention needs to soften and become more sensitive. All ‘forms’ that we inhabit and co-habit the planet with—‘whether they are an animal, plant, person, memory or social system’—otherwise ‘remain information summed up by concepts, on the one hand, and undisclosed forms from an unknown world, on the other’ (2013, p. 5). ‘Allowing’, they write, is one modality through which working with the inner, invisible terrain becomes possible and whatever we encounter may ‘disclose itself in us’ (2013, p. 5). It is in this way that we might ‘come to know without foreclosing’ (2013, p. 5).

With hindsight, however, holding is already remaking. Bernini highlights the delicate nature of the domain of inner experience: it changes by the act of observation (2013, p. 295). Quoting William James, he describes how a mental state behaves like a snowflake when we try to introspect it: ‘once caught in the warm hand [it] is no longer a flake but a drop’ (2018, p. 295; James, [1890] 2007, p. 244). Looking within, as such, is already an immersive, participatory activity. Landscapes—whether found, entered, or stumbled upon—already contain and embrace the viewer. Despite the apparent solidity of forms and the presumed distance of the one looking, we move, pulse, change together as living organisms. There is already a connection in constant motion. It shifts as we shift. Whatever emerges within our affective landscapes—whether we are aware of it or not—already affects us: our bodymind, our being. Yet how much we may be able to sense of these micro-movements depends on the unique wiring of our perception. As thoughts and feelings appear on coloured paper snippets something has already shifted.

Sliding from co-presence to deliberate action, landscapes can also be cultivated. Collaging—an intentional yet intuitive creative process—engages with what has been brought into articulation from the realm of the felt but not yet thought, foregrounding both this connection

and agency. Beyond the colourful cardboard images produced, the true output lies in the experience itself: how mapping an inner landscape may already change the relations and entanglements that bind us to space, place, or field. There is greater creative potential in exploring our own formation at any given moment than what may be immediately apparent within the aesthetic distribution of the academic sensible (see Rancière, 2009).

Looking within, touching in with—and literally, *touching*—a fragment of an affective landscape in our ‘poetic continent’ brings together observation and action. It is a moment of *practice*, a mode of engagement often claimed to be lacking in IR curricula dominated by theory and abstraction. It is an instance and modality of ‘practice’: an aspect that is claimed to be lacking in IR curricula dominated by theory and abstract language. Observing *how* we make observations—becoming aware of how our attention moves and what it notices—is itself a form of practical learning, beyond conventional disciplinary notions of what ‘practice’ entails. It is a process within processes, shaping the very frame through which everything else becomes observable. Recognising this reframes the approach; it shifts the game. What emerges through this process is not just insight but affective literacy—a deepened capacity to read what is thought and what is felt and navigate between them. Enabling movement across dimensions conventionally kept separate in the social sciences is itself a form of empowerment.

Collaging illuminated and amplified the continuous yet often unnoticed work of attention. The interplay of associations, juxtapositions, and the act of making—finding and positioning collage materials, witnessing the spontaneity of new shapes emerging—offered a way to explore the boundaries of articulation before form fully takes shape. Just as significant were the absences: what did not appear, the spaces in-between and around image, text, and object. These moments of openness held the potential to reveal the liminal spaces of meaning making. Bernini notes that

what inner experience does possess is the potentiality to be transformed into a storyworld: it has a latent affordance of narratability or, more simply, a latent narrativity. This latent narrativity can be activated by the double movement of structuring quasi-perceptual thoughts, images, sounds and emotions into a world-like ecology (worlding) and by threading these inner events into some sort of narrative cohesiveness (storying). (2018, p. 299)

‘You are not alone’ turned out to be a particularly powerful story of our collective worlding through collaging. Individual articulations of relations to self, discipline, and world, and the co-creative reassembly of these fragmentary impressions came together in the closing circle as new ground for journeying ahead. Pre-existing ‘world-like ecologies’ not only became visible but, through their collaged possibilities, felt less disconnected, more hopeful—perhaps even safer and more accommodating of the plurality that lives with and through each of us.

This is perhaps one way in which the field of International Relations might serve as a plane of encounters where learning and understanding unfold as forms of life wisdom—where taking relationality and inner experience seriously becomes central to sense-making. ‘This is what I want to curate, this awareness and a range of practices to do the work’. I was wording and rewording this intention, eventually settling on ‘staging encounters with our sense-making processes, in how we relate to ourselves, others and worlds’. Pedagogically, I am still exploring how affective landscapes of IR might translate into greater sensitivity and care towards lifescapes, ways of living, and modes of being and acting, both within and beyond the university. ‘Learning for life could look like this’, I mused. ‘How do I bring this sensibility back into the classroom, and then out into the world?’

I had no answers at that point.

But I remembered the power of our improvised closing ritual, so I chose to

hold

h o l d

h o l d

what had been worlded

before it is (re)shaped into  
a story

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## learning about learning

We are in the university café, wrapping up a research interview about journeys into and within the discipline when Vladimir walks in and joins us. Vladimir, soon-to-be Dr. Ogula, is a PhD student and a long-time collaborator. Without knowing the context of our conversation, barely a minute and a half in, he turns to my two participants—both current MA students—and asks, ‘What are you really looking for in your studies?’ A brief pause follows, giving me just enough time to introduce him as one of our guest speakers for the term. The ‘official’ designation and its connection to the syllabus subtly shift the atmosphere: the warmth remains, but the tone tilts from informal to semi-formal. Yet, the implicit epistemological weight of his question doesn’t go unnoticed. If anything, it lands with an existential undertone. One of them responds:

‘Meaning. We are starving students of meaning’.

Only in hindsight, while transcribing the interview, do I realise how deeply this remark resonates with my own *hunger*—a yearning to find more out about learning journeys that begin long before and extend far beyond our institutionally allocated time in classrooms and at university. Within our formal and informal educational trajectories, we converge for what, in the grander scheme, is just a fleeting moment: twelve weeks of ‘Knowing, Narrating, (re)Writing International Relations’ (KNR) within a one- or two-year MA program. The syllabus, as a narrative frame, mobilises imagination—mine, in ‘imagining a sphere of operations for

a course's ideas' (Germano & Nicholls, 2020, p. 8), and students, in mapping their own associations onto this sphere. On one level, these intersecting planes of imagination—what is invoked in us by key words, themes, approaches, assignments, and the overall sensibility of the course—draw us together. Yet beneath and beyond the surface of disciplinary discourse—what is sayable and thinkable within IR's cultural archive and regimes of intelligibility—the richness and complexity of lived experience and everything we carry within ourselves continue to swirl and morph, brushing up against other life worlds and affective landscapes. Our passion and wisdom,

frustrations, confusion, ignorance  
 ingrained habits of thought

what we were expected to learn  
 what we understood otherwise

our gifts and blind spots  
 what may be desired,                      what remains unresolved

all present in the space we co-create

as we show up, physically, virtually,  
 on both planes, and somewhere in-between—

I keep wondering:  
 what brings us to the field?  
                     What fuels and drives curiosity?  
 Where does the energy arise from and  
                     where does it long to go?

Where does it actually go?

My investment in learning about learning is meant to serve both students and myself—their learning, my learning, our learning together. The latter resonates with what Naeem Inayatullah describes as the 'potential overlap' between the teacher's 'own desire and the desire of the students', a terrain where, despite our asymmetrical institutional dispositions, we are 'intrinsic collaborators' (2022, p. 7). He writes, 'teachers are not meant to be masters of content. Rather, we convey how one might align oneself to desire, to curiosity, to a search for knowledge and healing' (2022,

p. 7). I am curious about the various forms such alignments may take—on both sides. How might we follow what stirs and compels us from within? Writing this book is already a practice of aligning to my own desire of exploring that very question.

By way of a playful allusion to Raymond Carver’s short story collection, part of my quest is to better understand what we do—what we might do, and perhaps even more importantly, where we might meet each other to begin with—when we talk about love International Relations (see Carver, 1989). My search echoes Richa Nagar’s commitment to ‘continue to learn ways of being and doing’ in a practice of ‘hungry translation’ (Nagar, 2019, p. 8). For Nagar, ‘translation’ is an ‘intimate relationship between the self and another, one that always struggles with how not to make that another into an Other’ (Nagar & Selmeczi, 2019, p. 88). This relationship never fully settles or arrives. It doesn’t seek perfection; rather, it remains hungry in its search, striving to ‘do justice to stories that are lived and narrated on an unequal or violent terrain, while also recognising that such an exercise is always marked by mistakes and gaps’ (Nagar & Selmeczi, 2019, p. 88).

The liminality that translation both generates and embraces is already a mode of being and a process of becoming. It is something we have known from ‘before’, carrying over into the ‘after’, surpassing the spatiotemporal frames of our class interactions. Attuning to what is present and what is emerging in the now points beyond conventional academic knowledge practices. It holds the potential to remake the sensibility of what learning can be—learning about, and always already *within* the fabric of international relations as it pulses through our living bodies, moment to moment, as we show up and share space, even when our words pass beside each other. It calls for us to tap into the complexity of international relations as it resides in cultural and cellular memory, in constant motion with the forces that have shaped us and will continue to claim our attention, energy, and life choices—

some of which, perhaps, are not so distant from love either,  
undefined, uncrossed out.

## depth of field

The collective collaging offered glimpses into the affective landscapes that made up the felt discipline in the room. It revealed a pool of associations, which, prompted by pre-set questions, took temporary form as expressions of ‘relation’, ‘aspiration’, and ‘challenge’ in conjunction with the field of IR. Each of us filled three colourful paper snippets with our own reflections, and moments later, we watched as these fragments entered into improvised constellations mingling with pictures, drawings, stickers, signs, and other objects. Nagar writes that she is ‘concerned for that which cannot be heard, seen, sensed, or felt through words alone, especially when those words are written down and caged in a regularized structure, in familiar fonts, in a predictable sequence of black and white pages’ (2019, p. 8). Here, the words that made it onto the paper were palpably more than words, confined only by the edges of the paper snippets and the cardboard. As the sheets began to display visible traces of manual labour, the collaging itself revealed something akin to a stereogram—those seemingly flat images that, when gazed at differently, reveal a hidden three-dimensional form. Similarly, relations that escaped direct wording—already worlded as part of an ecology of inner events, thoughts, images, and emotions (Bernini, 2018, p. 299)—began to take on a layered, multi-dimensional presence. I wanted to explore the life worlds that gave rise to these momentary articulations, reaching beyond their transitory entanglements, which had now been solidified into the artefacts of the completed collage. I wondered about the movements, motions, and passages that animated and generated what ultimately became visible expressions of the affective landscapes of IR. I was curious about the ‘depth of field’ of the image—what, in photography, marks the distance between the nearest and furthest objects captured by the camera, including everything that transcends representation. What neither the human eye nor the mechanical lens can see.

I knew I had to look closer. So, I invited students enrolled in KNR for research interviews about their learning journeys in the discipline and their experiences in the program. The interviews were framed as a voluntary process with a built-in component of research training, encouraging participants to inhabit the set-up in ways that felt meaningful and beneficial to them. I was acutely aware of the asymmetrical power dynamic between us. I had presented the project’s basic outline in haste—three minutes overtime the class schedule—as a final ‘quick announcement’

competing with the unstoppable fidgeting authorised by the break. In the eyes I met, I caught a glimpse of the familiar image of the professor who, from a position of authority, could easily make such a request without anyone raising an eyebrow. Yet, drawing on the sensibilities of relational interviewing and decolonial praxis, I knew I had to think carefully not only about avoiding extraction from these relationships—freshly conjured at the start of term—but also about how to honour and care for the not-yet-earned trust and vulnerability that came with them.

As Lee Ann Fujii writes regarding the ethos of the method of relational interviewing, ‘one of the first tasks is to build working relationships with those who make the research possible’ (Fujii, 2017, p. 11). Here, my conversation partners not only anchor this possibility—they are also members of the cohort I continue to work with for the next ten weeks and beyond. They are the ones making the course itself possible. It is their voices, insights, and presences that shape, bend, and remake KNR in its design as a collective learning journey. My efforts as instructor depend on their ability and willingness to receive what I have to offer and feed the circle of care: both for our emerging learning community and ‘international relations’ as we study and inhabit the field as an everyday practice. In truth, my vulnerability—subtly veiled by the imperial structures of formal education—comes way before theirs. I found myself returning to Inayatullah’s questions: ‘Can we imagine mutually beneficial encounters without imposition?’ and perhaps, as a precondition: ‘Can we create “authority without domination” in the classroom?’ (2022, p. 5).

I knew I had to move away from the gaze that pins me down as a ‘professor’, with its readily accepted power to impose—an authority already inscribed into the regular course of events. Yet the hold of this gaze works on each of us; it is not contained in any single body. It constantly hovers over the movements of thought and emotion, the shifting images of who we are and what we have come here to do. It quietly orchestrates our daily interactions in how we see and how we are perceived by others, how we look at ourselves and engage with one another.

Questions keep flickering.  
 Who holds authority?  
 How is authority upheld?

Can authority hold us all – *please* – maybe a bit more gently?

How can we learn to see ourselves and each other beyond our institutional, colonial, socially conditioned entanglements?

What it would be like to be seen that way?

Beneath thick layers of hierarchically imposed masks,  
 how might we reveal ourselves to one another as  
     ‘intrinsic collaborators’  
     hungry translators  
     ‘starving students of meaning’  
 still ‘in but not of’ the modern university (Moten & Harney, 2013,  
 p. 26)?

It strikes me, however, that to explore possibilities of aligning with what drives us, we must first attune ourselves to the desire itself and let it lead. Inayatullah notes that ‘if teaching is possible at all, it occurs from body to body’ (2013, p. 153). He writes that ‘we teach with our moving bodies and little else’ as the body performs, misperforms, ‘reperforms, searching’ (2013, pp. 153, 157.) As a forever (mis)performing ‘teaching body’, I cannot escape the multiple channels of radio emission that my embodied—by default, spotlighted—presence generates beyond the words I speak and write. This also means that there is a chance for my intentions—the entire plane of my sense-making—to be read behind my actions, and that I might draw on this prospect in an affirmative way. Beyond the words riddled with institutional and disciplinary overtones, there can be a form of communication that resonates differently.

On this occasion I decide to try and show rather than tell—to offer one tentative, experimental ‘working’ version of what such alignment might look like. From my end of the power relationship, I press against the translucent bubble of domination with some visible and invisible effort. I want to soften the space between and around us with gestures and opportunities of care—ones that are intrinsic to the process itself and offer something meaningful to everyone’s learning journey. For me, the emphasis is not necessarily on the outcome but on the generative power of acting upon this impulse in the first place: the sentiment that can shift the energy of our internalised locations and free our locutions of the weight of already distributed roles. I want my conversation partners not only to *know* but also to *feel* that I do not take their efforts for granted. I realise that words alone cannot convey this—coming from me, they remain perilously close to the language of instruction. I search instead for a practice—a form of collective doing—that can express appreciation beyond the horizon of expectations, which, in this situation, are remarkably low

for me, the ‘teacher’. After all, my students agreed to speak with me in the format of a ‘research interview’ simply because I asked them to consider it. I do not seek to compensate and thereby risk further reinforcing the hierarchical give-and-take. Thinking alongside Jacques Rancière’s figure of the ignorant schoolmaster, I recognise the need to relinquish the ‘old master’s institutionally inscribed power to oversee the economy of investments in pedagogical relationships’ (1991, p. 21). Rather, in the spirit of actually existing ‘mutually beneficial encounters without imposition’, I just need to do the work to own—and own up to—my request.

‘While I’m learning from you, I thought I could also share something that may not be part of your regular curriculum – at least not at this stage’. I prepare a consent form and a project description so we can walk through and talk through how to conduct research interviews—framing it as a practice that might be adaptable to other contexts they encounter. My participants are, in fact, researchers themselves, and I invite them to inhabit both roles simultaneously: participant and participant-observer. Beyond reflecting on the methodological angle, I encourage everyone to take up space in the way that feels most fitting. ‘You can ask me anything—anything you might otherwise hesitate to ask!’ We share a smile as I say this. Slowly, those initial polite smiles expand into something larger and begin to stretch the boundaries of the interview frame. Some of the questions are turned back towards me, curious of how I have landed in the discipline and learnt to navigate it. ‘What are *you* interested in?’ Others reflect aloud on the experience of being asked these kinds of questions—how unusual it feels to pause and think about their own learning, their own relationship to the program and the discipline. ‘It’s really good to have these questions from time to time to see where you are at’, one says thoughtfully. Another nods: ‘Am I drowning or floating? Floating. On a raft at least. I haven’t hashed this out like this before. It gives me more of an understanding of where I am at right now’.

Wherever these places may be—the fleeting resting points of ‘where I am at’—the paths of my ten conversation partners and mine cross at the nodal point of this MA program. Diverse backgrounds, professional experiences, and singular life stories touch against and fold into each other, interspersed by social and institutional landmarks of (mis)recognition—such as

law graduate		IR graduate		musician turned IR graduate
	writer		artist	lobbyist
		history teacher		comparative literature lecturer
			psychology graduate	–

carried by certificates, diplomas, reference letters, and bodyminds, deeply imprinted by cultural and geographical archives arising from

West Africa  
Central Asia  
Middle East  
Central and Eastern Europe,  
frequently overstampd with the watermark of a Western educational trajectory,  
as well as  
Western Europe  
North America

Where and how might we truly meet each other as members of an emerging learning community, if that is indeed what we are becoming? I have been thinking with and walking with the interviews long after their scripted and equally unscripted moments. The depth of the conversations, the warmth and generosity of those who shared their time stayed with me, weaving themselves into the fabric of my being, even as the vividness of their memory started to fade.

One of my interviewees attended the class online, with their camera turned off. Unable to pass through the Austrian immigration system, they were somewhere on the move—presumably in a country offering temporary refuge—where the Internet connection was often too unstable. For our interview, they bought extra data and found a seat in a hotel lobby so our connection wouldn't break. For the first time, I could see them: their face, the aura of the person, the play of light and shadow across their body.

It felt like a gift in the truest sense to be able to look into each other's eyes as we talked.

## archipelago writing

Months passed as the rhythm of academic life, in full swing, pulled my attention in a myriad of directions. The task of revisiting and transcribing the interviews quietly slipped to the backburner—until it was stirred again by the unexpected.

‘How is your **book** progressing?’

‘How is your book **progressing?**’

The question echoed from the edges of university routine. Often, it surfaced in passing as a parting gesture at meetings where students came to discuss assignments or anything related to their studies, at least ostensibly. To my surprise, they remembered and followed up on the project. During the interviews, I had mentioned that the book would be published before they graduate. ‘Could you send me a signed copy?’ some asked. I took note of their requests and cherished the care, the thoughtfulness, the quiet bonds that had formed.

By the time I returned to the archive of voice recordings, the energy of our conversations had largely been absorbed into the ebbs and flows of everyday life. I felt the distance from the lived experience, and with it, the familiar impulse to ‘analyse’—to sift through the words for content, to search for the ‘data’, the information I assumed I needed to locate in the ‘text’. But there was so much more lingering on the surface of discourse. As I began listening to the recordings, it became clear that what I was doing strayed far from any conventional protocol of discourse analysis. I wasn’t ‘just listening for the solidity and solidarity of words’ (Willink, 2010, p. 213, my emphasis). I was no longer hunting for the familiar or the neatly relatable. The instrumental search for what I already knew somehow stopped, and instead, I found myself journeying with the totality of sound—listening, intently,

pausing

staying with the pauses

the silences

the awkwardness

the unsaid

the noises made – by others, by us

thinking with what was said  
 what I heard but couldn't make out  
 what was swallowed with the coffee

in an imaginary dialogue  
 responding to my students' needs, desires,  
 challenges,  
 while encountering  
 the reverberations of their concerns  
 in my own mind

Lucia Farinati and Claudia Firth distinguish between hearing—as an involuntary sensory perception—and listening, as a cultivated, intentional act inherently tied to an ethics of responsibility: ‘the ability to respond’ (2017, p. 16). Listening, as a way of being-with—both with ourselves and with others—holds transformational potential. They write, ‘the feeling of togetherness and connectivity that listening to others or with others can create in the subject can also be seen as a force’ (2017, pp. 18–19). That force was tangible, though not in the way I might have imagined a ‘force’ working through me. It slowed me down, pulling me deeper into the recordings, keeping me there far longer than I had anticipated.

As I am writing this book—or really, as I write anything—I keep a document titled ‘journaling thread’ running alongside the main text. In many ways, it becomes the main site of my sense-making: a space where I jot down random thoughts, feelings, half-formed ideas, sparks, and inspirations—the unruly, living matter that crops up in conjunction with the project at hand. I carried on journaling while transcribing the recordings, capturing everything stirred in me as I listened, again and again, for the precise order of words. I noticed how this reflective thread began to shape a different impression of those encounters, filtered through another channel of perception. At one point, I found myself moving between the transcript, the journal, and the draft of this chapter—documenting, making sense, distilling meaning, creating new forms on the page. What cohered in one writing space unravelled in another—yet something new almost always emerged from the cracks.

Whenever I got stuck with the ‘proper’ writing, I returned to the journal. I sank back into the affective landscapes of my own process, tracing the movements that had carried me to that point—where writing had stalled. I noticed that, at first, I was somewhat anxious about a particular kind of ‘truth’. I wasn’t entirely sure how to read what I was hearing. ‘How will I know what’s real and what is said to please me, the teacher?’ Then I realised that ‘me, the teacher’ posed a different dilemma altogether. As I paid attention to what I described as ‘all these shades, layers, colours, textures’ unfolding in and around the flow of questions and answers, shaping the unique soundscape of each conversation, the real challenge became clear: ‘How will I present these voices in their singular yet interconnected complexity?’

The question of representation, and the weight it carries in writing, lingered over me for weeks, perhaps months. As I extracted quotes from the transcripts—initially intended as ‘illustrations’—I grew uneasy. I worried about creating reductionist or distorted images of my students, who were not only conversation partners and collaborators, but also the future generation of professionals—those who will go on to write IR, but first, write international relations with their own lives. I wanted to find a way to convey, and make felt, the sensibility of what happens when complex, diverse life worlds brush against and seep into this field of knowledge known and equally, *imagined* as IR. To evoke the felt discipline: how the field lives in us, shaping our bodyminds, marked by its subject matter; and how we, in turn, inhabit it, wherever ‘we are at’—in time, in space, and across the non-linear terrains of our being.

How can I write this without instrumentalising human relations or the care that was shared?

How can my writing offer back, even partially, the generosity I received?

Writing came to a standstill for a long stretch; whatever I managed to produce felt off, somehow not right. The finished transcripts—marked with bright highlights and scribbled notes—lay stacked together in a portable bundle I carried everywhere. It travelled with me on the subway and accompanied me on grocery runs. Even when there was no chance of opening it, the packet was there, adding an almost imperceptible weight to every step.

The spark finally came from the journal.  
 Browsing through my inner field notes, jotted often in telegraphic bursts,  
 I found myself re-entering the space of listening and the atmosphere of  
 those conversations.  
 I wrote:

‘this morning I woke up exhausted  
 massive brain fog, attention drifting in every direction  
 I sit down and start listening to a recording  
 I play the one with three of us in the café –  
 and then...hearing the voices – my students, now already former  
 students – and my own voice from months ago... something shifted!  
 suddenly I was *here* – alert – the fatigue is gone  
 listening to the other’s voice captured in a moment, an unrepeatable  
 situation that is already gone, past tense, yet still present – on my  
 phone, in my consciousness –  
 the emissions of voices that are both memory and my actual relation-  
 ship to the very moment, woke me up, transitioned me to another  
 dimension  
 I realise now I’m listening to them in a way I couldn’t when we  
 were sitting face-to-face in the café or on Zoom –  
 a lot of the energy was consumed by keeping the conversation  
 going – nodding, clarifying, offering reassurances, filling in the  
 gaps – making communication happen  
 now I can drift through the layers  
 I get to ponder, to feel what was there but inaccessible to me in the  
 moment  
 I’m sitting here, as insider-outsider  
 observing and documenting at a depth I hadn’t been able to touch  
 before’

The force of listening—what Farinati and Firth describe as ‘*attentive hearing*’ (2017, p. 16)—made me more aware of the power and potentiality of attention itself and how it opens experiences to their layered, multi-dimensional textures. The generative quality of presence—of sitting with the research material—transformed my relationship to it, and with that, my ability to receive, perceive and ultimately, *re-present* what was there, beyond the reflexes of my academic training. I stayed with the recordings, the journaling thread, the drafts of this chapter, learning to feel more deeply into what was already present. The restorative, even remedial, quality of this being-with started to show in other ways, too: in the

distinctive energy of an altered state of mind and a more expansive and dynamic picture that encompassed my interviewees, me, ‘us’, immersed in ‘relations relating’ (see Querejazu, 2022, p. 877).

Revisiting these notes, learning about learning and the process of writing about it began to take a different orientation. In trying to convey a sensibility, I came to realise that I was also co-creating it, at least in four ways: participating in the interviews, listening to the recordings, making sense of the transcripts, and writing through what I had gathered. Rather than attempting to reconstruct what ‘learning’ might look or feel like within the discipline and curriculum, I could only offer an account of my own process of sense-making—of the realisations that emerged at these junctures on the horizon of my thinking. That is, my learning realised, mirrored back through the life worlds of others.

What I came to understand about the process, and my place within it, still, hasn’t resolved the questions of representation and form—how to write this, and in what style. Page after page, I kept circling back to my intention—re-stating it, re-framing it, probing more deeply into the energy that sustains the whole process, awaiting the right words to eventually surface.

‘not to illustrate or substantiate a point but to open a gateway  
through what has been shared,  
or many –  
in each gesture there is a path’

In this effort I had to empty myself of the aesthetics of linearity—the default model of education when it comes to reading and writing texts in search for meaning to be extracted or established (see Klinkenborg, 2013, p. 31)—and resist the ingrained urge to explain what I had pre-selected and highlighted in the transcripts. Instead, I zoomed in on moments—small, embryonic events in the spaces between, around and within us—that carried a certain intensity, an energy, a feel. Moments that, at first glance, didn’t appear immediately significant to my (academic) eyes.

By directing my attention to what was calling me—without knowing where and how these minute unfoldings might fit into a ‘story’—I began to appreciate and care for them by enlarging and slightly embellishing them, making felt what was there—or perhaps what might be there—within the subtle layers of the micro-of-the-micro. I sat with these barely perceptible intensities, those that fell below the threshold of intellectual





the uneven, changing nature of thoughts, feelings, emotions—fragments of life matter. It also served as a quiet reminder of the subtle, invisible tectonic movements always at work beneath the static surface of the text. These places are also placeholders. In constant transition and translation, the archipelago continues to expand across the spaces of paper and mind.

### *IR in doubt*

Self-doubt weaves through most of the interviews. I notice how often students begin or end with an apology, questioning the value of what they might offer. Though they agreed to participate with enthusiasm, the first response that surfaces is often: ‘I don’t have much to say’. As the pattern repeats, a part of me wonders what we are really doing here, in this space designated as a ‘research interview’. ‘You might be a bit disappointed with a lot of us. Most people don’t actually have a deeper reason. No-one ever says “I felt like International Relations...”’ This may be largely accurate, especially among students with a Western education background. There is privilege in being able—and appearing—to be somewhat indifferent about study choices. ‘After doing my BA in Paris, I was looking for another exciting city to explore, like Vienna’.

‘I had always wanted a CEU ID card, so I started looking through the programs. IR seemed better than some of the other ones’.

‘Why study IR? Sometimes I just end up in situations’.

We both laugh. Yet in the next moment, from the space cracked open by laughter, something else begins to unfold. My ‘interviewee’ shares a story—of a photograph showing a grandparent sitting in the lap of a dictator, a picture that was never tucked away but remained, always visible, atop a drawer. Another branch of the family carried the legacy of the survivors, seeking retribution on their behalf. ‘I think I’m really trying to resolve the traumas of my family somehow. I always wanted to translate—not in a language-way, but in perspective-ways’. Biographical connections crop up and then abruptly fall into suspension. Language circles around what can barely be named and whenever words start to flow with more ease, illuminating a glimpse of what lies beneath familiar scripts, they are quickly discarded—as if, suddenly, they feel insufficient or inadequate. The discomfort is palpable: something *this* personal and intimate feels out of place. Too much. Irrelevant. And yet, brushing up

against these depths invites us to stare into the abyss of complex social, academic, personal, and transgenerational entanglements. What is ‘hidden from view at the point of structural overlap’—where tiles, leaves, or social formations overlap at their outer edges—continues to haunt (Alamo-Pastrana, 2016, p. 12). One anecdote opens the door for many more to slip in and claim the space and the attention they deserve. As Naeem Inayatullah so poignantly reminds us: ‘Pull the threads and questions appear – even for the questioner’ (2013, p. 341).

Stories that unwittingly unfold in place of ‘proper answers’ to my questions locate ‘international relations’ within the fabric of everyday events and negotiations. Experiences drawn from archives both near and distant are retrospectively narrated as latent ‘IR moments’, only recognisable with the benefit of hindsight. Memories, once recalled, realign themselves with a body of knowledge and the learning infrastructures that hosts us—anchored, perhaps, by the soft hum of the university café and the attentive gaze of an IR faculty member: mine.

Telling tells but it also reconfigures.

I find myself wondering – had I not asked what brings us here, would these stories have surfaced at all?

And if they had – what form might they have taken?

Even more so,

how might they have retold the present?

Reconstructed origin stories of the call to study International Relations often circle around moments—marks—hinting at a shift in perception or way of being. Some of these recollections are brief, offered as if self-evident. The desire to understand the ‘international’ beyond common sense stirs as bodies cross borders and encounter others from unfamiliar worlds. ‘I thought I would go to medical school but an exchange programme in Turkey, where I met new people from different countries, changed my mind completely’. ‘I started to look into IR because of a friend from Serbia. She opened my brain up not only to the role of the US in global politics but also about life’.

Other accounts develop more slowly, once the official frame of the ‘interview’ and the distance imposed by our designated roles begins to dissolve.

A young female conductor from the southern region of Europe visits a city in Ukraine, just a few months after the Russian occupation of Crimea.

Early on, she senses something is off—rehearsals feel disconnected, her instructions aren't fully followed. She notices the male musicians disappearing during breaks and decides she can't let this pass. 'I'm not losing this fight – I need to do something!' Determined, she follows them—and discovers they're slipping away to a pub around the corner. When she walks in, the room falls silent. 'OK guys, what are you drinking?' she asks and orders the same shot. After a minute of awkward silence, the ice begins to crack. Nerves loosen. Tongues follow. 'Where is the geographical centre of Europe? Tomorrow I'll bring a map and show you. It's here... and you people are abandoning us. We have just been invaded by Russia and we don't feel the connection... we are Europeans too!'

She recounts the experience with compassion. The humour in the absurdity of drinking at 10 a.m. in a professional setting gives way to something softer—a warmth, almost like an embrace.

'Professor', she reflects,

'it was only then that I understood that coming from Western Europe, they had already assumed that I wouldn't see them as Europeans... Their defensiveness was there before I even arrived. Rehearsals went better after that, but I knew that the performance was going to be secondary. The connection needed was not a musical one. They didn't need another visiting conductor from the West to show off their skills. What they longed for, in that moment, was European solidarity'.

An hour slips by in the blink of an eye. Layer by layer, the intricate trajectories that brought us here—into this field, into this particular locus of study—begin to unravel. As the conversation deepens, I lose track of time. Someone waiting for their own interview at a nearby table drifts over and joins us. We find ourselves meeting at the edges of our academic roles—still fluid, still unsettled halfway through the first term. And it is here that the question gently turns back onto me: 'And what was your click moment?' I feel both comforted and caught off guard. 'It's good that they feel safe enough to ask me that', I think to myself. Yet I hesitate, unsure where to begin. I reach for what feels familiar—the polished version of my academic journey, the story I've told before. It comes out in broad brushstrokes. Safe. Predictable. While I'm still holding space for

the unexpected, I can sense the threshold of my own willingness to risk, leaning into the security of what's already been rehearsed.

'Well, it all happened here, at CEU. As a law student visiting the IR Department for a term, I found myself enrolled in a course whose title changed overnight. What started as 'International Organizations' shifted suddenly into a journey through biopolitics via Foucault and Agamben. Until then, I had been taught that law was a neutral sub-system of society – a notion I never fully bought but didn't yet have the vocabulary to question. That course changed everything. I realised that everything was political – especially what claims not to be. I've been walking in that direction ever since'.

The walk has been eventful, often strenuous—I make sure to emphasise the former. I instinctively steer away from the finer details, from what the overlapping threads cover up. After all, our relationships are shaped by asymmetry; this is the default mode of how we operate. Tomorrow, we'll step back into the classroom, interpellated by our institutionally assigned roles. In truth, we're only just learning how to trust each other—beyond these roles, but also through them. In this moment, no matter what I might choose to share, I know I can't afford to venture too far into the more obscure corners of my own personal archive. I realise that I'm not in a position to do exactly what I'm making space for students to do. And perhaps it is precisely this tension that both enables and safeguards their freedom to explore what they're ready to explore, in their own time, in their own way. It is in the delicate balance of holding and letting go that our connectedness is revealed.

'So you saw the dark side and that was it?' they ask.

'For me, it felt more like the bright side. It unlocked a sense of agency – that I could make discoveries of my own, adapt the tools I'd been given, and use them to make sense of my own life. I didn't have to feel powerless or confined to a single narrow paradigm. There was space to move, to explore, to do things differently'.

I make a point of foregrounding both serendipity and perseverance in recalling the 'click'. The energy of that initial spark did channel into action, though it demanded sustained effort in many forms. Still, perhaps the process was much slower and more complicated than how I'm reconstructing it now. Maybe other, less visible turning points shaped my path

long before I consciously thought of ‘choosing’ IR. Maybe the unconscious movements of my body and the hard-wired neural pathways of my intellect carried me to places, making me ‘end up in situations’, just as some of my students describe. In holding space for the unexpected, I find myself meeting my own uncertainties.

An hour and a half into the conversation it’s time to bring it to a close.  
‘Maybe this was a failed interview, Professor. It’s a mess!’

We all laugh.

I couldn’t agree more: the pull of doubt has landed us in a mess – but the kind that is thoroughly, wonderfully generative.

### *embellish island*

Yet doubt continues to move through me as I write this chapter, moulding the ‘interview islands’. I smooth and sharpen their edges, while the intensities—scenes, words, gestures—keep slipping, rolling just out of reach. They scatter like beads of different shapes and sizes, resisting the thread, even as their affinity—from a certain angle—seems undeniable. I wonder how my conversation partners, some now at a post-graduation distance, others still immersed in university life, might receive these fragments. How would it feel to see themselves appear here, in this way? And what of those currently in my research methods class—what might they make of this attempt, this way of working with lived experience, both theirs and mine?

I gather my courage and ask one of my interviewees—someone who, through her wit and sharp observations, feels most vividly present in the text—to read a draft of this chapter. She is a mature student; we are nearly the same age. Her life experience of ‘politics’, particularly as an activist, far exceeds mine. We meet every Tuesday for ‘Qualitative Research Methods’. Though I trust her wisdom and judgement completely, I notice how nervous I am. I’m shaking inside as I walk towards her after class. I pull the printed copy from my laptop sleeve and, handing it over with an exaggeratedly ceremonial gesture, I half-joke: ‘I’m trusting you with my most confidential personal information’. For a moment, it strikes me that these unruly beads-on-a-string—the interview islands—aren’t so different

from the sequence of nucleosomes in DNA. Beyond skills, training, and method, they reveal the invisible chain of sense-making: those micro-operations of noticing, enlarging, arranging, and creating that are unique to each of us. I am, in a way, handing her a blueprint of my perception—a fragment of my spirit-DNA.

She looks momentarily taken aback as the paper turns unexpectedly heavy in her hands. Our eyes meet, exchanging signals faster than language. She recognises my vulnerability. I feel seen, and

the awkwardness fades.

Hours later, we meet again in the café where the research interview took place over a year ago. As our hot drinks arrive and the muffled clinks of glasses signal the opening of a shared space, her words begin to flow—clear, steady, and luminous. Swift in insight yet gentle as they meander, they work through the intersections of writing, life, knowledge, language, politics, and the collective entanglements in which we are immersed. She reflects on the realisations provoked by the interview islands, particularly the challenges and aspirations of her peers, which now appeared in a new light. ‘It’s humbling, the knowledge politics’, she notes, pointing to how what may be an aspirational educational goal in the Global South becomes a site of critique and scepticism in the Global North.

Then, with a soft shift, she turns the page and draws my attention elsewhere.

‘Here, I drew a heart by this paragraph. This was my favourite part!’ I sit wordless, moved, my gaze resting on the margin where the small heart lives – not anticipating what will come next.

‘Embellish!’ she exclaims suddenly.

I glance at her, a little perplexed. She continues:

‘We have been taught that it is not good to embellish things because we want to be honest and pure in our narrations. Nagar’s ‘hungry translations’ foregrounds the other. She creates a stage for them to speak and this is one form of justice. But sometimes, justice happens through embellishment! How else do you lift something up from the ‘micro-of-the-micro’, as you wrote, and bring it to people’s awareness – especially here, in the West – without embellishing it? It is

not lying – it is storytelling! We need that, for Western eyes, to make things stand out and truly be seen. Otherwise, we are too comfortable and sheltered in our bubbles to notice what surrounds us. The truth is in the embellishment’.

We both laugh. ‘Not lying, storytelling’—her words linger long after the conversation. I didn’t tell her that this way of working with lived experience—enlarging and embellishing the micro-movements of the mundane as an act of care—came to me intuitively. What she identified as ‘method’ wasn’t part of my academic training. It emerged from long stretches of silence as I was sitting with our voices and their transcription, listening as intently as I could—past the sound, in-between the typed letters, tuning inward.

Page after page, we circle back to the interview islands. I want to check something specific with her from her interview—an anecdote, vivid and powerful, that I’d worked hard to preserve in detail to hold onto the energy it carried. But the more I wrote, the more I found myself worrying about the rendering of details—about my choices in telling and retelling what had been shared in trust. My conversation partners—some still my students—belonged to a small cohort. Even if anonymous to the outside world, they knew each other as peers, as friends. Tracing resonances—that imaginary string connecting fragments of affective landscapes—I realised these islands were also mirrors. They held the potential for recognition, should anyone from that circle pick this book up. The depth of field that emerged in the intimacy of the interviews, carefully held within the institutional frame, would now enter the public domain. ‘I want to tell these stories, but I don’t want to unsettle the delicate weave of communal ties’, I thought. So, I chose to change a few descriptors—markers of place, profession, or person—where they felt non-essential to the trajectories of how disciplinary encounters and personal lifelines intersected. A gesture of care, meant to safeguard the space we created.

For instance, in an earlier draft, the conductor became a choreographer, and the musicians turned into dancers. The story remained, its essence intact.

Alongside a few small acts of fabulation, I also diffused certain specifics—referring to regions rather than countries, and making gender explicit only when it felt necessary to expose power dynamics at play. I held

onto a principle, however tentative: that everything included should be there with intention, even as a part of me kept wondering if adding more detail would automatically enrich the narrative. The delicate balancing act between ‘too much’ and ‘not enough’ became my way of taking responsibility for, as Klinkenborg writes, ‘the shape of what lies before’ me (2013, p. 34)—both the form each sentence would take and the relationship I was cultivating to my conversation partners in this way.

‘Is it okay like this?’ I ask, pointing to the section that carries her story. ‘Yes’, she says – and then pauses. The silence stretches and soon enough it begins to feel long. ‘You know... I was wondering’, she adds. ‘What’s the purpose of these small changes? I was just imagining how hard it would be for male dancers to rehearse after schnapps in the morning. Playing an instrument requires less physical effort!’ We burst out laughing. I laugh so hard that tears spill down my cheeks. The putative protective force of fiction collapses—like a house of cards—with one gentle blow.

We agree the story should be told as it unfolded.

And I find myself thinking – perhaps the ‘truth’ resides  
 in this very gesture of affirmation,  
 in the asking,  
 in the risk of asking,  
 in receiving permission.  
 It lingers in the moments we share  
 negotiating,  
 teasing,  
 teasing out,  
 adjusting and reverting,  
 unmaking and remaking,  
 co-creating what we call ‘representation’,  
 making sense,  
 finding meaning together.

The conversation moves on. She turns to the two other interview islands that, in an earlier version of this chapter, followed ‘IR in doubt’. She flips through the pages, then suddenly looks up:

‘And where are you, Professor, in these sections?’

I know exactly what she means – and I’m at a loss for words. A part of me feels strangely glad to have been found... even as I’m caught out. ‘You embellish and then disappear?’ she teases, her eyes holding mine. I smile and nod.

She’s read me—not just the text but also the information carried in my perception-DNA. And, somehow, it no longer feels terrifying. She noticed what I’d been half-avoiding, watching askance for some time now. A friend, who read these two interview islands earlier had said the same—that they felt like ‘work in progress’, the ‘learning’ still waiting to be harvested. She was right. And now, hearing ‘disappear’ aloud, the word lands—and it hits home. Where did I lose connection? When and how did these lines lifted from the transcripts slip into ‘data’? More poignantly still, and reaching deeper into the politics of the personal, where did the possibility of telling a story slip away from me?

Where did I slide back into the well-worn subject position of the Second World scholar, diligently emulating Western scholarship while (self-)muted in their capacity to write in their own voice?

We end there – held in the dense, charged quiet of her question and the cascade of other questions it set loose.

I thank her from the bottom of my heart.

On my way home, I keep wondering how I might draw a little closer and breathe life back into the rest of the interview islands. For years, I have circled around the edges of ‘Second World subjectivity’ and its imprints on my academic being (see Strausz, 2022). Yet, thinking alongside Madina Tlostanova’s question—‘what does it mean to be a void?’ (2012, p. 131)—in relation to the post-Soviet space and its claims to existence, I’ve mostly only reached the invisible walls of this void within me. There was still little to say, apart from the layers of long-suppressed frustration and the familiar heaviness tugging at my heart, shoulders, and stomach (see Nieuwenhuis & Strausz, 2023). Whether this shared learning journey—working with and within these relations alongside my current and former students—will break down, bend, or otherwise transform the walls guarding the post-Soviet void inside me, I still don’t know. But returning to the draft islands now, from a place that reaffirms the very possibility of a story—something that, until now, seemed just out



were seen not as peripheral, but integral  
 to any theorisation of the social and the political?  
 What if:  
 were seen *as* theorising the social and the political?

What doesn't fit within established frames of analysis is often easier to dismiss than to use as a force that stretches—or even breaks—the frames themselves. Yet our encounters with 'politics' and the desire to understand pasts and presents—the craving for that ephemeral peace we associate with 'knowledge'—often emerge from the unexpected, the extraordinary, the abnormal, from what doesn't make sense, from what escapes immediate (re)cognition. The interview process was intended to open space for expanding the scope of awareness in this regard. It sought to reorient attention towards the minutiae of everyday life and lived experience when reflecting on what shapes the aesthetic sensibility of the discipline. 'The international has to be something complex', I often hear from students, explaining why their research designs seem to call for more theory or yet another case study. But in the intimate space where attention meets attention, 'complexity' begins to mean something else. It is no longer just about theory as we know it, or data that can be gathered and categorised. What falls below the threshold of academic sensibility continues—somewhere, somehow—to make a demand on our on attention. Life beneath the academic radar punctuates learning journeys, waiting to grow towards the light whenever a window opens, or a crack appears.

The inquiry into 'why study IR' softly tugs at the threads of yet unspoken pursuits of life learning as we ease into the interviews. What unfolds is a textured archive of imprints and impressions—traces of people, moments, and circumstances where 'politics' was first encountered, sparking a desire for 'knowledge'. Specific individuals emerge as sources of inspiration, often without ever knowing it. 'I admired how my mentor navigated patriarchal power structures—surrounded by men twenty years her senior, she always earned their respect'. Another recalls, 'When I visited my grandma, she showed me the books she kept stored in an old fridge that no longer worked, inviting me to borrow any I liked. I realised some of them belonged to my dad, an engineer, and how deeply he was into politics'.

As biographical threads deepen, their entanglements begin to reveal themselves horizontally, juxtaposed with other lifelines within the group. A father's passion sparking his daughter's interest in the academic field

sits alongside experiences where the discipline's subject matter has already been wired into the body, painfully and without choice:

'Growing up in an environment where bloodshed and explosion were everywhere – it was normal for me. I didn't know how it happens, who does these things, or why. When I travelled to other countries and saw people living peacefully, enjoying their lives, it really made me think: how does this system work? Who does this? Who wants this? Why can't we stop these things from happening?'

The stories gather like distant, scattered islands.

Between innocent curiosity and the urgent need to make sense of the marks of embodied violence—as a matter of life, death, and possible futures—stretches a vast terrain of concerns around 'knowledge'. For those with long, Western educational histories, this MA is a third or fourth degree, and their search is for specialist knowledge. 'I was really interested in activist art and how it can influence politics, but I didn't have that political foundation'. Someone else notes, 'I have been looking for a framework to understand structures and processes I can't yet see in the area I want to specialise in, which is the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership. How can I learn to see the patterns?'

For others, particularly those coming from the post-Soviet space or the Global South, the promise of knowledge also lies in knowing otherwise—seeking more open, attentive, and caring ways of being together in a community:

'In the environment where I come from, critical thinking is not encouraged. A question is considered as a lack of knowledge rather than seeking knowledge'.

They continue: 'Children are not taught how to communicate emotions. We don't teach each other how to connect. Learning how to communicate emotions is important – if the world is ever to become a better place'.

Knowledge is also entwined with action. The weight of environments on life forms—and the desire to transform them—extends knowledge not only into knowing how to govern differently but towards cultivating a different leadership mindset, embodied by the new generation. Some of my interviewees share carefully considered plans for how this degree

program might support concrete projects—founding a women’s empowerment initiative, or starting an NGO upon returning home. They speak of these ambitions in contrast to conversations with friends and peers who envision careers within formal institutional structures. ‘This is how I want to make a difference’. As I write this, I pause to note that none of those aspiring to become diplomats, foreign ministers, or ambassadors volunteered to speak with me about their learning journeys.

‘I wanted to understand how we got here as people. Leadership will change if it comes from the actual community’, one reflects.

In a resonant tone, another adds, ‘If you are not a doctor, a lawyer or an engineer, your parents are disappointed. I wish more African people would study other things. It is also about mentality, a different relationship to education’.

Someone else concludes: ‘We need more scholars of colour. If I get really good at writing, then I could be a scholar and contribute to things’.

An emphasis on ‘practice’ and the desire to ‘do something’ runs through many reflections. Yet while students from the Global South often see academic knowledge as an enabler, those with Western educational backgrounds tend to express more ambivalence: for them ‘practice’ stands in deep tension with ‘theory’. ‘I don’t want to become an IR scholar – I want to do something more practical’. I do my best to soften the edges of this assumed divide, while acknowledging the impact of Western social science’s default colonial aesthetics—*as if* theory had nothing to do with acting upon the world. ‘Theory is also a mode of doing’, I offer, ‘and it’s up to us how we choose to read it, write it, and put it to work – and for what ends’. Unsurprisingly, I don’t always succeed in this attempt: how could a single statement from a faculty member undo this conditioning, let alone affirm another truth? The distrust in the discipline’s ability to contribute to social transformation lingers:

‘Sorry to interrupt, Professor, but maybe we’re in the wrong subject... maybe we should be mastering humanitarian aid or social work if we want to see real change!’

Yet ‘practice’ without ‘theory’—or without an orientation that infuses practice with meaning and guards it from becoming mere bureaucratic operation—feels insufficient, too. One of my conversation partners reflects:

‘I don’t want to work for an NGO, where anyone could have done the same job, and then left... There has to be a more impactful way for me to be in the world and feel satisfied, so that I can sleep at night’.

What counts as ‘impact’, what it means to make a difference, or what a recognisable pathway to ‘real change’ might look like—these questions surface repeatedly in our conversations. Yet, they often remain elusive, unresolved, and conflicted, weighing most heavily on those with a Western educational background:

‘How can you contribute with this degree, this knowledge? Going back to your region, it is expected that you fix things, but then you realise that changing society is not a fixable problem’. Another adds:

‘I never went into the field of IR expecting that it could stop war. That would put you in an awkward position. It’s absurd to think that maybe you are the one who could prevent war... as a student!’

Caught between optimism and pessimism about what might be possible, the fallback position often circles back to an aspiration—to do something—without yet knowing exactly what or how.

‘I obviously want to do good in the world and I want to make an impact, but I don’t think everybody can do that. Maybe we are not going to be those people – that is OK’.

Someone else interjects:

‘I’m not sure I agree with you. I think everyone can do something’.

One of the interviews ends there. We smile at each other, held for a moment by the hopeful tone and the wide, undefined space carried by that word—*something*. It wraps around us, and perhaps, around the islands of knowledge politics we've been navigating. Maybe this, too, is a gateway to the field beneath, or rather, the field over and around the disciplinary field—into the abundant, fertile 'mess' that has long pre-existed any order of scholarly thinking.

I am learning about learning

theirs, mine, ours  
 endlessly pondering  
 what it might mean  
 to attend to the mess  
 without fear  
 without apology  
 letting go of the need of certainty  
 in academic knowledge  
 and elsewhere  
 unlearning the learnt insignificance  
 by turning to the richness  
 already here,  
     in all of us

    as the contours of islands  
     shift  
 on paper  
 in my mind  
 I am learning about learning  
 not only through the words

but the water that connects  
 solid-looking forms and their inner plasticity  
 their inherent potential to change

I wonder, if in this way,  
 the Second World-story of invisibility  
 and other ways of relating to self, other,  
 knowledge, world  
 that limit, separate, empty out  
 might slowly be rewritten,  
 here,  
     knowing as becoming –  
     we already are ‘intrinsic collaborators’

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## curating learning journeys

‘What has been a challenge for you?’ I intend to ask about how my interview partners have been navigating the field of knowledge they identify as International Relations, but I leave the question open, inviting any kind of challenge they wish to name—whatever has surfaced alongside their studies. While aspirations vary widely, struggles with language and time touch almost everyone. Most students are not native English speakers. Yet this feels like a taboo, carefully skirted around. Admission to the program assumes fluency—not only in English but in worlding a social milieu constructed and sustained through its dominance. The actual degree of comfort—the ease or strain of this fluency—remains largely unspoken, tucked away as a personal responsibility. Where our ‘English’ comes from, and how it sits alongside the other languages and worlds we carry, is rarely seen as anything *political*. Any ‘lack’—framed against the expectation of seamless, ‘natural’ inhabitation—is relegated to the bureaucratic terrain of ‘skills development’ and the domain of university support services. I am reminded of my own struggle as an MA student in this same program nearly two decades ago. I remember feeling painfully aware of the misfits in my own making as a ‘knowing subject’ (see Foucault, 1994, p. 256), constantly working to adjust—to improve—in order to write, speak, and think IR in a recognisable manner. Back then, I believed the answer was simple: I just needed *better* English.

About half of those who signed up for ‘Knowing, Narrating, (re)Writing International Relations’ (KNR) do not have a background

in IR. At one level, familiarity with a related branch of the social sciences can be helpful. Some describe IR as a curious fusion—‘a bit of everything from other disciplines’—and, because of this hybridity, not quite as serious as fields with longer or more rigidly defined canons. ‘It’s like a playground’, one student mused, ‘you have all these different components – swings, slides – that’s the beauty of IR’. Yet the same familiarity can also become a cap on imagination, manifesting in categorical judgments about what *is* or *is not* considered ‘proper’ IR. KNR has often been labelled—especially by those who studied IR before—as ‘not IR’, regardless of what learning may have unfolded through it. ‘Really interesting course, even therapeutic, but not IR’. Interestingly, having no prior investment in the discipline’s implicit structures can be a gift. It leaves space for what might otherwise be perceived as impossible, irrelevant, or inappropriate: the insignificant, the amateur, the altruistic.

For those without prior IR training, the discipline’s language often feels like an impediment, both in completing assignments and in trying to participate in class discussions.

‘I can handle the readings, but the way of speaking is a huge adjustment. It’s a kind of language I never use in conversation. Sitting in class, I can tell who has an IR background and who is like me – just sitting as a deer in the headlights.’

Someone with multiple degrees in linguistics notes: ‘language is already a barrier ... but we have no choice but to work with it’. For them IR ‘feels like a foreign language’, one that demands the mindset of a language learner: ‘at first, it’s just an undifferentiated mass of sounds, but there is an intonation, a rhythm, and from that, we can start drawing meaning and identifying patterns’. The wisdom of this insight stays with me. Perhaps listening for the rhythm really can help us find connections and other traces of life across things, people, and the more-than-human world rendered lifeless by other knowledge practices.

The scale of foreignness can feel vast and intimidating. Some try to mitigate it by seeking relatable points of reference beyond the IR jargon. Basic expressions are frequently looked up online, and I learn about a summer project dedicated to checking *all* IR terms on Wikipedia before starting the program. Concepts demand translation, yet attempts to render them in everyday language are simultaneously discouraged in academic writing.

The senses made remain disjointed, as one way of doing things overwrites other possibilities. I hear repeatedly that ‘any particular way of thinking can be explained in simpler words’. Yet, somehow, experience suggests otherwise—not for lack of creativity or effort in finding other ways of wording. Someone laments, ‘Why do people have to flex their vocabulary? But I feel when I’m writing for class, I’m guilty of the same thing’.

### inner formations

Learning to reproduce disciplinary discourse comes with its own distinct pushes and pulls—what is often perceived as both ‘fancy’ and alienating in IR’s language archive. ‘Vis-à-vis is literally there in every text, and all these other phrases that make you appear cool’. Listening to my conversation partners, I recall how learning to speak a language also places demands on one’s mode of being. It shapes subjectivity. In working out what means what, we slip into a field of forces. Language not only affects relations—it produces them. We become recognisable within a particular social milieu, but what’s less visible is how this very formation can sever existing bonds and make it harder to create new ones.

I remember how our interactions lost some of their natural flow and straightforwardness when I started high school – my grandmother and I.

The conversation around the dinner table with my family when my first book was published.

The affective labour of closing distances and mending the space between us – carried by what, from one perspective, might be called accomplishments:

the acquisition of knowledge, a contribution to a disciplinary field.

The everyday worlding of the discipline gives rise to a distinctive aesthetic regime of sense-making. Learning its language offers a sense of control—what Carol Cohn calls ‘cognitive mastery’ (1987, p. 704)—which inevitably informs how we relate to what we speak or write about. Distinctions drawn and absorbed between language registers and knowledge categories begin to separate life forms. Becoming fluent in the

language of International Relations may, often unwittingly, silence others. One interviewee, who studied IR at the BA level, bursts out, clearly disillusioned—questioning the very notion of ‘mastery’ embedded in the degree structure:

‘I’m disconnected... I’ll write good papers based on the knowledge of others, but I know that when I leave the classroom, life is based on *my* knowledge’.

The perceived gap between knowledge and experience only grows wider:

‘I was expecting something more, something different – and above all, international relations, which means human relations! We can create international relations just from the books of others; we don’t even need to go out there anymore. How can you build a life in international relations just inside the library?’

Disconnection surfaces not only in how one relates to the subject matter—often framed through abstract considerations of high politics and policymaking—but also in the experience of learning and *doing* IR as an everyday practice. It emerges in the act of thinking within the intellectual and affective grids of mainstream syllabi, within the questions posed and the answers offered. Yet, from time to time, quiet whispers punctuate the default performance of cultured idea exchange. As we speak, a student from Central Asia shares their disappointment, laced with disbelief:

‘I have lived in Central Asia, but people who’ve never been there will read these articles – what will they think? How can such renowned professors, like Francis Fukuyama, write in such a biased way? How can he write these things with the knowledge and experience he has?’

Had it not been for the interview, I wonder if these words would have been spoken aloud in this way—with the emotions intact, without suppressing the pain of misrepresentation. The effort invested into emulating what counts as ‘good academic practice’ leaves little room to question it, let alone to engage in what Elina Penttinen describes as ‘understanding academic research as a form of practice’—one possible way among many of relating to self, others, and worlds. She writes that we need to ‘turn back and take a good look at what is going on at that moment in which we sit down with our books and research material and

begin creating, interpreting and understanding what we believe to be meaningful in the realm of international relations' (2013, p. 33). This mode of inquiry directs attention to the body, our emotional states, and personal dispositions in the very acts of meaning making. It calls on us to think *and* feel, and just as importantly, to grant ourselves permission to do so beyond the normalised aesthetic sensibilities of the profession.

Yet what holds us back from allowing ourselves to feel—deeply and expansively—is shaped as much by the learning infrastructure of the modern university as by the familiar aesthetics of disciplinary habit. The challenge of managing workloads and maintaining mental health within a competitive environment finds its way into every conversation. It tends to come up towards the end of the interview, named almost as a logistical inevitability that everyone must somehow navigate. It warrants acknowledgement but rarely invites further discussion. Remarks like 'it doesn't leave you energy to do anything else' roll out in a matter-of-fact tone. Only a few students pause to question what has become the default mode—the drill of worlding IR. One, already holding a PhD in another field, reflects: 'This MA is more strenuous than a PhD program—I can't afford to go to class without having done the readings'. Stress runs as an ever-present undercurrent of the program, its scale far exceeding expectations. 'There is a pressing deadline on everything we do'. Another person jumps in:

'Professor, when was the last time we actually *thought* about something? Time spent on thinking – knowledge for the sake of knowledge – just isn't possible.' They tell me that peer pressure reinforces the same sense of institutional scarcity. 'You don't want to look like you have too much time on your hands, either.' Appearances of the acceptable kind of 'busy' have to be kept up but ultimately, what transpires is another kind of learning that none of them have signed up for. Appearances must be maintained – the right kind of 'busy' – but what emerges is another kind of learning none of them set out to embark on. 'Do you realise that every time we read, the knowledge doesn't stay in our heads?' What sounds like a question lands more as a statement, offered for my understanding. My conversation partner is visibly upset – the first to allow themselves to show and share their frustration without tempering it. 'It defeats the purpose. It's not about laziness'.

As I listen, I recall conversations with colleagues about how some courses have already reduced reading loads and assignments. There's an unspoken assumption that the demands of the program may no longer align with the realities students navigate.

But perhaps what is truly being 'taught' is not what either of us—students or faculty—originally signed up for. Frustration gives way to a deeper sense of desperation as my conversation partner continues: 'I'm going to make it through, and nothing will stay with me. *Zero* will be retained. We're learning how to skim, how to "muddle through" – just like in bureaucratic politics. In the end, we'll have a Master's in how to manage tasks, be flexible and multi-task – but that's all'.

It took me some time to fully hear what was being said and grasp the weight of it, even though I caught glimpses of these histories of subject formation earlier. When asked about their BA subjects, students often respond: 'Oh, I barely remember anything'. Much like how the technology industry designs users rather than products (see Williams 2018, p. 10), learning infrastructures—here and elsewhere—shape knowing subjects at a more profound level than the knowledge fields themselves. The 'how' begins to overwrite the 'what'. Over time, experiences accumulate as the body remembers at least one thing: not how to grow, expand, or create, but how to survive—and with that, how to constrict, limit, and exclude. The sharp edges of critique are gradually worn down as bodies slip into self-preservation mode—and may stay there, in and beyond the classroom, often without even realising it. The learned docility pays off in society, while its costs remain unseen. It was only in that moment—when stating the obvious broke open into a loud, undeniable statement—that I came to see the urgency of unmaking these internalised scripts of learning. Of finding ways to loosen the grip of the rule-abiding, 'muddling' subject drained of the energy to think beyond what is given—in my students, and in myself.

In closing, I ask my interviewees what they thought could be done differently, at least as far as our course, KNR, is concerned. The question is met mostly with silence, and appreciation for being asked. Then, one reflection comes. To my surprise, the suggestion isn't 'read less'.

‘The question isn’t what we shouldn’t be reading... reading is an investment. Texts are like seeds. A lot of what we read will only start to germinate later. Maybe never, for some. But for others, it can be a catalyst’.

The way forward, then, is not reading less. For now, I hold on to that.

### mastering otherwise

Ever since, I can’t unsee the ‘masters of bureaucratic management’ in gradual, continuous making. While the space of germination that opens when attention meets words on the page never disappears, the possibility of working *attentively* with what we read, hear, say, or otherwise sense slips away in the quiet, everyday performance of expectations. Participating in our sense-making processes with awareness—to be able to pause and reflect as thoughts, images, and impressions arise—depends on the felt sense that such space exists. Looking more closely requires (self-) authorisation: the courage to explore beyond the familiar frames of whatever lies before us, to affirm the generative potential of the yet-unknown. It asks for patience, for staying with what is present—a non-guaranteed investment in another way of seeing. Yet, on the wordless edge of saturation, wrestling with competing pulls and distractions, attention fragments along the plane of instructions. In such a narrow mode of sensing, the energy we give morphs into a transactional resource—fuel for performing what is required, for finishing the task, for getting the degree. I’ve witnessed it many times how bodies, mine included, retreat into the automatisms they already know. As we speak and write, in the subtle economies of speech, silence, and other gestures, I cannot unsee my own complicity—perpetuating ways of acting that operate beneath recognition yet powerfully shape mind-spaces and nervous systems, unseen but deeply felt.

In emails and consultations  
questions asked and received in haste  
writing assignments and my grading of them

in and through the texts we produce  
the words we exchange  
what bodies know and remember

I register the moments of closure:

as we skirt walls and borders that live in us  
what we are not ready to see, and  
the fear that holds them in place  
or perhaps, our denial of both

when despite all efforts, nothing seems to move  
when we are caught up in choreographed motions  
roles enacted without feeling our ways through them

I note my powerlessness when what I offer  
is not received

when *more* –  
more food for thought, inspiration, provocation  
more encouragement  
more questions without answers  
linger heavy in thick air

as ‘pedagogy’ that  
somehow, somewhere  
missed  
the mark  
and missed to mark  
what is present  
what was open,  
waiting

and equally,  
when I, too, am closed to  
the possibility of inhabiting  
the space we share  
otherwise  
as I nervously keep the time and

miss out on  
the fullness of the moment

I remind myself:

it is not about  
reading less,  
or trying to give  
more,

but  
how  
aware  
I am and  
we can ever be  
to what we have  
not been trained  
to notice

Conversations with students revealed a range of junctures—some striking, others subtle—where ‘discipline’ meets ‘life’. I began to see more clearly how lived experience grows through formal academic structures and their familiar aesthetics as we inhabit them day by day. With hindsight, however, it wasn’t until this particular interview that I came to understand how our trajectories—traced through singular lifelines—intertwine and fold into one another. Moments of illumination, where disciplinary and logistical forces intersect in shaping the knowing subject, marked a real turning point for me. They reshaped how I thought about the horizon of possibility in education, and the direction of my own pedagogical practice.

My earlier points of concern had emerged around what I interpreted as blocks to learning, such as a lack of personal connection to the body of scholarship that students are introduced to and come to identify as International Relations. Closely tied to this was a shared unease about the limited alternatives this body of work seemed to offer for thinking and working through questions that matter—globally, locally, and in one’s own personal paradigm. What began as a search for ‘connection’ and ‘alternatives’ gradually became a clearer, more embodied orientation: a commitment to locate and experiment with affirmative, life-enhancing modes of being, doing, and being together—within but also beyond the curriculum and the institution. I began seeking remedies not only to disconnection and despair, but also to the (self-)

extractive, logistical constitution of academic subjectivity. My attention turned towards the register of the *how*—the everyday gestures and states, affective textures and subconscious currents through which habitual sensibilities are enacted, and, I came to believe, could also be gently remade. If we can come to understand not only *what* kind of sense we make, but *how* we make it—the micro-practices that shape relations and affect lives, including our own—we may open the door to ways of knowing that support more curious, creative, sustainable, and wholehearted ways of living and acting.

And with that, a cascade of questions was set in motion.

How might we come to see more clearly how we see and make sense?

How might we become more aware of and attuned to the lenses, reference points, assumptions, biases, and blind spots through which we render realities intelligible—both our own, and that of others?

And with that,

how can we shift from relating to knowledge as commodity, toward an understanding of knowing as a way of being – resonant with the rhythm of life, always in motion, in a continuous state of (un)becoming?

How might we being to imagine who we are and what we may be capable of in a more expansive sense, yet with humbleness and care?

How might we craft gentler modes of acting, ones that can lift the survival mode and instead, nurture the conditions for growth while honouring all forms of life—starting within our own paradigms?

Holding space for the gifts—and the risks—that may emerge as we go,

how can I, from my institutional position as instructor, facilitate movement in any of these orientations?

How might we all, within—but neither confined to, nor defined by the frames of recognisability already in place—

master otherwise,

without seeking mastery as control, or as destination?

And what are, where are the pathways from ‘muddling through’ to

healing,

growing,

flourishing?

It was amidst these ruminations that the notion of ‘learning journeys’ began to articulate itself for me—both within and beyond the classroom.

The metaphor came to me intuitively, gesturing towards the boundlessness of how and what we come to make sense of and understand as we move through life experientially, even if our travels take us through socially and institutionally bounded spaces from the start.

Julian Sefton-Green and Ola Erstad speak of ‘learning lives’, a notion that places learning ‘within a “whole-life” perspective’, also as ‘learning *for* life’, a modality of learning that makes us more responsive to ‘changing life pathways and transitions’ (2013, pp. 1–2). At the same time, Sefton-Green draws attention to the cartographically charged image of the ‘journey’, and its intimate connection with the colonial practice of ‘mapping’. He cautions against the tendency to search for a ‘route’, warning that this may cause us to overlook ‘the journeys not taken, the redundancies, the repetitions and the activities whose ends we cannot know or even guess at’ (Sefton-Green, 2017, p. 117).

The sensibility of a ‘journey’, as I saw it in my mind, appeared as *journeying*, holding space for wanderings, meanderings, accidental shifts, turns and pauses—those moments that unfold in the liminal spaces between the unfamiliar now and our familiar reference points against which new understanding begins to take form. Academic disciplines and learning infrastructures often render learning in finite and predictable terms as per their frames of recognition and the particular modes of operation they reward. Yet beyond the classroom—and outside a practice of instruction that steers towards completion within a system of commodification (see Cowden and Singh 2013, pp. 42–43)—learning continues to arise from our relationship to the unknown. It lives in what we may come to realise for *ourselves*, each in our own way—whether with or without the help of others—on paths that are neither linear, nor visible, let alone anticipated.

In processing the inexhaustibly rich textures of what has been worlded through experience, previously distinct planes may come together—often in unpredictable, and seemingly chance-like ways. Insights surface as fragments of experience constellate, even when their edges don’t fully align, allowing space to probe further, more deeply, and from new angles. Understanding often arrives in hindsight—days, years, or even decades later—while the infinite poetic potential of meaning making remains the ever-present backdrop to whatever content may take form.



## teaching oneself

I have been reflecting on what teaching would look like if it were modelled after—and intentionally designed for—learning as an ongoing, non-linear, and innately transgressive process. Martin Heidegger observes that ‘teaching is more difficult than learning because what teaching calls for is this: to let learn’. The true teacher, he suggests, is someone who ‘lets nothing else be learned than – learning’ (2004, p. 15). To teach, then, is to ‘be capable of being more teachable’ (2004, p. 15) than those we call students, whose real learning lies not in what to learn, but in how. I keep on pondering what it might mean to commit to learning in this way—to embody a process that resists containment or perfection, whether in the form of what or how I ‘teach’, or in the unfolding worlding of my own life beyond the academy? How do I remain teachable—and keep expanding that capacity—in and through the web of encounters and entanglements we navigate each day?

If teaching, too, is rooted in a place of not-knowing—the very place from which learning arises—it asks us to stay with discomfort, to trust it, and to welcome it as a generative, fertile state. It calls for staying with the grappling without wishing it away. Cultivating an epistemic praxis aligned with the rhythms of life—impermanence and possibility—may give rise to a patient, non-instrumental, receptive mode of attention. A self-reflexive attitude nourished by genuine curiosity towards self, others, and the multiple worlds we traverse. Inhabiting these liminal spaces also invites us to ask: what forms of knowledge and what ways of knowing meaningfully support changing perspectives and the expansion of our thinking-feeling capacities, enabling everyday transformations in these times and circumstances? I note though that this way of knowing as a process of becoming cannot be given to another: it can only be inspired. Sparked.

I have been searching for methods that might spark a sense of openness—not only towards what we are looking at, but also towards *how* we come to see what we see.

This search brings me back to my long-standing fascination with Jacques Rancière’s figure of ‘the ignorant schoolmaster’ and the ethos of democratic education grounded in the equality of all intelligences, that is, everyone’s equal capacity to make sense of their experiences and to translate what they see, hear, and otherwise sense in their own words.

For Rancière, emancipation lies in the realisation and ongoing practice of autonomous sense-making—when someone learns, as he puts it, ‘how to be equal in an unequal society’ (1991, p. 133). Yet we have long since learned how to be unequal, often without even realising it. Tyson E. Lewis observes that ‘the first lessons of education are always on the level of the senses themselves’, where a hierarchical disposition of bodies, voices, and gestures becomes inscribed into the ways we sense, and make sense of, ourselves, one other and the world around us. ‘Is it not true’, he asks,

that we all teach ourselves and our children to ‘unsee’ certain realities that would otherwise challenge our fundamental beliefs were they to be openly acknowledged? For instance, we must learn to unsee homeless individuals, stray animals, pain and suffering, exploitation, and ecological disasters if we are to maintain the ability to function as productive workers within a post-industrial economy. Or we must unsmell trash, noxious fumes and other disagreeable odors which would indicate the decay of our environments. (2012, p. 4)

Formal education builds upon and continually reinforces pre-existing designs of social ordering. What is rewarded, sanctioned, disciplined, encouraged, or even demanded in the classroom and at the university unfolds within frames of recognisability that echo and reify familiar structures: traces from our earliest, subconscious encounters with the world. As Lewis emphasises, ‘before cognition, *there is already an aesthetic partitioning of the sensible*’ (2012, p. 4). We see and hear within the narrow and always exclusionary confines of how our senses have been trained to relate to the sensory planes of everyday life. The grids of sensibility also mark the limits of compassion: what remains invisible, distant, or illegible to our trained perception cannot be felt, and thus, cannot be cared for. A sense of equality, then, is not merely an abstract idea but a transformational experience within the very structure of social being—one that must be practised, enacted, and claimed within the hierarchically ordered micro-worlds and milieus we traverse each day. Yet the capacity to perceive and make meaning beyond the aesthetics of familiarity—to translate what is sensed into a self-same language and words that feel genuinely ours—can only begin to develop within the social norms, roles, and functions that have already shaped our inner landscapes and cognitive habits. This, too, becomes a matter of learning to notice—of cultivating

the attentiveness to recognise those fleeting, subtle moments, even if only for a few seconds at a time, when rehearsed patterns crack, and something unexpected, unanticipated, or unnameable makes itself felt.

I keep wondering how to invite, facilitate and stay with such moments.

How might we work with them?

What might we call this mode of attentiveness  
in action?

What may be the acting verb for attuning to the micro-  
avenues of emergence?

Rancière recounts the story of ‘the ignorant schoolmaster’, Joseph Jacotot, who accidentally disrupted the cycle of reproducing the ‘old master’s explicative order in the minds of students. With it, he also interrupted the learnt incapacity—the internalised refrain of ‘*I can’t, I don’t understand*’ (1991, p. 23)—that renders individuals dependent on someone else’s knowledge, on ‘expertise’ to bridge the gap when they no longer trust the power of their own understanding. Using a bilingual edition of *Télémaque* as ‘the minimal link of a thing in common’ between himself and them (1991, p. 2), Jacotot’s students taught themselves comparing the French text to its Flemish translation. The method was simple: without the mediation of the teacher’s explanation, they sought patterns, identified correspondences, and drew connections between what was known to them and what was unfamiliar. Comparing and contrasting the known and the unknown, students made their own sense by the act of relating. Through a practice of relational meaning making, they learned to read, speak, and write in French—without ever having been formally taught how. What started as a chance pedagogical experiment revealed something profoundly philosophical about the process of learning itself: that everyone is capable of making sense of what is unknown to them autonomously, without reliance on the teacher’s knowledge or explanation (see Strausz, 2022). Jacotot’s method, later termed ‘universal teaching’, gave rise to a form of intellectual emancipation that he discovered could extend across disciplines. As Rancière recounts, Jacotot deliberately chose to teach subjects in which he felt least competent—such as painting or piano—and even guided students in litigating in Flemish, a language he did not speak himself (1991, pp. 14–15).

Jacotot’s accidental pedagogy, propelled by the ‘facts’ of learning he observes in his students’ growing practical competence, enacts a radical

rupture in the normalised aesthetics of education. This rupture exposes the pedagogical fiction that underpins social and educational hierarchies: the imagined division between ‘knowing minds and ignorant ones, ripe minds and immature ones, the capable and the incapable, the intelligent and the stupid’ (1991, pp. 6–8). Such classifications, and the hierarchical dispositions they impose, sustain a continuous practice of explication: the teacher’s presumed role is to tell the student what they do not know and how to improve. The ‘art of *distance*’ is central to this logic of stultification, whereby ‘the master always keeps a piece of learning – that is to say, a piece of the student’s ignorance – up his sleeve’ (1991, pp. 5, 21). Rancière describes the mechanism of explication through a ‘double inaugural gesture’: the old master’s declaration of the student’s ignorance and their self-appointed performance to dispel it. The distance between ignorance and knowledge is both established and erased by the same authority figure, looping this act into the student’s relationship with themselves. In this cycle, a kind of ‘opacity’ settles in—as if the student could no longer learn in the way they once figured things out, prior to entering formal education. Understanding becomes tethered to external validation; the ability to make sense is surrendered to an outside authority. Stultification, Rancière argues, betrays the teacher’s ‘fear in the face of liberty’ (1991, p. 108)—the fear that anything might be learned, and any sense made independently, without their intervention. Meanwhile, the student grieves a loss of agency: ‘understanding that he doesn’t understand unless he is explained to’ (1991, p. 8).

The education system transforms this ‘loss into profit’. ‘The child *advances*’, notes Rancière: ‘he has been taught, therefore he has learned, therefore he can forget’ (1991, p. 21). What students acquire and retain are not resources for (self-)discovery, but rather, ‘a new intelligence, that of the master’s explications’—a quality they may go on to reproduce by becoming explicators themselves (1991, p. 8). Substantive knowledge about any subject matter becomes secondary to the aesthetic partitioning in which knowledge claims are embedded. Inequality is thus reinscribed not only through content, but through the form and structure of pedagogical interaction—the choreography of knowing and not knowing—within and beyond formal education. In what Rancière calls a ‘society pedagogicized’, dependence on expert knowledge and guided instruction ‘that could not possibly be formulated by one person on his or her own’ (Bingham & Biesta, 2010, p. 21) becomes a defining feature of social interaction. Explanations, framed as pathways to improvement,

‘serve to cover up the fact that explanations are themselves the problem’ (ibid.). They prefigure a gap and presuppose an incapacity—an assumed lack—that justifies their existence. In doing so, they reinforce the very inequality they claim to overcome.

The ignorant schoolmaster removes the meditating intelligence from the learning equation, beginning instead with the premise that people are already capable of working things out for themselves. This is evident in everyone’s personal history of having acquired a foreign language in early life: their mother tongue. Based on the assumption of the equality of all intelligences, ‘teaching’ becomes a matter of sustained encouragement—will upon will, rather than intelligence upon intelligence—to use the most ancient ‘method’: observation and comparison, making judgements between what one knows and what one does not. Once freed from arbitrarily imposed distances between teacher and learner, what comes into view is that ‘there is only one power, that of saying and speaking, of paying attention to what one sees and says’ (Rancière, 1991, p. 26). By refusing the hierarchical separation of the ‘ignorant’ from the ‘knowledgeable’, Jacotot’s method of universal teaching aims instead to ‘reveal an intelligence to itself’ (1991, p. 28). The task of the ignorant schoolmaster is not to explain, but to ‘verify’ the same intelligence at work in the writing and reading of texts. As Rancière puts it, ‘there is nothing beyond texts except the will to express – that is, to translate’ (1991, p. 10). Understanding, he argues, ‘is never more than translating’—and this is what Jacotot helps his students to discover: ‘that all sentences, and consequently all the intelligences that produce them, are of the same nature’ (1991, p. 9).

The classroom of the ignorant schoolmaster centres the student’s ‘method’ of making sense of the world (1991, p. 14). Education becomes an emancipatory process when ‘mastery’ is no longer tied to the possession of ‘knowledge’ but the ability to embark on a journey of seeing and discovering for oneself. In this reimagined order of learning, the student becomes a ‘seeker’, and the teacher is, first and foremost, ‘a person who speaks to another, who tells stories, and returns the authority of knowledge to the poetic condition of all spoken interaction’ (Bingham & Biesta, 2010, p. 6). When students are addressed as people, they respond as people—not as subordinates under scrutiny, but as equals in a person-to-person relation (Rancière, 1991, p. 11). The teacher doesn’t teach what to learn but rather, trusts everyone’s ability—including their own—to find a path, to make up a process *into* knowing as they go along.

‘One can teach what one does not know’ (1991, p. 101) in and beyond the classroom, by insisting—and persisting—that the other calls upon the universal resources available to them: their will to learn and the capacity to pay attention. Rancière writes that Jacotot

had left them alone with the text by Fénelon, a translation – not even interlinear like a schoolbook – and their will to learn French. He had only given them the order to pass through a forest whose openings and clearings he himself had not discovered. Necessity had constrained him to leave his intelligence entirely out of the picture – the mediating intelligence of the master that relays the printed intelligence of the written words to the apprentice’s. And, in one fell swoop, he suppressed the imaginary distance that is the principle of pedagogical stultification. (1991, p. 9)

Pedagogy becomes a way of supporting and honing the student’s already existing ability to work their way through human expressions and generate their own. ‘The master is he who keeps the researcher on his own route, the one that he alone is following and keeps following’ (1991, p. 33). What is verified is not knowledge itself, but the ‘fact of work’ on the path of knowing: the effort and attention the student invests into their own research, into what they do and say in relation to a ‘third object’, such as a book unknown to both student and teacher. The role of the teacher is to affirm that the student has been searching and has remained in the process of seeking—the mode that inevitably brings something new into view beyond what they were initially meant to find. ‘Whoever looks always finds’ (1991, p. 33) and the teacher’s task is to keep the student motivated to keep looking and to reflect on the process.

In and beyond the classroom, the one who searches is prompted by the other to give an account of the search. In Rancière’s narration three guiding questions help to reconstruct the work of attention in how they engaged with the shared object: ‘What do you see? What do you think about it? What do you make of it?’ (1991, p. 23). In articulating and translating the experience of seeking and finding, the student turns inward—towards the mechanisms of their own meaning making. Here lies the emancipatory potential of the ignorant schoolmaster’s practice: verifying the process of inquiry allows for an honest relationship to self, disrupting the socially constructed subject position of ‘ignorance’. Attending to one’s own sense-making processes generates insights beyond the hierarchical distribution of capacities. It opens space to connect with

one's own power to see within and outside, to create something with their own devices, to make a 'work, with the pen, with the drill, or with any other tool' (1991, p. 108), without looping through someone else's limiting view of who they are and what they are capable of. As Rancière notes, 'it is always possible to play with this relation of self to self, to bring it back to its primary veracity and waken the reasonable man in social man' (1991, p. 108). In such moments, 'whoever forsakes the workings of the social machine has the opportunity to make the electrical energy of emancipation circulate' (1991, p. 108).

Rather than the acquisition of substantive 'knowledge' in a given subject area, the teacher's concern lies with how the student works with their attention: the process of discovery—of finding things out—and how they become attuned to their own 'method' in doing so. The experience of the spark, the illumination of one's own understanding, is key to freedom: 'whoever teaches without emancipating stultifies. And whoever emancipates doesn't have to worry about what the emancipated person learns. He will learn what he wants, nothing maybe' (1991, p. 18). The emphasis is on how an individual may emerge as a 'thinking subject' both within and beyond the education system, becoming self-aware through their actions as they translate and through that, also *transform* what is yet unknown to them (see 1991, p. 54, see Strausz, 2022). Emancipation, Rancière contends, is 'seized', when, 'even against the scholars, [...] one teaches oneself' (1991, p. 99).

### curating the work of attention

In the paradigm of the ignorant schoolmaster, 'knowledge is nothing in itself and *doing* is everything' (1991, p. 109). Much of this doesn't need theorising—we've never really stopped 'teaching ourselves' since the moment we began to speak our first language. Our 'methods' may have taken different forms at different times.

I used to doodle a lot in school. The movement of my hand and the shapes that appeared on the page helped anchor my thinking in my body. In moments of panic, I still draw mind maps to give form to what feels like an infinite tangle of tasks. By seeing them take up a defined space on paper, I can reconnect with the spaciousness within myself—and with the power to work with what there is.

Circling back to the IR classroom, I have been pondering how to translate the ethos of being in—and staying with—a mindset of search. This means moving away from what Klinkenborg describes as the ingrained habit of managing ‘the evidence gathered from other authorities’ and turning instead towards ‘cultivating one’s own authority’ (2013, p. 31). I’ve come to realise that, in most of my classes, directly probing into the work of attention may not be effective. The postgraduate classrooms I navigate are already steeped in the aesthetics of disciplinary discourses—both in IR and across the social sciences—and in the conventions of academic thinking. The interviews revealed that it’s not uncommon for students to spend an entire class silently worrying about saying something ‘smart’. Some concentrate on crafting one polished intervention, holding onto it for nearly the full duration of a hundred-minute seminar. Even when courses offer caring, accommodating environments, we tend to default to the lowest common denominator of prior and present learning experiences—which, in this context, is still one of performance under pressure, within a competitive, scarcity-driven world shaped by self-doubt, learned insignificance, and a transactional approach to education. I began to see that the questions—‘What do you see? What do you think about it? What do you make of it?’ (Rancière, 1991, p. 23)—need to be brought into the classroom differently. Their power must be folded into the processes and practices of learning itself, so they don’t remain merely intellectual prompts. The aim is to bypass the already conditioned intellect trained to perform for academic validation, and instead cultivate a space where reflection can emerge from a more personal place—one that is intimate, yet remains safe within the public realm of the university.

Jacotot’s technique centred reading-comprehension as a modality of comparing and contrasting, making sense of the written word as a repository of human expression, propelled by the same intelligence as the one deciphering the marks. Transforming an instrumental, logistical relationship to ‘knowledge’—one that aligns, even if sometimes uneasily, with abstract theorising and disembodied disciplinary language—was not primarily about generating evidence of an equal capacity to make sense of something that someone else had created, however complex it might be. Rancière’s universal method could, indeed, empower an illiterate parent to teach their child to read by asking them to decipher a poem through letters and words they already recognise, moving back and forth between the known and the unfamiliar, giving an account of the process. The question I have been grappling with—in the light of how my students and I

navigate the discipline and the modern university—is how we might find ways to study our own formation as knowing subjects: to come to see where ‘knowledge’ may have constrained our ability to see for ourselves, and equally, to explore how we might become otherwise. How might we develop the capacity to open towards ways of knowing that are more integrative, embodied, and life-enhancing?

I thought I would offer my own terrains and methods of experimentation—the processes of experiential writing—as a way to facilitate private moments of exploration and observation. Moments that re-centre attention from a presumed, external location of authority—the figure of the instructor—back to itself, and to the affective landscapes of worlding, the ‘folding’ of the outside within (see Deleuze, 2006, pp. 97–98). Writing, in this sense, becomes both a means of grappling with what is not yet known or articulated, and an ongoing invitation to self-reflection through the graphically visible, retraceable archive of the journey (see Emig, 1977, p. 127). For me, leaning into the non-instrumental qualities of writing—allowing writing to write back and reveal what I hadn’t previously seen—has released ‘making sense’ from the pressures of disciplinary performance. Writing has served as a diagnostic tool and transformational space—a site of discovery and self-making beyond the stylised norms and expectations of educational settings.

The ‘method’ I’ve trusted the most in making my own sense—unfolding at the threshold between the familiar and the infinite poetic possibilities of meaning making—has simply been to keep the pen moving.

To keep tapping on the keyboard –

to keep jotting things down as they came to me,  
 freely writing out whatever I carried, and whatever landed  
 as a spark,  
 holding myself, holding myself in this open state.

Writing had already become a vehicle for KNR for steering thinking towards action—for finding voice and crafting connections across seemingly separate planes within and outside us. Following Michael J. Shapiro, experimenting with writing differently offered a way to ‘work on more promising stories’—stories that ‘facilitate perpetual encounters by practicing a writing that is resistant to all static maps and all fixed identity

stories' (1997, pp. 208–209). Shapiro's 'ethics of encounter' emerges from an embrace of uncertainty within which 'place and person must be endlessly negotiated' (1997, p. 208). I began to think that reworking the logistical wiring of academic engagement and expanding our capacity for learning would require an encounter with what precedes the story itself: our own presence in these moment-to-moment negotiations, in the arcs and folds of our continuous becoming as knowing subjects.

Teaching ourselves might begin by becoming more attuned to the many pathways our attention takes as we engage with the discipline and attend to the lives we live. This includes noticing what has long been with us—habits that continue to nourish, those that deplete or constrain, as well as the registers and sensory avenues through which new experience might enter. By looking deeper and closer at the relation of self-to-self, into where and how learning may arise, I began to articulate my current endeavour as staging an encounter with our sense-making processes. Becoming more aware of our own 'method' offers the possibility of working with attention more intentionally—towards great degrees of freedom in how we make meaning, find voice, tell other stories, and connect with the generative power of these capacities.

To learn how to study independently—including the study of self and the ongoing remaking of subjectivity—called for greater sensitivity to the micro-processes of sense-making: to points of contact with the world around us, to how we touch and are touched by what we perceive, and to the subtle movements of folding—how thoughts, feelings, sensations, and what may remain unnamed live in us, and how we live through them. Writing differently—working with the plurality of voices and possibilities of subjecthood within and beyond us—required inhabiting the process of writing differently, too.

Alongside expanding the scope of writing-based reflection and refining the practices we engage in class, I also reflected more thoughtfully on my role as an instructor. What might my embodied version of the 'ignorant schoolmaster' be like? How can I emerge as a co-traveller—one who verifies the search, affirms the capacity to make one's own sense, and holds space for the inner work of transformation as part of reclaiming ownership—perhaps authorship—over our formation as subjects of our time? Through guided writing, I sought to offer frames and protocols that might allow us to re-inhabit our relationships—to ourselves, to others, to the worlds we traverse—while staying with the relation itself. In designing writing prompts and exercises, this meant making space for

the inner search and gently reorienting the desire for mastery towards presence: showing up for the process as an undefined but deeply felt ‘outcome’ of effort and attention. At first, I wasn’t sure how to do this or how to name what was surfacing as mostly improvised practice in the classroom. I thought more about how to frame the prompts, the sequence they followed, and the arc they offered for exploration. Much like ‘learning journeys’, the notion of ‘curation’ appeared on my thinking horizon intuitively. As I began to explore critical and feminist curatorial scholarship, I recognised a shared concern with the making of knowing subjects and how we are shaped through a constellation of staged and unstaged relations—a resonance that spoke directly to my own pedagogical aspirations.

Simon Sheik writes, ‘producing a public is making a world. It is also making other ones possible’ (2007, p. 185). Moving beyond the bourgeois conception of the museum and its attendant duty to preserve and arrange objects for display, acts of curation—especially in critical and feminist curatorial studies—are seen in an expansive sense. Unhinged from the confines of the museum, curation reaches into the everyday composition of the social. Curating objects gives way to curating processes—and with that, curating experiences. As Berit Fischer poignantly puts it, ‘exhibiting’ becomes ‘in-habiting’ (2020). The simultaneous production of meaning, audiences, and agency reveals a pedagogical dimension: one that can either perpetuate dominant structures—national, colonial, patriarchal—or open space for alternative social encounters, prompting new forms of imagination and practice.

Taking this transformational potential further, Paul O’Neil and Mick Wilson point out the multiple conjunctions between curating and education in how

both practices are so often construed in a processual mode, eschewing the foreclosure of ends. They converge, rhetorically at least, in valuing the emergent and as yet undisclosed; they speak of potential. Emphatically resisting the pre-determination of outcomes, these practices attempt to reject a normative production of the ‘good’ subject. (2010, p. 18)

Beyond rhetoric, the radical potential for remaking subjectivity—away from regimes of normalisation—lies in an experiential openness that embraces diverse ways of knowing, and equally, not-knowing, in how we

relate to ourselves, to others, and to our surroundings. The Raqs Media Collective reminds us,

the point is not to render all things and ourselves transparent and legible, but to insist on the interpretative worth of margins of error, of accidents and serendipity, of uncanny resonances and speculative layering, of doubt and ambiguity as the foundations of an epistemology that does not have to ground itself in the dead habit of certainty. (2010, p. 79)

I read the encouragement to work within the liminal spaces of sensing and sense-making in enabling open and open-ended experiences as closely intertwined with how the role of the instructor might be reimaged within educational structures. Ryan Rice describes the curator as a space-maker, as an ‘architect, one who has the foresight to build an approachable, empathetic space that can broaden perspectives within the cultural landscape’ (2018, p. 106). For Berit Fischer, the creation of such empathetic spaces is inherently holistic and life-affirming, centring lived experience and its generative, transformative potential. She observes that ‘today’s utterly mediated and often distanced perception and engagement with the world craves embodied sensorial experiences and holistic ways of critical consciousness raising’ (2023, p. 94). This calls for understanding the curatorial as ‘agency and as caretaker for regenerating and safeguarding a micropolitical relational sensitivity, joyfulness and affectivity’ that turns passive observers and consumers into ‘experiencing participants’ (2023, pp. 94–95). In this practice the ‘knowing body’ comes to the fore: one that holds both unconscious, embodied knowledge, and the capacity for encountering strangeness and creating new expression (see Fischer, 2023, pp. 94–96).

Fischer’s approach is situated within a broader feminist curatorial praxis that seeks to reclaim and redefine curation through its etymological roots—care, cure, curiosity, concern, and as ‘curatorial attention to the primacy of care for all life’ (Krasny & Perry 2023, p. 1). This includes remaking our relationship to the more-than-human world, and actively engaging with what it means to live together in respectful, solidaristic ways within our entanglements and interdependencies (see Fischer, 2023, p. 94). In Maria Lind’s words, this curatorial orientation becomes ‘a way of thinking in terms of interconnections: linking objects, images,

processes, people, locations, histories and discourses in physical space like an active catalyst, generating twists, turns and tensions' (2010, p. 63).

Elke Krasny and Lara Perry describe care as a mode of participation that is fundamentally contextual, grounded in deep immersion. They write that

care is always material. Care is always relational. Questions of care, demands for care, and care needs cannot be answered in the abstract but must be answered through the relations in which care is embedded and which are enabled, supported, performed, or even established through care. (2023, p. 7)

Care repositions the curator—not as a singular authorial figure, but as someone embedded within the sociopolitical processes and relationships they navigate on the ground. Both the curatorial space and the role of the curator expands. Krasny and Perry call for a self-reflexive practice that asks not only *what* the curator's work does, but *what* and *whom* it cares for (2023, p. 8), and *which* struggles it aligns with. Here, the macro and micro converge: 'curating with care' becomes a form of political activism, encompassing practices of self-care and collective care alike. It emerges as 'an anti-capitalist, anti-colonialist, anti-racist, and anti-sexist praxis and politics' (2023, p. 8).

I continue to think with openness, care, and attention to the relational and holistic dimensions of lived, living experience—the breadth of our sensory registers and the textured layers of our interdependence.

More and more, I have come to understand my own practice as curating the work of attention in and through writing.

I keep wondering: what it might look like to inhabit the space of writing as a curatorial space?

What kind of openings might appear when we treat the page not only as a site of articulation, but as a space for *experiencing* the aliveness of sense-making?

What might unfold in the space between pen and paper, fingers and keyboard, in the pauses before and after words—on the liminal edges of language, as we revisit the graphic traces of writing?

Fischer writes:

curating with, and in care, might offer a safe space in which trust can be developed; micro-perception be rehearsed; one's driving force of joyfulness can unfold; and in which affectivity, response-ability, and agency might be practised as an embodied critical micropolitical awareness (2023, p. 102).

How might writing-based reflection embrace—and be infused by—

care for processes  
care within processes  
care for the inner and outer spaces we inhabit  
care for others and ourselves  
care for awareness  
care for becoming

as transformational ethos, politics and practice?

What might it mean to learn

how to *self-curate* our learning journeys –

in this way,

in other ways?

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folding over



## letters to authors

Dear reader,

I often find myself pausing at this point—wondering what comes next after affirming the presence of this relationship. But one thing I’ve learned over the years is that the power of connection—or perhaps the longing to connect—is enough to keep things in motion. It might feel different if I knew exactly who I was writing to, but knowing you are there, and writing with your presence in mind, already does the work.

In class, I often turn to letter writing to explore the complexity of relating—  
and how attuning to the micro-movements of being in relation can open up new horizons of possibility.

The letter form already carries an ethics of relationality. The presumed, rather than actual, presence of the other is both an invitation and a passage of exploration for the self, writing. David Scott, in writing to his late friend Stuart Hall, describes his letters as gestures of ‘thinking about’ and ‘thinking with’ him (2017, p. 4). The letter, he writes, is a ‘speaking form’, almost ‘alive’ in the register of voice through which it unfolds. It evokes proximity and tentativeness ‘in such a way as to call into being, to activate, the dialogical presence of a specific interlocutor’ who is physically absent (2017, p. 6). In this mode of address, a ‘dialogical room’ opens: a

space for ‘expanding, enlarging the cognitive circle, the space of intelligibility’ (2017, p. 17). In the ethos of what Scott describes as the practice of ‘intellectual friendship’, the letter invites an ‘attitude of attentive receptivity, a readiness to appreciatively hear where the other is coming from’ (2017, p. 14).

Writing a letter is a way of becoming present—both to the other and to oneself.

A text becomes a letter through its particular form of address—one that originates from an ‘I’ who signs the letter and, in doing so, affirms its authenticity (see Stanley, 2011, p. 207). Yet the underlying stakes of the letter form lie in what Zimitri Erasmus calls the ‘relational bond’ between writer and addressee. The other may be absent, but the emphasis rests on connection—on the cultivation and continuation of relationship. Liz Stanley notes that ‘epistolary intent’ involves not just the act of writing, but the intention to communicate (2015, p. 242). What is foregrounded, then, is not absence or separation, but rather ‘the continuation of presence by other (epistolary) means’ (Stanley, 2011, p. 137).

The connections cultivated through letter writing extend across multiple planes. What David Scott describes as attentive receptivity also shapes one’s relationship to oneself—to one’s actual state of being. This kind of openness, where the other can be heard on their own terms rather than filtered through the pre-formed concepts we harbour, must be nurtured with care and patience. The longform letter supports this intention: it asks for time to be set aside. It calls for dedication. In doing so, it also invites a turning inward. Through thinking through writing—what Zimitri Erasmus describes as ‘writing as thinking’—thought is exposed as a ‘dialogical and open-ended practice located in—but not bound to—lived experience’ (2021, p. 124).

Writing not only reveals thought but also generates it, shaping relationships both with oneself and with others. Erasmus’ epistolary pedagogy is rooted in a concern for ‘deep literacy’, where ‘critical engagement with what one knows, how one came to know it, and how one might push at the boundaries of one’s mind requires thinking both in isolation and in conversation with others’ (2021, p. 128). Yet the bond cultivated through writing is not directed solely towards the other. Friendship, Erasmus suggests, can also become a mode of relating to one’s own sense-making processes. She writes that

as one would with a friend, I ask students to ‘go for walks with their work:’ to go out for a walk with the specific intention of thinking about their work. If they become conscious of a lapse in their friendship with their work, I encourage them to rekindle this friendship by drawing on lecturers, supervisors and co-learners – the second step. Friendship is ignited by affect; so is thought (2021, p. 128).

Beyond expanding the ‘space of intelligibility’ through the work of thinking, letter writing as an ethical modality also affirms and activates our capacity to feel. It is inherently connective—inviting a friendly, open-hearted stance not only towards the other and their never fully known, sometimes imagined realities, but also towards ourselves. The private letter is generative: it offers a space to dwell in and attend to relationships, to work with and within them. It cultivates what might be described as ‘critical affective literacy’, and with it, what Anwar Ahmed terms ‘affective equivalence’ (2015, p. 391). The possibility of affective states appearing side-by-side across different planes of worlding, carry the potential to soften and transform hierarchical dispositions, social roles, and unevenly distributed capacities—gesturing towards a sense of equality. Letter writing also offers a way to engage our own complex entanglements—social, geopolitical, historical—and the depth of our investment in relating. At the same time, it invites awareness of how we inhabit the *now*. It reflects and subtly reshapes the kind of relationship we hold with the present moment—the time of both writing and connecting.

Thank you for reading on.

### **‘Who are you in conversation with?’**

‘Letters to authors’ is a writing practice in which students are invited to write letters addressed to the authors of assigned texts.<sup>1</sup> Over the years, these letters have materialised in various formats—written during class (both online and in-person), or asynchronously as a reflective task completed in students’ own time. Two main iterations have emerged: letters that are sent, and letters that remain unsent. In both forms, the aim is to cultivate a different kind of relationship to text, knowledge, and one’s own sense of agency. By staging an encounter with the ‘author’—whether through the prospect of actual interaction or the imagined presence of their voice on the page—the practice subverts the

passivity often associated with academic reading, and refocuses attention on the lived, moment-to-moment experience of making sense.

Letters to authors proved particularly resonant during the first three weeks of the course ‘Knowing, Narrating, (Re)Writing International Relations’ (KNR), titled ‘Situatedness: Where Are We, Who Are We in International Relations?’ This opening section invites students to reflect on and problematise subject positions—what it might mean to ‘know’ in and through the discipline. Classes centred on ‘the making of the knowing subject’ turn the gaze inward, working to unmake how we have been shaped—made to appear or disappear, empowered to speak or expected to stay silent, positioned to know, not-know, or forget—through and within the body of scholarship we engage. Whose voices are heard, and what are they allowed to do? Since our entry into the field—or perhaps even earlier, into the wider structures of formal education—we have, to borrow Tyson E. Lewis’s framing, learned to ‘unsee’ ourselves as knowing subjects in our fullness: not only as the ignorant ones but as knowers, theorists, and makers of knowledge (see 2012, p. 4).

As I grappled with these questions myself, I recorded the following reflection in the ‘journaling thread’ I kept in and around the course, while preparing for the letter-writing task:

‘This session engages with the spaces for (self-)reflection on our disciplinary conditioning – how it happens, and perhaps even as it happens. Not only in our academic fields, but also elsewhere. How we internalise norms and expectations – more often as habits or assumptions that operate at an unconscious level. We absorb ways of doing, acting, speaking, and thinking without even noticing. And once we begin to enact and practice these modes, they become shaded from critique and reflection, partly because they’re rewarded – not always explicitly, but through being seen as the normalised, accepted way of doing things. Our ability to fully understand our own making, while it is in process, is necessarily limited. But we can work to open up that possibility – for ourselves, later on. For this, we need to become aware of, and embrace, the idea that there is much to be learned from how we’ve been “made” into knowing subjects of different kinds. And we can begin to create resources – archives – of our own formation, even while we’re not yet fully able to “see”. Understanding how we came to inhabit a particular way of being and a certain mode of perception is key to

changing it, transforming it – to regaining some power over our own formation as knowing subjects.’ (January 19, 2021)

Beyond mapping the aesthetic distribution of the discipline’s sensible (see Rancière 2004; see Choi et al. 2020, pp. 24–26) and our entanglements within it, the emphasis is also on what keeps us going—and how we might nurture that spark. Drawing on personal accounts of IR scholars shared through autoethnography, autobiography, and other creative forms, we talk about what prompts curiosity, where and how learning and discovery unfold, and how life events, negotiations, chance encounters, and transgressions shape our ways of knowing and the kinds of ‘knowledge’ produced within academia. Crucially, we ask: what do we bring with us to these conversations? What experiences, wisdom, inspirations, ephemeral observations—together with doubts, questions, and whatever we may be working through in our breathing, embodied, personal archives—come into view, come into play?

I stage these encounters with texts that already offer a mode or process of introspection at the intersection of ‘the personal’ and ‘the academic’. We read, for instance, Carol Cohn’s ‘Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defense Intellectuals’ (1987), Roxanne Lynn Doty’s ‘Maladies of our Souls’ (2004), Ken Booth’s ‘Reflections of a Fallen Realist’ (1994), Richa Nagar’s *Hungry Translations* (2019), Oded Löwenheim’s ‘The ‘I’ in IR’ (2010), Jenny Edkins’ ‘Objects among Objects’ (2011), and the chapter ‘Shame and Rage’ in Himadeep Muppidi’s *The Colonial Signs of International Relations* (2012). I invite students to write a letter to one of the authors whose work moved them in any way. I frame this invitation through a quote from bell hooks. In *Teaching to Transgress*, she reminds us that ‘theory is not inherently healing, liberatory, or revolutionary. It fulfils this function *only when we ask that it do so* and direct our theorizing towards this end’ (hooks 1994, 61, my emphasis). Writing a letter to an author—not just as a scholar, but as a living, feeling being—can open space for a different mode of relating, a way of asking theory to serve this purpose. For theory—which was once someone’s lived experience, moulded into form—to offer something back to life as it unfolds in the present, the labour of translation, of relating back, of reconnecting with living realities, cannot be bypassed.

For both letters to be sent and those kept unsent, the prompt remains the same: ‘Choose an author whose text you enjoyed reading—someone who felt as though they were speaking to you. Someone you are

already in conversation with, consciously or unconsciously'. I offer only minimal guidance, mostly around the framing: 'Begin with an address—"Dear..."—and sign off with your name'. Within these simple bookends of the letter form, the relationship can unfold and take shape in whatever way feels right, as long as it's held with care, respect, and appreciation:

'You can ask questions, share your reading experience, let them know what resonated or what puzzled you. You might reflect on connections with other texts. Anything that comes to you. Before closing, please don't forget to thank them – your reflections, and whatever discoveries you make in the process, were sparked by their research, writing, and presence'.

Opening up the process of letter writing—whether through sharing the letters themselves or the experience of writing them—with a wider audience creates space for witnessing: a mode of engaged, embodied listening in which relationships-in-the-making are revealed through resonant, shared experiences, layered with contingency, uniqueness, and unpredictability.

When letters are sent to their intended recipients, the anticipation of a living encounter already unsettles the familiar aesthetics of academic study. I've been fortunate to draw on academic friendships and the generosity of peers, many of whom—when approached—have willingly and warmly stepped into the role of respondent. The 'author' comes alive, joining the conversation—reading and engaging with what has been shared in the letters. Students write with the possibility of a real exchange in mind, which unfolded through video messages, emails, and Zoom conversations with scholars and artists whose work we engaged in class. Expanding the forms of interaction in this way brought 'theory' to life in a participatory and democratic spirit. Students' reflections initiated and steered the conversation. Their questions, and the resonances uncovered—where and how we may meet around the concerns discussed as the living relations of international relations—fostered a collaborative dynamic between students, guests, and myself as instructor. Hearing about the real-life negotiations behind a piece of writing—the motivations, challenges, and the ethical and political stakes—brought the text to life, revealing its intrinsic fluidity and tentativeness beneath the appearance of fixity. It also revealed the 'human' behind the human expression captured in language.

The ‘same intelligence’ (Ranci re 1991, p. 9) that produced the marks on the page became tangible and relatable in the presence of someone still working things through. These encounters left both letter writers and recipients equally moved and energised (see Strausz, 2021).

The unsent letters are not shared in class unless someone chooses to do so. To gently widen the circle of intimacy before returning to the plenary space, I first invite students to reflect on their experience in small groups. ‘Who did you choose to write to? What was it like to write to the author? What made you think?’

### modes of address

I want to take time to linger with the small movements of the letter writing process, to notice what unfolds in its quieter gestures and choices. ‘So, how did you address the author you wrote to? What came after “Dear”?’ I ask the class as everyone returns from their small group conversations. In this online session during the pandemic, I invite them to share their responses simultaneously in the Zoom chat, using the ‘cascade of answers’ method.

Here’s what comes through:

‘dear bell (I stylized in all low caps like she does)’

‘dear bell (then I changed it to Dear Professor hooks)’

‘Dear Professor Muppidi’

‘Dear Professor’

‘I started with Dear Carol but then I thought it would have been better to put Professor Cohn’

‘Dear scholar Edkins’

‘Dear Oded’

‘I started with “dear Oded,” but switched to more formal “dear prof”’

About half of the letters began with a formal address. For one student, even the idea of addressing an academic by their first name felt impossible—culturally, it simply wasn’t permitted. At the other end of the spectrum, those who felt relatively comfortable using a first name explained that they did so because they were addressing an author, not a professor. ‘Somehow I felt my letter was emotional, so there was no need to call her “Dear Professor”—I wasn’t critiquing her work or suggesting alternative theories, nothing too professional. It was more about how I felt

reading her text’, one student shared. Another reflected, ‘I didn’t even think much when I wrote “Dear Professor Muppidi.” But later, when I looked at my letter and saw how emotional it was, I realised there might have been a disconnect between the tone of the address and the content of the letter’.

As we move deeper into the conversation—into how each participant navigated the overlap between personal experience and academic reflection—I see hesitant smiles appear, even from those who prefer not to speak. The tone of the discussion shifts. Doubts and uncertainties begin to surface. The boundaries between ‘the personal’ and ‘the professional’ begin to blur. I ask those who began informally but later shifted to a more formal address—what prompted that change? Why the shift from first name to academic title?

There is a pause, and then the reflections begin to unfold:

‘At the beginning I started with dear Carol and then once I finished the letter, I thought it would have been better to put Professor Cohn, because I don’t know ... somehow my letter was written in a way that... I thought that writing, addressing her in a formal way would have been more suitable. I don’t know why, to be honest, I had this feeling from inside that it would have been... I don’t know, easier for me at least, to choose that more formal way’.

Reflexes shaped by earlier educational trajectories begin to surface. For many, formality—and the distance it creates—signals respect and feels like the safest safeguard against overstepping. These modes of address often go unquestioned, even when the memory of their bodily inscription still carries discomfort. One student recalls being a first-year undergraduate and making the ‘mistake’ of beginning an email with ‘hello’, only to be told to resend it with the proper salutation. Everyday anxieties around institutional letter writing arise as well. ‘I re-read the emails I send to university staff at least five times... Every time I can’t decide whether to say “best regards” or “kind regards”...’ Others nod, smiling knowingly. Another adds, ‘I first wrote “dear bell”... but then I paused—what would she think of that? Even though I’m not even going to send it’.

These letters, indeed, were never meant to be sent. There was no expectation of reading or response. And yet, the imagined gaze of the author—and the entire disciplinary apparatus surrounding it—exerts a

real and powerful influence from within. Cultures of academic socialisation become deeply wired into the body and the crafting of the academic self. While this habituation may offer a sense of safety and the comfort of default modes of operation, it can also limit flexibility, adaptability, and more heartfelt ways of connecting and expressing appreciation. In these moments, we encounter what already lives within us—what we carry from one place to the next across our academic journeys. Even in spaces that invite more diverse modes of engagement between students and faculty, loosening the grip of what has been ingrained as ‘appropriate’ conduct is far from simple.

Someone notes:

‘It took me two years to start addressing my professors by their first name, and I still struggle with it. But when I started writing, I ran into the exact same issue as everyone else, apparently...I wrote ‘bell hooks’ and then spent the whole time thinking, “This isn’t actually how it’s supposed to be!”’

Power relations—and our shared entanglements in them—become visible in the space that follows:

‘Dear.....?’

The space, once filled, may pass almost unnoticed. When left empty, it can feel vast. The gesture of addressing a distant other is, in itself, a moment of exposure. In the classroom, unease and discomfort are palpable—so too is the tension between the letter form’s invitation to write from a personal place and the disciplinary pull to censor or edit out what doesn’t align with the learned sensibilities of IR. After all, the practice of letters to authors is designed for the author writing, not the author already written. It creates a safe space—a kind of lab, more like a cocoon—for exploring one’s relationship to academic knowledge, to the life worlds it both hosts and excludes, and to other ways of knowing and being in the university, without the fear of sanction. The published author—and how they live within us—becomes a placeholder and a catalyst for this inner work. Encountering the ‘discipline’ within—our everyday acts of self-making shaped by the demands of academic recognisability, often at the cost of care, connection, or creativity—offers an opportunity to begin transforming our relationships to ourselves, to others, and to the

worlds we both study and inhabit. ‘Authors’, in the plural, gestures towards a realisation of authorship in the self, writing: both as the act of authorising oneself to feel, question, and express on equal terms with others, and as the lived experience of writing—authoring—another way of knowing as becoming into existence. Beyond the infrastructures of academic publishing, the ‘author’ is not only the one marked in print. The ability to connect, in and through writing, resides in all of us who write.

The letter writing practice, in any case, opened up greater awareness of how we participate in knowledge practices—often at a subconscious level. What might be experienced by one student as the negotiation of an institutionally inscribed relationship, ‘Dear Professor’ appeared to another as what they described as an ‘unconscious tactic’ conditioned by the rules and codes of the game. ‘At first, I thought of the letter as a dialogue’, one student shared, ‘but then I found myself constantly referring to the paper she had written. I wanted to highlight the fact that I value her as an academic, so I changed it to “Professor hooks”’. The line between ‘choice’ and conditioned response is blurry. Much, we found, depends on from where—what inner place and institutional context—one is writing. Once this is acknowledged, those who had hoped to create a more personal connection reflected that ‘using the first name would be better, because that makes us feel like we are on the same page’.

For a moment, I stay with the invocation of

‘the real things’

and the quiet contrast it draws with what typically appears in conventional academic discourse. Someone shares that they didn’t manage to complete the letter, but they had made a start:

‘I thought I’d say “dear Oded” and I realised there was no one else I would have addressed by their first name after I wrote that... and I thought that was interesting, because this author allowed for a kind of vulnerability that made me reduce the formality of how I might address them, and the distance between us. I wouldn’t consider that for anyone else I read, for some reason’.

Others chime in, noting that the use of a first name felt natural because the authors themselves had opened something of themselves—something

that couldn't easily be contained within the title of 'professor' or any other academic designation. This suggests that the letter writing practice might have unfolded differently with another set of texts or authors.

For now, at least: 'real' begets 'real'.

I take note of that.

### languages of intimacy

The conversation about modes of address—and the subject positions crafted in negotiating first names versus academic titles—opens onto another plane. Someone shares:

'I love writing letters, and I used to do that in primary school with my Romanian literature teacher. We wrote to each other a lot – like 16 to 20 pages of thoughts! I feel very connected to what I write and to what I read... well, not necessarily in IR, but this was the very first time I connected so deeply with a text! So, I addressed her in my mother tongue. In Romanian. I wrote "Draga Roxanne", which is like "Dear", and then I explained it. I wasn't sure if I should just leave it like that, or to also include her surname. It felt very personal, and I'm still debating'.

Someone else in the group asks whether the whole letter had been written in their native language. We learn that it was just the gesture of address—the rest continued in English. They reflect: 'If I had done this in Hungarian, which is my mother tongue, I would probably have written very differently. I've just realised I didn't even think to do that'. As I listen, it dawns on me that I hadn't explicitly offered this possibility when giving the writing prompts.

In another iteration of letters to authors, in a different class, the letters were actually sent—and the anticipation of an exchange shifted the dynamic. In this version, we discussed language explicitly. My friend and co-traveller Catherine Charrett generously responded to student letters through a video message and a written collage, joining from afar our differently experimental and more outward-action-oriented class, '(Mis) Performing World Politics' (see Strausz, 2021, 2022). Students were invited to write to Catherine in English, Spanish, or Catalan, and each letter was received and responded to in the language in which it was written. It strikes me that when letters remain unsent, language takes on

a different function. It is no longer a means of reaching out to another, but becomes a mirror, reflecting how we inhabit the field of the discipline. We think, speak, and write International Relations in English—a language that, for most of the group, myself included, as well as the majority of teaching assistants I work with, is a learned one: a second, third, or otherwise foreign tongue. A language that can be befriended, even perfected, bent, and adapted—and yet, the innate intimacy may always remain just out of reach, at that elusive meeting point between corpora—of flesh and word.

I remember that even my earliest encounters with English had little to do with leisure or play. It wasn't a language I picked up without effort or intention. By my teenage years, it had become clear that English was my passport to the West—to Western knowledge—and that the privilege of passage had to be earned. It wasn't gifted, and it couldn't simply be acquired. It came through discipline, effort, and a constant reckoning with the sense that my English was still not good enough. 'Still not' carried less hope than 'not yet'. It felt like walking through a dark tunnel without end, propelled only by the will to master syntax and whatever could be worked out and worked through at the level of intellect. It wasn't so much about the expansion of horizons. It was more about the contraction of the body.

It so happened that, for a long time, it escaped me how language—especially the kind of academic English I was learning—moves with and through power structures. How it draws in distant, unfamiliar worlds and, in doing so, pulls them into my own. These worlds, despite—or perhaps because of—their foreignness, began to make claims on what matters. My points of reference gradually shifted. The native language that didn't 'know' these distant realities quietly receded. Suspended in its wisdom and its unique way of making sense of the world, it became *regional*. Out of place, in hiding, it often no longer responds when its utmost competence is called upon. Such as connecting with and making sense of one's own lived experience.

I know I'm complicit in this forgetting.

And I'm grateful that the letters, and our conversations around them, brought this into view.

I also take heart in the fact that my repeated invitations to inhabit these writing processes in personally meaningful ways helped bring forth something I, as the designer and facilitator of these practices, had initially failed to make room for.

### ‘writing for yourself’

Engaging with the course material in an unscripted way brought a tangible sense of openness into our interactions. Conversations began to spill over into reflections on academic experience beyond the classroom. ‘In my previous university, I was encouraged to express my opinion’, someone shared, ‘but even when I liked the professor, I would still refrain from being self-reflexive’. Someone else continues, ‘This letter encouraged me to give more feedback—not just about what we do, but also how it affects me’. To share, to show, and not to take each other’s efforts for granted—from either side. Among other micro-transformations, the letter-writing practice helped to break through institutionally conditioned passivity and humanise relationships in other ways, too. ‘We should send more letters!’ someone interjects with enthusiasm. ‘We’ve been receiving these very long letters from professors. You sent us a 15-paragraph email at the beginning of the course—you clearly put a lot of thought into that. And then I don’t respond. I feel bad! Maybe this is a sign that I should respond more’.

The mostly warm and generative reception of the letter-writing practice over the years deepened my appreciation for engaging the micropolitics of the discipline from within, as a site of inquiry. It became clear that this required first creating space to reflect on what would otherwise have neither a place nor a language in the IR classroom. Encounters with the ‘fold’—with the outside as it lives within one’s own subjectivity—needed to be intentionally staged, and the process itself curated, along with the openings it invited to rethink and re-inhabit our relations. Wanting to explore how these experiences might travel beyond their initial frames and the IR classroom, I invited Olga and Vladimir—who each took the course in different cohorts a few years ago—to reflect on their experience of the letter-writing practice and what has stayed with them.

They recorded the following conversation:

**OLGA:** This was the first exercise of this kind I had ever done in my life. The biggest impact it had on me was the realisation that I actually have

something to say, even though I'm just an MA student with no publications, no work experience. Our education is built in such a manner that there is always some kind of hierarchical relationship. Of course, I always feel the distance between me and the author. Whenever a professor assigns an article, even if I don't know anything about the author, I always approach it with respect and admiration. 'Oh my God, I'm just a student, I haven't published anything, while this person has already written so many articles!' So my first feeling wasn't... aversion, but pure surprise. At first I thought: 'Does this person really want to hear my voice?' But then, after the professor's encouragement – 'yes, write for yourself, write no matter what' – it was easier to begin. Suddenly, I realised I did have something to say. It helped that no one was going to read it, but even if someone does, it is not a big deal. You realise there are some things you think about differently. This was really valuable for me.

**VLADIMIR:** Imagining a person behind the text – a '*you*' standing in front of my simplified writing. You don't need to know much about the author while reading or writing; the point is to recognise that there is a living being behind the words, which might otherwise seem like plain academic prose. To understand, apprehend, and appreciate that person and their effort. The exercise made me reflect on myself, on the way I learn. As I was doing it, I paused to think: 'What is actually happening here? Who, what am I in that situation?' And then: 'How *can* I write, what *can* I say in relation to another human being?' When you reflect on what you're actually doing here, right now, on the space, the process, the people and objects involved, there is more room for ethical engagement with the text, for probing your own ethical approach towards theory, towards the case – through writing. There's been a lot of talk about intersubjectivity in IR, but intersubjectivity never happens when you write *about* it – that's intersubjectivity objectified. It takes place when you write *to* somebody. This exercise was never purely subjective for me. It has been an opportunity for real reflection about the 'relations' – that part often forgotten in IR: the interpersonal, the intercultural, the interdisciplinary – whatever form it takes.

**OLGA:** I agree – it's so important to notice these things: intersubjective conversations between seemingly different levels in IR academia. What I realised is that, unfortunately, reading it once is not enough to comprehend the text. Whenever I re-read the text for the second time, it was always a revelation for me. And it is crucial that you not only recognise that there is someone behind it, but you put both yourself and that other person on the same level. You can address them as an equal. And it is important to keep this thought with you along your studies and throughout your life... Only

recently did I realise the importance of writing. I write to the professor because I have a deadline, I write to a bureaucratic institution because I need to get some papers. I always write for something, to someone. But this exercise is about writing for yourself. So, it's important to keep returning to that practice, that experience of writing to an author, or even writing to yourself. Even when you write a letter to an author, you're still writing to and for yourself.

**VLADIMIR:** Yes. I used this exercise later on to begin writing whenever I hit a 'writing block'. Writing in a dialogical form simplified even the most complex conceptual reflection, so crucial for my current PhD work. I find my 'voice' through it.

I note that

moving beyond writing blocks  
 crafting one's own practice of writing  
 finding voice  
 making sense on an equal footing  
 coming to see the distinctiveness of one's own thinking  
 experiencing intersubjectivity with distant others  
 befriending the personal in the academic  
 sharing and showing more  
 recognising the effort of communication  
 connecting with spaces of intimacy in and through language  
 reflecting on learning habits and one's own formation as a knowing subject  
 embodying a fuller affective range in thinking about international relations  
 re-inhabiting authorship as agency  
 are but a few of the dimensions  
 that opened  
 in the relational space of  
  
 writing a letter

*note*

1. An earlier iteration of this discussion on the letter-writing practice appeared as 'Marks that matter: Slow letters to authors and

selves', in J. Lüder (Ed.), *Signature pedagogies in international relations* (pp. 70–84). E-International Relations Publishing.

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## the living document

I designed the practice of ‘the living document’ in the autumn of 2020, as I prepared to teach a fully online course during the global pandemic. I envisioned it as a shared space of reflection and exchange that would run parallel to our class discussions. I felt a strong need to create opportunities for connection beyond the familiar frames of classroom interaction—especially since, for me at least, the new set-up was entirely unfamiliar.

This was the first time I was embarking on a term-long journey with a group of master’s students who would not meet each other—or me—in person, and this mode of engagement was to last for the entire duration of the course. I found myself wondering: How would trust be cultivated without our bodies being present? How would we humanise one another and stay in a register of care and generosity if our reference points were limited to pixelated images of speaking heads? How would we navigate this space—and the relationships unfolding within it—without the possibility of correction or grounding that physical presence, gestures, and the subtle, embodied information of being together in place might otherwise offer? What, then, would my role as a teacher be—and what kind of support and curation of materials, encounters, and relationships would this new context ask of me? And equally, if our primary plane of interaction is the online space, how might I step back—so that students can also connect with and learn from each other informally, as they might in face-to-face settings, beyond the formal structures of the class?

These questions stayed with me (see Strausz, 2021; Nieuwenhuis and Strausz, 2023), prompting me to imagine ways of teaching that might work with the affordances of the online environment rather than against them. The living document became one such process—an experiment in building connection and a sense of community through shared attention and presence, extending beyond the limited sensibilities of 100-minute Zoom sessions.

Alongside finding ways to adapt to the new conditions of the pandemic classroom, I was also guided by longer-term considerations. My ongoing interest in learning journeys and the becoming of ‘knowing subjects’ (see Foucault, 1994, p. 256) had taken shape through various forms of experiential writing in previous years. One such practice was an evolving reflexive journaling process—a ‘journaling thread’ where I would write out freely whatever arose in me in relation to my research. Over time, this thread became a kind of personal archive, capturing the habitual, often subconscious pathways through which I made sense of the world without realising it. Staying with the practice felt awkward and raw at times, especially doing it nearly daily when I didn’t feel like it—but its honesty was ultimately worth it. When I returned to re-read these pages—rich with side comments, turns of phrase, and fleeting observations—things began to appear in a different light. Like trying to read tea leaves with limited understanding of their patterns, I found traces of my own sense-making that extended beyond what I could have deciphered at the time. I had become increasingly aware that in the unique ‘design’ of our lives, we constantly leave behind interpretive clues—subtle traces and impressions embedded in our everyday worlding (see Cavarero, 2000). Looking back on these personal archives offers infinite potential for uncovering alternative, often surprising, stories of selfhood, otherness, and the worlds we travel.

The idea of generating such archives with the intention of returning to them later—beyond one’s immediate personal paradigm and within educational spaces—is one I’ve been nurturing and experimenting with for some time. I had previously invited students to handwrite reflections at the beginning and end of a course, collecting them in a box. Questions like ‘What does security mean to you?’ offered an entry point in the first week, and we would revisit these reflections in the final session to trace shifts between ‘start’ and ‘finish’. Over time, though, I grew increasingly curious about how we might tune in more closely to the *present*—to what is happening in the moment, *as* we are being formed and transformed,

in the midst of our journeys through a course. How might we develop a subtler awareness of the process and our inner wiring as it unfolds, while moving through the syllabus together?

### anonymous distillations

The living document emerged at the intersection of these concerns. As a pedagogical device, it supported the formation of community within the online space, while also offering a space for personal reflection in each class. Over time, it gave rise to a collective archive of learning journeys that unfolded across the term.

Technically, the living document was a shared, anonymous Google Document. Students were invited to log out of their Google accounts to preserve anonymity—and in each class, everyone chose to do so. The practice was introduced in the syllabus of ‘Knowing, Narrating, (Re)Writing International Relations’ (KNR) as follows: ‘In exploring the power of writing, alongside the guided writing exercises designed for each seminar theme, we will be collectively composing and nurturing a “living document” by adding one line of reflection (anonymously) after each seminar discussion throughout the course’.

In the first class, I tried to ground this in something more familiar:

‘This will be an experiment in the power of mundane, everyday acts – ones that may not seem significant as you’re doing them’.

The initial process was simple: the final five minutes of each class were set aside for distilling a ‘takeaway’—a thought, impression, or lingering question—from the readings and discussion, in whatever way felt meaningful to each participant. There was no expectation of finality or resolution; the aim was simply to mark where each person found themselves in their thinking at that moment. Alongside substantive insights, uncertainty, questions, and in-progress reflections were equally welcome. As the shared link opened, the Anonymous Animals of Google Docs lined up across the top of the screen—then, at their own pace, they began to animate the page, slowly populating it with quiet traces of thought.

With each class, the document grew. The distillation process became a kind of ritual. In the end-of-term learning reflection sheet—designed to gather anonymous feedback on the course’s writing practices—many students noted how valuable it was to have ‘a moment to sit back

and reflect on what I was thinking about everything’. But the practice also required effort. One student observed that this final gesture helped sustain a sense of connection and openness, resisting the usual dramaturgy of closure. It affirmed that other ways of making sense and understanding were possible—that the conditioned restlessness before the end of class could, in fact, become a meaningful, focused, and generative moment: ‘I really liked having it. It was a nice sum-up activity; it forced us to think, to process the information that we grasped’. Another reflected:

‘The majority of us usually end class on our laptops, closing it and putting aside what we just discussed. Even though it might be tiring at times – we’re exhausted after a long day of class – the living document incites us to produce food for thought and to leave the class with a “takeaway” message.’”

The document remained accessible throughout the course. Students could return to it after class, adding or revising their reflections in their own time. Several participants later remarked that, after a while, they could no longer tell which words were theirs and which belonged to others—and for them, this was ‘the best experience’ the living document offered, a true sign of ‘solidarity, if not unity’.

Beyond what appeared before our eyes in moments of collective writing, the document also had a quieter, secret life. Traces of co-creation and collective being accumulated subtly, only becoming fully visible at the end of the course when we paused to ‘look back’ on the journey. Each iteration of the living document revealed its own ecology of reflection, interaction, and inhabitation. I hadn’t anticipated that the regular practice would also support writing development for some. For a few students, it led to ‘new skills to be more focused and succinct’, while others noted that it ‘helped me start writing faster and be more creative’.

### **affective learning**

Not everyone participated with the same enthusiasm—and, in fact, not everyone participated at all. Occasionally, one or two students opted out, and from my perspective, that was perfectly fine. It was crucial that participation—especially in these writing practices—be offered as an invitation: to explore, to inhabit a shared frame, and to think and create beyond the familiar aesthetics of academic study. And I welcomed it just

as much when those invitations were gently declined. No explanations were needed.

Those who participated appreciated the experience, even when it came with its own challenges. Writing within the five-minute window didn't come easily for everyone—some spent the first few minutes simply thinking about what to write, occasionally feeling frustrated or overwhelmed. One student reflected:

'This one-liner experience was exciting but also overwhelming at times. I even skipped it once or twice when I felt overloaded by class discussions. But overall, it gave me the opportunity to be poetic and contribute in an extraordinary way – a single line that could be self-explanatory and still capture the theme of the seminar. It was especially interesting to revisit it at the end of the course'.

Another shared:

'It was sometimes arduous to reflect after a long day of studying. But I was always glad once I had written something. Going back to our document in our last class was incredibly rewarding and made it absolutely worth the effort. There was so much insight, honesty, and a sense of support and community in what everyone had written. It was a great experience'.

The tension began to ease as the group grew more comfortable expressing thoughts and feelings that didn't neatly align with the rehearsed modes of knowing in academic study. Even those who initially remained sceptical about the value of collective reflection came to recognise its significance—particularly in creating space for emotional awareness:

'I didn't feel it directly helped improve my academic performance, it did offer a space to release immediate feelings after a seminar – something that is often dismissed in academia. In that sense, I found it to be a valuable emotional platform that's often overlooked'.

It became clear through the practice of the living document that anonymous, collective writing offered a powerful counterpoint to what was voiced in class—remarks always attributable to a specific speaker. Anonymity, first and foremost, relieved the pressure to perform individually, softening the lines of separation that a competitive academic

atmosphere often draws and reinforces by default. As one student noted: ‘It allowed me to go deeper because it was anonymous, so there was no pressure to say something brilliant’. With time, a sense of community began to emerge—one grounded not in achievement, but in presence. When no one had to be ‘good’ or ‘better’, when comparison as a trained intellectual reflex no longer carried existential weight, something more spacious opened up.

Collectively, anonymity exposed what usually remained just below the threshold of speech and the ordered, relatively safe, and predictable surface of academic discourse. It illuminated what shaped and animated classroom dynamics—including silences, pauses, and tensions—the subtle geographies of feeling that didn’t yet have names. The quiet, attentive labour of the Anonymous Animals—typing, editing, erasing—brought the affective landscapes of IR into view, making them visible and tangible as they were forming in the moment, and reworking them in the same gesture. The contrast with conventional academic spaces was remarked upon repeatedly. As one student reflected:

‘It allowed me to engage with my emotions a lot more. As a student of IR for four years now, this is something I’ve never been able to do in an academic environment. It made me realise there’s more to learning than writing from a perceived objective place – there’s also a subjective one where I can connect honestly with my emotions and feelings’.

The living document created space for affective states to be acknowledged in the classroom and invited students to stay with them—approaching them with awareness and curiosity. It gave permission to inhabit international relations and the field of study on plural planes. Emotional openness encouraged some to ‘be poetic’ in how they articulated their impressions or to find poetry in the fleeting knowledges of everyday life. One longer reflection highlighted the sense of connection that emerged through the practice:

‘The true significance of the living document became clear to me during our last class. It was fantastic to read others’ thoughts, and I felt ecstatically happy when someone read my short note and said they found it very touching. Hungarian writer Péter Nádas wrote in one of his essays – or maybe it was György Spiró, I don’t quite remember – that people are naturally curious about one another on the street, but when they look into each other’s eyes, they quickly look down, almost ashamed of their

curiosity and openness. It's the same with daydreaming: people are afraid to share their drifting thoughts. The living document was a perfect tool to help us feel more comfortable doing just that – sharing what floats through us'.

Another key transformational aspect echoed across courses was the experience of bearing witness to others' sense-making processes in real time. 'We were doing it simultaneously, so it was interesting to watch others fill the doc', someone noted. For some, the diversity of views and reflections—and how differently people responded to the same discussion—came as a surprise. One student remarked, 'It enabled us to see that perspective matters. Although we read the same things, we talked about the same issues, each of us had a different takeaway, which made me think more deeply about the learning process'.

Reading how others thought or felt was often motivating and sometimes funny. 'It was a good platform to bond with each other', someone shared, but it also went beyond 'getting to know' fellow students. Encountering others' ways of thinking prompted new ideas, research puzzles, and insights that 'didn't occur to me in class and wouldn't have otherwise'. The honesty with which participants shared what was present in them during those few minutes of reflection—sometimes closely related to the subject matter, sometimes extending beyond it—turned out to be liberating. The expression of struggles and doubts helped loosen the grip of isolation and alienation, especially during the pandemic's fully online context:

'When someone wrote that they didn't understand something or similar, I felt that this wouldn't have been expressed without such a medium. And that actually gave me strength. Especially in times like these, when you're at home and you think that everyone is doing perfectly and you're the only one who is completely messed up. Sharing doubts is so important'.

The courage to express confusion made a real difference. It helped others 'accept these doubts and work through them' in their own lives.

### iterations: three lives of the living document

Over the course of three teaching terms, the living document took on a journey of its own. It evolved and morphed alongside our learning processes, beginning as a blank page with a simple caption at the top: ‘a living document’. Featured in two online and one hybrid iteration of KNR, the collective writing space was inhabited differently every time, reflecting the distinct moods, energies, and needs of each group. These variations also reflected my own shifting role in facilitating the practice, which evolved in a non-linear way. My prompts and invitations likely changed slightly with each term, informed by earlier experiences while staying responsive to the present moment. Emphases, framings, and the staging of the collective reflection process within the arc of the course undoubtedly fluctuated. The aim was never perfection, but rather adaptability and a continued openness to experimentation. From time to time, students expressed preferences for how they wanted to engage with the space. I kept thinking with and through the process together with them, listening closely for further creative openings.

The unique character of the ‘life’ the living document nurtured was reflected not only in how students engaged with it and inhabited it throughout the term, but also in what form the gesture of ‘looking back’ took during our final session.

#### *poetry of one-liners*

The first iteration of the living document was created for ten online students who were unable to enter Austria at the start of the fall term due to the pandemic. On top of an already challenging set-up, our time together was shaped by time zone disparities, unstable internet connections, and the outbreak of the second Nagorno-Karabakh war. Sleep deprivation and attending multiple classes in the middle of the night became common among members of the class. One participant spent several weeks in a war zone, finding temporary shelter in our Zoom conversations from the lived realities of international relations. I found myself thinking that International Relations, as a field of study and practice, had never felt so intimate and so distant at once.

At the end of each class, I offered the same invitation, using more or less the same words. ‘In the next five minutes, please distil into one sentence what you’re taking away from the session, or where you are in your thinking’. I must have emphasised ‘one sentence’ in a particular way,

because everyone consistently wrote just that—whether a statement or a question. The suggested form, or ‘genre’, was observed throughout.

The process turned out to be powerful in many ways. These one-liners carried an intensity that someone once described as ‘pure poetry from the very start’. The first living document that evolved in bold against a plain white background looked, felt, and sounded like this:

**A Living Document**  
**To start is the hardest task.**

**Clarity is Power.**  
**What does emotional openness really mean in everyday life?**  
**Understanding is probably the biggest power.**  
**Patience needs to be embraced.**

**Perhaps there are new ways to see our old worlds.**

**Learning to breath and grow in the plural without being subsumed, flourishing in the spatial, temporal, corporeal and spiritual complexities of being...**

**Creating space**  
**Neither more nor less**  
**Just like a lotus flower springs to life, finding tranquillity in the wild.**

**Knowledge is the new rich, arm yourselves with it.**

**Let go to make space for something new.**

**Security-in-security.**

**The World is your cocoon.**

**Theory in practice is an act of liberation and love.**

**The possibilities to learn can be endless.**

**Security is not a product, but a process.**

**Let us escape the tempting yet harmful traps.**

**Change starts within.**

**Personal is Political.**

(excerpt from the living document, Fall 2020)

After a while, as the group settled into the practice, the one-liners began to interact with one another. The unique sociality and communal dimensions of the exercise started to emerge within the five-minute window of distillation. One participant recalls a memorable moment:

‘There was one particular day when I had such a beautiful experience. I had written “Who is a soldier?” I was in the middle of trying to answer my own question when, suddenly and at the exact same moment, four other people in the class answered. We are all from such different backgrounds and countries, with such different relationships to war, that I could only imagine the emotions that prompted each response. Right beneath my question appeared: “Who wants to be or who happens to be”, “A person?”, “Are we all soldiers?”, and “I don’t want to be a soldier.” I sat there stunned for a moment and took a screenshot – one I still look at from time to time because it was such an incredible moment of connection’.

This is how the exchange took shape:

**Dismantle or Reclaim? Theory or Praxis? “Or” or “And”?**  
**The more I learn, the less I know, honestly**  
**However unbiased I claim myself to be, I still carry a prejudice.**  
**Maybe it’s solidarity we need a little more...**  
**Who is a soldier?**  
**Who wants to be or who happens to be..**  
**A person?**  
**Are we all soldiers?**  
**I don’t want to be a soldier**  
**One or many?**  
**Must the gap between “who i am” and who “i should be” be**  
**determined by the state?**  
**To be happy, subvert!**

The sense of connection was especially strong in the final session, when we collectively revisited the feeling and thinking trajectories traced by the one-liners. For the first few weeks, I wrote my own one-liner too. ‘After all, the living document is anonymous, and I am also a member of this learning community—even if differently’, I thought to myself, reflecting on how much I had been learning together with the group, in and through ‘pandemic pedagogy’ (see Schwartzman 2020; Szarejko 2021). Over time, however, I came to realise that this space needed to be nurtured in line with its original intention: to stage an experience for

the next generation of IR-trained—ideally, IR-touched and IR-inspired—professionals to meet beyond the limiting and distorted frames of existing learning infrastructures. I began to see more clearly that my role was to gently hold and guard the learning journey, to make space for the possibility of encounters—both with the self and with others—that the practice made possible. It was good to be reminded: *my learning is in the curating*.

Designing the gesture of ‘looking back’ emerged as a key opportunity—not only to honour the work, the attention, and the effort invested in creating seemingly ephemeral traces over twelve weeks, but also to illuminate what might otherwise remain unseen in individual gestures. ‘What is it that we can infer from a collective journey composed of traces left anonymously?’ I asked. Beyond what is attributable to any one person, the trajectories of the collective begin to surface—such as the power of repetition over time in collective, synchronised action, and the subtle shifts such repetition can produce. As one participant remarked: ‘I thought this document, particularly engaging with it at the end, was an exemplification of the growth that was occurring within the group’.

In the final session, we spent a few minutes in silence, reading through the entire document. I had also prepared a surprise experiment: the living document, read aloud by an AI voice as a single continuous text. It took sixteen minutes to state—in the same emotionless tone—what had been distilled, harvested, earned, and realised over the course of the term. Upon listening, one person remarked that they ‘got a feeling that it was a well-prepared free verse’. Not everyone appreciated the artificial voice; some felt it should have been read by a human. Still, what was unquestionable was the sense of belonging that had emerged through the collective journey. A certain unity revealed itself as marks and traces came together in what, in that moment, appeared as a coherent text—amplified, perhaps even exaggerated—by the recording. One participant noted that the living document ‘harmonised our collective learning processes’. Another shared: ‘I was surprised that in the end, there were only three moments during the audio when I could pick out what I had written. It all blended together so well’.

That sense of shared ownership echoed from other angles, too. One reflection read: ‘The living document contributed more questions to my learning journey, yet it no longer feels like those questions were raised individually. They are OUR questions now’. The singularity of ‘I’s, at this register of engagement and interaction, had compounded into a blended ‘we’. This might only be a momentary coming together—meanwhile, on

other planes, in other classrooms and life contexts, social inequalities, competition, lines of separation, and barriers to understanding continue to persist. Still, what we witnessed together may be understood as a moment of situated solidarity, of the kind Richa Nagar describes as a ‘blended and fractured we’, where co-creative labour necessitates ‘multiple i/Is from uneven and diverse locations to come together as wes, while also recognizing that every blended we will also be an intensely fractured we’ (2019, p. 42).

Looking back on the journey of the living document, its first version felt truly special. Not only because of the challenges participants had to navigate alongside their studies—though perhaps those difficulties provided a subconscious drive to make things count, to seek out what might be affirmative and life-enhancing, even in small, everyday gestures in the classroom. The ‘poem’ that came into being through the one-liners stands as a testimony—in both form and content—to other ways of knowing that sprouted beneath the threshold of disciplinary discourse and academic recognisability. These trajectories didn’t unfold in the spotlight of the curriculum. The living document grew in the shade, on the margins of texts and at the edges of affective landscapes, nourished by only a few minutes of attention at a time. Quality attention, nonetheless. Yet it was not initially seen as a primary ‘site’ of learning—until, perhaps, that moment of looking back, when the living document appeared as a new entity, on its own terms, in its own right. A living object; a text woven with life. Knowing as many life forms and modes of being, held by the same, yet ever-changing, space of the blank page—and of collective attention.

### *‘I am living’*

A year later, the second iteration of the living document unfolded quite differently. It was offered as a space for reflection in a slightly larger online class with sixteen participants. By then, the protocols of pandemic-era engagement were well rehearsed—though the strains of online learning and limited access still lingered. From the very first session, I noticed that reflections varied in length. Perhaps this time I hadn’t placed the same emphasis on writing ‘one line’ when inviting students to inhabit the space. In any case, the intention remained paramount: to craft a meaningful, collective practice of reflection that we could keep going and keep growing over the course of twelve weeks.

I came to understand that the actual form the practice would take would emerge from the acts of writing itself and the life journeys that sustain them. An invitation to ‘live in’ a space, after all, can manifest life forms that are unexpected, fluid, and generative. Rather than honing in on one significant aspect of a thinking process, contributions became more contemplative and exploratory. The living document transformed into a workspace to work through questions and concerns. It took on a distinct feel and texture. I appreciated how a different group, in a different setting, allowed the document to ‘live’ in its own way.

This time around, the collective journey took shape in this way:

If power is actually ‘a multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate’ like Foucault argues, then is there really a way of studying power?

We practice power unintentionally, because we can speak about a limited number of things, and we leave some topics, perspectives and voices in the shadow. We are power-engines, practicing inclusion and exclusion every second even in our thoughts.

“What is ‘the other’ to you?” It’s both the subject of my research and myself in different contexts.

Behind our politically constructed facade (of being white, male, non-white, etc.) we have historicity and social and cultural context from which we are disconnected by these racially constructed and gendered hierarchies (i.e.: I have a socio-cultural context but I must behave as a white or a female, and I cannot recognize my wider historicity).

(excerpt from the living document, Fall 2021)

Moving beyond the ‘one-liner’ form opened up other possibilities as well. Frustrations and moments of discontent had more room to surface. The difficulty of making sense of the readings was highlighted several times, while other reflections spoke more directly to the experience of the seminars themselves:

‘This was by far the most exhausting class. What I actually forgot to mention is switching between breakout rooms added another layer of stress, and required patience on my part to deal with that “omg, I’m nervous because I don’t know whom I will be speaking to” feeling’.

The living document became another channel of communication between myself and the students—one through which they could help shape how the classes were run. The comments I received this way were invaluable, offering near real-time feedback on how students were experiencing the seminars—something no official course evaluation form could have captured.

What emerged as occasional disconnects between my intentions—for instance, encouraging and diversifying participation, which at times felt like a source of stress for some members of the group—helped me fine-tune my sensitivity to their needs and experiences. KNR foregrounded lived experience as both subject matter and site of learning, and I felt deeply grateful that ‘lived experience’—in its rawness and uncensored honesty—weaved through and expanded the frames we had initially crafted.

The ‘looking back’ gesture was co-created with the class. Earlier in the term, students had expressed a desire to engage more deeply with what they had generated as a collective stream of reflections during the course. The design of this revisiting emerged organically from the living document itself. ‘I would love to go back and comment on other people’s comments!’ someone had written.

Our closing ritual unfolded through a sequence of moves.

The first invited everyone to re-enter the archive of the living document. I offered a few words of reassurance: ‘Please don’t worry if you haven’t written anything before. Your presence has been part of this all along. We’re now creating a new experience—part of a collective journey that’s still unfolding. This is an experiment!’

This time, I asked students to enter the document, read freely, and engage with what was there in any way that felt right. Cameras could be switched off. ‘As Anonymous Animals, for the last time, we’re going to come together in co-writing the wisdom trajectory of this course!’ I announced. ‘Over the next 10 minutes, browse the document. Change the colour, change the font, write into it—be in conversation with our collective unconscious as a group, in any way that feels right for you!’

The document came alive with playful energy. Through the gestures of revisiting, the practice received a new name: ‘documenting life’.

A Living Document/*documenting Life*

It's not about me. :) <- Every time I opened this document, I just loved that this is the first thing.

It has been about me (us) in-forming (in formation) though - *maybe to reformulate then it's not just about me.*

I am living

"I wrote this! :)"

what/who/where is 'I' in this text? Of the text? Of me? Am I the text?

How do I write without accidentally othering my counterpart

*you can't*

The initial act of negation—perhaps a gesture of disagreement or resistance, which appeared as the first entry—also grew and expanded. The exchanges made possible through the writing-in were warm, respectful, and supportive. For some, the moments of appreciation offered to and received from peers—something often absent from the familiar dramaturgies of class discussions—felt particularly meaningful. Revisiting these traces became not only a way to better see the collective trajectories we had travelled, but also an opportunity to respond intentionally to the expressions that had emerged. In a truly co-creative spirit, heartwarming messages appeared in response to concerns shared earlier—even weeks later—as if offering comfort to a ‘younger self’ with the wisdom gained through the journey. The note in orange and italics may be seen as one such instance of counsel that arose anonymously between members of the group:

I don't feel I have something valuable to contribute with today. I see people are actually writing things, I feel bad. *that bad feeling seems like it is coming from the fact that you are comparing yourself to all those who are writing. It might be an even more valuable contribution to listen.*

The power of such deeply affirmative moments rippled through the group. In their learning reflection sheet, one student highlighted this exchange as something they would carry with them:

‘Someone commented that they felt they had nothing to contribute to this particular class, and someone else answered that maybe their contribution was that they had listened. I think it’s a very special experience when others make you feel good about yourself or when you make others feel good about themselves. It doesn’t happen often enough, especially in academia’.

Students then continued in small groups, where they could share with one other what they felt, found, learnt, and unlearnt. Throughout the course, I had treated this as a guiding principle: that sharing would unfold gradually—first peer-to-peer, and only later in plenary. Horizontal solidarity, once it sprouts, can become a powerful pillar of a ‘blended but fractured we’. Before wrapping up the group conversations, I invited students to return with either a quote or a co-written thread that had stayed with them. Our final move was to read these lines aloud without any commentary—as a kind of chorus, echoing back and also forward the voices that had shaped the collective journey.

One by one, participants began to speak, each with a short pause in between. From the second sharing onward, it became clear that many had chosen the same passage—so quickly, they had to select something else. The phrase that drew collective attention was a reflection on ‘silence’. ‘Silence, ok. For now at least’. It had appeared relatively early in the course, and I wasn’t sure what to make of. But the traces left in the document made it clear that it had resonated with many.

Silence, ok. For now at least. *I love silence in class. It obliges me to have silence in my confused brain as well. It’s that moment when I realise the loneliness of my last brain cell. It’s awesome. This was my second favourite post after “It is not about me” I absolutely loved this.*

A few pages on, which is to say, a few weeks later:

Silence, again. But not on purpose. *This leitmotif is really appealing. Love the continuous reflection on silence.*

I may never fully understand what these layers of ‘silence’—in the classroom and in the sentence above—were meant to communicate. But silence, without making a sound, found a voice through writing. In its quiet way, it slipped into form. Its acknowledgement and appreciation—subtle, hard to describe, let alone measure—expanded the realm of the sayable in class.

*somatic politics*

The third iteration of the living document entered a much larger class of twenty-four students, taught in a hybrid format. The relative comfort of the pandemic normal no longer applied; we were now in what was considered a transitional phase, moving towards the pre-pandemic norm of fully on-site instruction.

Disparities and lines of separation multiplied across the physical and virtual planes, and I found myself more worried than usual about how we would make things work. What could possibly create a sense of shared experience between the grey, often nameless icons of those joining from afar, and the students sitting together in the room, immersed in interactions with their whole bodies and sensing faculties?

If eyes can't meet eyes, then where—and how—might presence meet presence?

I wanted to ensure that everyone who connected with the class by signing up for it was honoured—regardless of how they were able or chose to participate. Some students barely spoke or never turned their cameras on. I had limited access to their histories and present circumstances, and in that state of not-knowing, I was careful not to push for more—whether in the form of activity or disclosure. Accommodating the diversity of backgrounds, needs, and capacities translated into creating more space for connection within the group, across infrastructural, cultural, social, and emotional barriers, and whatever else might have stood between us.

The living document became a kind of meeting point where, perhaps only for the duration of the practice, members of the class had the chance to appear as equals, and to decide whether and how they wanted to contribute. Taking inspiration from the closing gesture of the second iteration, I staged the practice slightly differently. From the beginning, I invited students to enter into conversation with one another. Everyone could comment on each other's notes. It was no longer a closing reflection at the end of class but rather something like a portable bridge—one I used whenever the conversation between students in the room and those joining via the large screen seemed to lose energy. In those moments, we

took a ‘living document’ break, which proved to be a versatile pedagogical device. Just like in previous iterations, it brought to the surface of discourse what might otherwise have remained unspoken. It acted as a pressure valve, releasing tension, while also giving me real-time feedback about the class.

The living document was shared via Zoom and projected in the classroom, becoming a visual expression of co-creative labour. But its evolution wasn’t always easy or pleasant to witness. While the space remained open for expression within the bounds of mutual respect—as a parallel plane to the class discussion, meant to capture whatever might arise—the turns and patterns of reflection often shifted in directions that, at times, felt more like a distraction or an escape from class, rather than a sustained effort to remain engaged despite those distractions. Comments about hunger, caffeine cravings, and other bodily sensations began to proliferate—often, notably, with a ‘politics’:

This class reminded me of being an inquisitive, open-hearted child again...

People here are such smarties **Now I want Smarties**

Slowly getting hungry - **I second that** **Where's my coffee :( No coffee at CEU after 4**  
**??WHY???** **Caffeinate the needy.**

**IF ANYBODY SUPPORTS FREE COFFEE ON CAMPUS I SUPPORT HIM/HER/THEM FOR STUDENT**  
**UNION REP I suppose we could make a petition or write a letter Occupy CEU. ( and it's only**  
**the first week...)**

I have so much to learn und there is so much that I don't understand yet **I can feel you**

Today's class made my day.

I didn't realise till now how sick I was of academic writing and I only just started my Masters  
Challenging ways of thinking about knowledge and knowledge production is important in  
order to diversify who and what we know of the world

There is so much to (un)learn and to finally resolve the inner conflicts between what you'd  
like to express, and what is expected

The fact that for additional material we were told to watch a TED talk by Chimamanda  
Adichie does show that this is a class about (re)writing international relations in a different  
light and with a different voice.

Head is spinning with new texts and information **Yes, slight panic in the chaos of concepts,**  
**faces and assignments/readings**

Lets not translate, provide the stage instead. **Love this!**

**The readings were by far the best, because they captured issues and discussions in academia**

**My heart rate is so high I need to calm down in a bit.**

still in need of caffeine- same here, it's such a ritualistic part of my day...

**Do you think we look exactly like people from the past?**

(excerpt from the living document, Winter 2022)

Part of me occasionally wanted to intervene when reflection on 'academic' content seemed to diminish—but I didn't. The threshold between controlling and guarding the interactions felt precariously thin. I chose

instead to sit with my own unease and work with it as a way of both participating and taking responsibility for whatever the living document generated and brought to light. I did my best to weave material from the living document back into class discussions, illuminating its conjunctures with the readings whenever an opportunity presented itself. Still, I wondered: in trying to bridge certain divides, might I have unintentionally created new ones?

The end-of-term course evaluation reflected that not everyone benefited equally from the freedom the living document offered, or from how the group chose to engage with it. One student wrote: ‘The free writing form, for me, was useless, as many people were writing about being hungry or wishing to take a cup of coffee’. I understand and appreciate that, in these instances, the sense of an ‘academic’ connection may have been lost—and with it, the perceived utility of the practice itself called into question. Yet from another angle, these brief three- to five-minute ruptures, interspersed across our hundred-minute sessions, allowed the body to become sensible in a classroom where one-third of the bodies were absent. The body didn’t show up in an intellectually framed manner that aligned with the aesthetic expectations of an ‘IR class’. It arrived in its visceral states—its urges, its cravings, its desires.

‘How is this IR?’—the question occasionally posed about KNR’s course content and approach—echoed in my mind. And now, we were looking at ‘course content’ generated by the course itself: material that was unplanned and, by disciplinary standards, uncoded and uncodified. Narrating what the body did—and could do—as political potentiality might have been our shared task of translation. And yet, in its performativity, the collective subconscious of the living document had already brought to awareness what was both missing and missed in the hybrid everyday realities of the course: the body as a site of learning, and with it, the embodied, felt presence of every member of the group.

In hindsight, this is the kind of knowing I’ve come to understand as the somatic politics of the classroom. Transforming the Cartesian mind/body separation (see Timperley, 2020) by offering integrative, embodied ways of knowing—countering the centuries-long conditioning of disembodied knowledge practices in academic study—required that we first become aware of the disconnect. The simultaneous presence of traces of the body and the planes of thought began to draw ‘mind’ and ‘body’ closer together, towards a more holistic understanding of the bodymind. The opportunity for this realisation came through the appearance of what

was otherwise absent. It took me time to see it this way. It was part of a learning process that began within—and extended far beyond—the IR classroom.

### **gifts of emergent forms**

Looking back on the multi-layered journey of an astonishingly simple pedagogical device, the living document engendered richer and more nuanced learning journeys than I had envisioned and was itself transformed through them. The blank space of the page hosted a multiplicity of forms. As a vehicle of expression and experimentation, it shifted shape and adapted to the energy field of each group.

As a parallel, seemingly marginal plane of reflection and inquiry, it not only counterbalanced what was spoken or could be voiced in class conversations by making visible what might otherwise remain unseen, but also transformed the space of engagement by responding to needs and offering remedies. The collective subconscious did more than mirror what was there, unspoken; the very form in which reflections occurred offered something else too—a gesture, a gift, a response to the often-invisible structural conditions shaping our collective experience.

It brought to awareness what was missing, and, in the same gesture, it also filled the lack.

At the height of pandemic lockdowns, and during a time of war, the living document became a distillation pipe, helping to focus on what really mattered. Concentrated energies. Of the heart. The poetry of one-liners revealed unity and solidarity beyond individual I-senses. It manifested oneness amidst conditions of radical, and often violent, separation.

The normalised, instrumentalised routines of pandemic education called for something that could pierce through the numbness. The living document became a workspace, and then a playground. It enabled deep thinking through writing and later, the playfulness of exchange among peers. Horizontally and vertically, it nourished something vital: a vibrant, living pulse within the constraints of the time.

In transitioning back to the old normal of in-person instruction, the living document—within a hybrid teaching mode—became a community space, one that prefigured the body as present. A placeholder for all bodies.

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## writing for writing

The writing practices woven through ‘Knowing, Narrating, (re)Writing International Relations’ (KNR) are designed to stage encounters with our own processes of sense-making. Each practice provides a curated pathway into greater awareness of how we inhabit both the academic discipline and everyday life as ‘knowing subjects’ (see Foucault, 1994, p. 256). Unlike practices such as ‘letters to authors’ or the ‘living document’, where relationships and reflections emerge through engagement with a particular addressee or the collective, what I’ve come to call ‘writing for writing’ centres on personal reflection and inner exploration. Here, guided by a question or a prompt, the focus turns inward, unfolding primarily within and *as* a relationship of self-to-self. Curating the work of attention largely happens in the spaces of writing itself. The other—writing, worlding—is present in and through the texts we engage with. Within these frames, however, our awareness turns to the very processes of perception and sense-making: how we come to see and ‘know’ whatever—and whomever—we encounter. How do ‘others’, images and events live within us? What is our relationship to the ecology of senses and meanings—the hybridities, complicities (see Ling, 2014, pp. 13–14), and ambiguities—that have shaped us and continue to direct our gaze?

I introduce writing for writing as a self-reflexive practice that accompanies the reading and discussion of course materials—the textual field of the discipline—and expands the terrains of thinking and feeling that may inform assignments in both narrative and traditional formats. For

each of my courses incorporating this approach, there is the possibility to submit narrative papers written as autobiography, autoethnography, autotheory, or in a personally negotiated creative form. While writing for writing may seem like low-stakes ‘writing on the side’, not directly contributing to a conventional academic paper, these practices—simply by doing them—diversify the planes of engagement, fostering transformative experiences both within and beyond the IR classroom. They support embodied learning by facilitating connections and movement across different planes, create space for unmaking and remaking subjectivity, and foster freer modes of navigating contexts—both writing frames and social frameworks.

### living-theorising

Embodied connections between text, knowledge, and lived experience unfold in the space created by the questions students respond to in private writing moments integrated throughout the course. These questions invite reflection on how the course material intersects with students’ unique sense-making processes, helping to bridge the distances and disconnections they often experience when working with disciplinary language, abstract concepts, and the demands of a specific aesthetic of expression. At the heart of all these questions and prompts lies one fundamental query: ‘How do these texts speak to you and the worlds you navigate?’

Writing that attunes to the processes of meaning making as affective ways of worlding and relating not only draws attention to aspects often excluded from scholarly views but also fosters movement between planes that are typically seen as separate—such as thinking and feeling, the academic and the personal. Naeem Inayatullah and Elizabeth Dauphinee observe that contributors to their edited volume *Narrative Global Politics* ‘do their work by addressing theoretical problems as autobiography’ (2016, p. 1), where storytelling provides access to non-linear spaces and times. They write that

travelers, theorists, and storytellers, who are one and the same, must move. Logically, they first move outward to then move inward. One builds a bridge to oneself via the world at large; one knows and heals oneself by means of knowing and healing others. One distances oneself from oneself as but a moment in which one grasps the larger world outside. [...] We

travel to encounter others and, in so doing, we encounter ourselves. (2016, p. 2)

The ‘textual itinerary’ of KNR (Shapiro, 2025) is designed to authorise travel, allowing the personal to emerge as the irreducible context within which any content may manifest. Writing in response to questions that encourage deeper exploration of life journeys—the plural, multi-layered archives that house disciplinary knowledge alongside other ways of knowing—helps recover the intimacy of seemingly ephemeral events, within and outside us. It fosters a practice of living-theorising. Reading theory through the crossings of lifelines, affective landscapes, and critical concepts opens up a wealth of connections. What is, and where is, the political for each of us? How do International Relations translate into everyday international relations, and into the ‘inner relations’ of subjective experience (see Strausz, 2024, p. 422)? How might these subjective experiences, in conjunction with concepts, research methods, and the lived realities of others, both near and far, help us uncover pathways of action and imagination that encourage becoming and being together in more expansive, heartfelt, and caring ways?

### becoming world-travellers

Texts come alive as questions direct attention to aspects that might otherwise escape analytical reading, creating space for movement—within and away from the narrowly defined plane of meaning making through extraction. Shifts occur at the level of perception. Maria Lugones describes ‘loving perception’ as playfulness in contrast to the violence of ‘arrogant perception’, where the latter is associated with the Western ‘agonistic traveler’ who plays only to win and conquer (1987, pp. 5, 15). ‘Loving perception’ is the modality for ‘world-traveling’, that is, being in any particular and often multiple worlds ‘*creatively*’, with ease and ‘an openness to being a fool, which is a combination of not worrying about competence, not being self-important, not taking norms as sacred and finding ambiguity and double edges a source of wisdom and delight’ (1987, p. 17).

Yet, becoming a world-traveller who moves to preserve and nurture, rather than deplete, the intimacy of encounters is a process. It requires a sustained investment in mastering otherwise, reorienting the desire for logistical efficiency and measurable improvement towards the unmaking

and remaking of subjectivity—expanding our capacity to hold ambiguity and seek out life-affirming openings. Showing up to the unknown, without expectations for the outcome or the urge to resolve it, takes effort and persistence. Shelley Sacks and Wolfgang Zumdick describe the ‘poetic mode’ of engaging with whatever surrounds us as a mind-state of openness and receptivity (Sacks & Zumdick, 2013, p. 5). This ‘aesthetic’ way of relating feels enlivening, in contrast to the ‘anaesthetic’ numbness of distanced, calculative thinking that separates and alienates. By activating our emotional capacities, we open ourselves to other modes of sense-making—such as the childhood wonder that views the world as ‘undivided and indivisible’ (Sacks & Zumdick, 2013, p. 6). Sacks and Zumdick note that ‘coming closer to the unknown is helped by not naming, by allowing whatever we encounter to disclose itself in us, in a mode without predetermined language’ (2013, p. 5, my emphasis).

Writing for writing helps access and deepen the ‘poetic mode’. The scaffolding of these practices and their prompts directs attention to the space of writing as a space of awareness and possibility—a space where we encounter what lies within us, grapple with what may be uncomfortable or surprising, and engage with what doesn’t yet make sense but is present, on the page, in our bodyminds. What I call experiential diagnostics—a study of our unfolding affective landscapes—opens the path to creative remaking. By looking closer and deeper into points of contact between text and lived experience, we enter what Verlyn Klinkenborg calls ‘the living tissue of a writer’s choices’ (2013, p. 33), where insights gain articulation in and through language. Poetic possibility may first reveal itself in the inconclusiveness of words. Language archives may surface that are more cautious and tentative—softer in their touch. The micro-movements of how we process experience in the space of writing become more visible. We may also become more aware of our ‘method’ of sense-making (Rancière, 1991, p. 14) and begin to trust it—trusting how we arrive at insights autonomously, without being measured or measuring ourselves against pre-set ideals of knowledge and knowledgeability. For writing to connect us with our inner landscapes, methods, and imaginative horizons, it must be claimed for that purpose. To transform the space of writing into a site of inner work, we must re-enter it, inhabit it, and live within it. Becoming a world-traveller means circling back to places of openness again and again with intention, turning this into a mode of travel—in the field and in our everyday lives. Repeatedly engaging in writing for writing—both in the classroom and on our own time—is how

a new relationship to writing, knowing, living, and living-together can take shape. ‘See what happens if you write out freely what comes to you’ can be a starting point.

### self-curating our learning journeys

Writing freely within pre-set frames that encourage discovery and openness—contrasting with writing aimed at meeting specific expectations—can foster a practice of self-curation. By tapping into inner spaciousness and possibility as we move across different planes, this practice might serve as a micro-avenue for inhabiting the social world differently, extending beyond the classroom and the university. Reflecting on how these practices might unlock capacities that travel beyond the classroom and influence everyday sensibilities and processes of meaning making, I’ve been inspired by Michel Foucault’s meditations on the ancient Greek practice of *parrhesia* or ‘truth-telling’. Drawing on acts of ethical self-constitution that direct attention to the self who is telling the truth, I have come to see writing for writing as a modality of what could be called truth-writing: a process that enables encounters with ‘otherness’, the yet-unknown as an ‘other world’ within, through acts of courage that carve out space within social performances to attend to our formation as knowing subjects (see Foucault, 2011, p. 340; Strausz, 2018, p. 103).

Michael A. Peters emphasises that for Foucault, truth-telling—giving an account of oneself—is fundamentally different from what might be seen as a confession through a Christian cultural lens (2003, p. 214). In its Socratic tradition, *parrhesia* functions as an educational practice that curates a process of becoming. The courage to tell the truth unlocks a mode of being that is open and receptive not only to what is being spoken but also to the audience’s perception of the life that gives rise to the utterance. Socrates’s questions to his students probe the relationship between rational discourse and how one lives, seeking to uncover whether a harmonious connection exists between the two. It is in the disjuncture between *logos* (reason) and *bios* (life) that care for the self can emerge. By revealing where words and actions, thoughts and feelings, are misaligned, the desire to care for one’s own life may be sparked. The ‘other world’ within, illuminated by truth-telling, is not only about destabilising a constructed, taken-for-granted identity but also about uncovering possibilities for more authentic, less fragmented ways of being.

In Jacques Rancière's account of education, the Socratic method is portrayed as a form of stultification. Even if the teacher does not explicitly explain, they merely 'feign ignorance' and pose leading questions that lead to intellectual subordination rather than emancipation (see Bingham & Biesta, 2010, p. 29; Fullam, 2015, pp. 54–55). Guiding a student to a place that the teacher already knows can be seen as subtly imposing one intelligence over another, rather than allowing the student to think for themselves. However, through Foucault's reading, I build upon the gesture of creating space for self-reflection as a form of care for the trajectories of becoming. By asking questions that explore the relationships between speaking and being, discourse and life, thought and feeling, the space for self-making is brought to light. A 'reparative reading' (see Sedgwick, 2002, p. 149) of the Socratic maieutic approach might emerge from returning to its etymological roots: the teacher serves as a midwife who understands and embraces the birthing process without knowing the individual being born.

I tentatively situate writing for writing as a pedagogical framework that fosters reflexivity through open-ended questions at the intersections of truth-telling as self-care and the ignorant schoolmaster's process, which reveals intelligence to itself by guiding the student to discover their own method of sense-making. The power of questions is intimately connected to becoming a knowing subject. The practice of *parrhesia* calls on the individual to speak everything they have in mind—reflected in the etymological roots of 'pan' (everything) and 'rhema' (utterance)—opening themselves to others' listening. This practice is driven by a desire to see more clearly and 'live in the best possible way', perhaps more harmoniously, more wholesomely (see Peters, 2003, p. 2015). Jacotot asks, 'What do you see? What do you think about it? What do you make of it?' (Rancière, 1991, p. 23), affirming the student's equal ability to understand human expression—such as the words of others—and to create new expressions in their own words, thus removing the teacher's mediating authority from the equation.

I read these two pathways towards self-understanding and self-making as an invitation to look inward and trust the process of self-reflection—the turn within. Speaking freely—externalising what is carried inside—brings attention to the yet-unknown layers of selfhood, positioning these internal relationships and affective landscapes as sites of both care and study. Stepping into the modality of making one's own sense, without relying on another, frees our capacity to engage with experience in its

continuous (un)folding and creates space for the ethical negotiation of what we may or may not choose to accept, internalise, or carry forward. After all, as Rancière notes, the emancipated person may choose to learn nothing (1991, p. 18).

Yet, in the classroom and beyond, I am neither Socrates nor Jacotot.

In the modern university, I am not in a position to listen in that way or to guide someone through a personalised process of self-realisation. I also have to tread carefully around the questions I ask and how they are woven into class discussions. I don't want to put anyone on the spot; my aim is to ease the pressure to perform.

However, I've noticed that through writing practices, the supportive gaze of the other can be curated.

Perhaps the generative and caring interventions of a specific interlocutor—a teacher or mentor—need not come from a single person. They can be dispersed across points of reference, processual frames, associations, and inspirations, mobilising our capacity to observe, make sense, and advance the process. Support may come from multiple angles: the personal tone of the assigned texts, the questions posed, and the space held for surprise, discomfort, and the yet-unknown. While writing remains private, the act of sharing in the process expands the experiential base of connection among members of the group.

The space of writing opens through intention—by directing our attention to the channel where aspects of our worlding can be put into words. It is one of the simplest things we can do. Learning to inhabit this space with security and confidence—allowing the complex entanglements of self, others, and worlds to reveal themselves without defining what the relationship may become—could be one pathway to autonomous sense-making that transcends the ingrained planes of both social atomisation and dependence on expertise. Crafting a relationship to pre-given frames where we remain open and cultivate attunement to life-affirming orientations may become a skill and new capacity that travels across other (social) contexts, elsewhere. We can also curate—write and rewrite—our

own experiences by framing our own questions and following the trails that emerge from them. This could model micro-practices of resistance, transformation, and becoming otherwise.

### **writing and rewriting**

During the pandemic, I developed what, for lack of a better term, I introduced in class as the ‘writing and rewriting exercise’. This task connected to the ‘(re)writing’ component of the course, introducing a practice of sense-making that promised transformation through persistent engagement in and through writing. Twice a week, students were given a frame—a fully private moment—to attune to the processual nature of writing and explore how writing not only documents thinking, but also shapes thoughts, feelings, senses, and sensations in the act itself, potentially leading to new insights. For the fully online class, I recorded guided writing sessions lasting fifteen to twenty minutes, which participants could complete on their own time as part of their preparation for each class. Each session included a sequence of three or four questions and prompts designed to activate lived experience and personal biography in relation to the weekly readings and themes. In between tasks, I included three-to-five-minute pauses, allowing students to reflect on the prompts and write freely in response. At the end of each recording, I thanked everyone—whether they were writing or not—for their presence and effort.

I recorded these sessions in a low-tech manner, using Panopto, so they could be watched as videos, similar to the pre-recorded lectures. However, there were no moving images—only a single slide displaying ‘writing and rewriting exercise’ and a number to track effort and time. I included the questions on the slides when I had the capacity to do so, though most of the time, I didn’t. Often, while recording, a new question would come to mind, and instead of sticking to the plan, I followed the fresh inspiration. The simplicity of the low-tech set-up allowed for improvisation, which, as I later learned from student feedback, created a different mode of presence. In the space for free writing between the questions, I forgot to mute myself. As a result, background sounds inevitably seeped in. My chair squeaking. A mug clinking on the table. Sirens from a busy road. It became clear I was there—asking questions and holding space for whatever might arise in response. Had I thought more carefully, I might have edited the recordings more professionally.

Yet, the traces of my life world that remained—aligned with the spirit of the course—were received generously, even illuminating a sense of connectedness, despite the mild irritation. As one student noted, ‘Writing can be quite lonely; it’s nice to have little bits of background noise’.

This is a practice that students are asked to complete on their own time, with no oversight from me, nor any guarantee that they will choose to engage with it. However, wherever possible—in classes, course emails, and consultations—I make sure to highlight the space for the writing and rewriting exercise and its generative, transformational potential, which only becomes apparent through exploration. What someone described on the learning reflection sheet as a ‘nice option’ to think about can evolve into a powerful resource when practised consistently. I weave it into the fabric of the course, making it a regular part of what we do. I show how individual practice nurtures collective learning. In class, I revisit the questions from the recordings, connecting how writing differently—and the new forms it may give rise to—resonate with the ethical projects of the texts we read. ‘Here, too, we are exploring methods of sense-making—zooming in on our own’. I also highlight how the practice can inform graded coursework in this course and beyond as ‘writing for writing’. Quoting Michael J. Shapiro, I emphasise that we can choose to ‘think through writing’ (2013, p. 25), and that thinking in this way is likely to make us think even more, and in unexpected ways. ‘Writing is already rewriting’, I stress, ‘there is movement, and something new emerges, even if only on a small scale’.

Before anything else, though, I invite students to inhabit the frame offered in a way that feels meaningful to them. My hope is that they make it their own:

‘Through the process of writing, you also create the security of the self to explore insecurity and the unknown. I can see great strength arising from that over time. This is why I encourage you to continue with your writing exercises for now, for your own purposes. Because this is your self-practice. You are working with reflections, connections, resonances, and gradually deepening your understanding. If you want to use any part of that for your assignments later on, that’s wonderful’.

If nothing is taken ‘substantively’ from the course but a self-practice and confidence in trusting the unknown—and one’s ability to keep moving as a traveller—that would already be a significant gain. As a practice of

living-theorising, this is how we may all emerge as theorists—of International Relations and international relations as inner relations (see Strausz, 2024, p. 422)—through continuous efforts to relate and bring closer what would otherwise remain seemingly disconnected.

### *expanding writing*

I introduce the writing and rewriting exercise by first cultivating a different sensibility towards writing, gently shifting away from performance pressure and an extractive, instrumental approach to working with texts. I encourage students to keep a physical journal and write by hand, noting that handwriting activates the Broca region in the brain, which, among other functions, enhances spatiotemporal awareness. ‘As we put pen to paper, we connect with our whole bodies and begin to feel more’. I reassure them that typing can work just as effectively, depending on the mindset. ‘Maybe try to feel your fingertips for a moment as they touch the keyboard?’ I often add. A small shift in attention to what we might otherwise overlook could contribute to making a difference at the undefinable level of the micro-of-the-micro. I also aim to lower the stakes and encourage attunement to the process itself, regardless of the outcome. ‘Whatever comes to you, just write it down – nothing is also fine!’ ‘See what happens if you write “nothing” and keep the pen moving – might another sentence emerge?’ ‘In any case, just being with the question, staying with it, is already generative’.

The recording continues to expand the sense(s) of writing –  
what it may be like and what it can do.

It facilitates connection, both with the practice itself and within one’s own paradigm of inhabiting it. The narration begins with a conscious gesture of entering the space of writing—still within our everyday routines, yet moving away from those modalities where meaning making largely takes place on an intellectual plane. We start with grounding and slowing down as a way of preparing for writing from a less fragmented, more connected place. This is a path into what Sacks and Zumdick describe as ‘allowing’—the ‘poetic mode’—where we observe how what we encounter lives within us (see 2013, pp. 5, 66). Attuning to the place, to the states of the bodymind in the moment, takes a couple of

minutes. The evolving script—always half-prepared, half-improvised as I seek deeper connection within myself—is not only an invitation to another mode of presence but also a performative enactment of it.

I proceed as slowly as I can:

‘Welcome everyone to our writing and rewriting exercise. I would like you to take a few moments to arrive in the space where you are. Make sure there are no distractions and that you have a keyboard, or pen and paper, in front of you.

Allow yourself ten to fifteen minutes of quiet reflection, where you can fully connect with the power, the transformational potential, of writing.

Take a deep breath and release.

Notice your surroundings, the space you’re in, and gently bring your awareness and attention back to your own body. Observe your breathing as you inhale and exhale. Just notice how the quality of your attention shifts when your point of reference is yourself – your physical body, your mental state, your emotions.

Keep breathing gently, allowing oxygen, inspiration, joy, and creativity to enter your system with each inhale. And with each exhale, release, letting go of stress, worries, and time pressure.

And prepare for the writing’.

### *in the spaces opened by questions*

The questions that follow point to the intersections of the personal, the academic, the political, and the ethical. I have designed them to mobilise personal archives that encompass life learning, childhood memories, cultural wisdom, as well as doubts and uncertainties—each serving as sites of reflection and discovery. Sacks and Zumdick write that ‘a question is a gift and a danger’. It opens up terrains beyond the familiar: it ‘initiates movement among the fixed forms’ and acts as a force that breaks through ‘all the information and ways of seeing we are socialized into’ (2013, p. 14). Stretching the horizons of sense-making and what is considered legitimate ‘knowledge’, the questions aim to reveal the interconnections

between academic knowledge production and other ways of knowing, encouraging expansive—sometimes wild—associations. They are meant to uncover unexpected connections, resonances, and patterns across the rich, multi-layered worlds that come to life when seen.

For each session, I select anchor points and provocations from the readings. Some of the questions engage with a concept in the assigned texts and invite a personal connection to it. For example, in Week 2, we read sections from Elizabeth Dauphinee’s *The Politics of Exile* under the theme ‘the power and politics of narrative’. In the book, the figure of the professor reflects on how her belief in ‘her ability to order and classify her world’ was shaken after meeting Bosnian Serb Stojan Sokolović, through whom she encounters complexities of the Bosnian war that her academic research didn’t quite prepare her for (Dauphinee, 2013, p. 2).

I highlight a turn of phrase.

‘Similarly to what you may have read in Dauphinee’s book, have you ever been challenged – or perhaps shaken – in your ability to, and I quote, “order and classify your world”?’

Five minutes, starting now’.

On other occasions, I read a quote aloud and build questions around it. For example, we read chapters from Richa Nagar’s *Hungry Translations* to reflect on the politics of theory, practice, and the role of IR scholars. I select the following passage for the recording:

As my fingers begin to type these words, I am filled with a sense of deep humility. I recognize that for each one of us who is afforded the means or tools to step in with an authority to make knowledge claims, there are millions of others whose words and knowledges we stand on, but who have been systematically made invisible on the pages and spaces of formal learning – except as objects or subjects who must be researched, represented, discussed, and at times, “uplifted” by the experts. (Nagar, 2019, p. 7)

I invite students to ponder:

‘Whose knowledge do you stand on?’.

‘What does it mean for you to be a translator?’

On other occasions, I ask students to highlight moments that spoke to them in a meaningful way:

‘What was a thought-provoking moment for you in the text?  
Was there anything that resonated with you?  
Something that surprised or challenged you?  
Something that really made you think?’

Some questions carry an explicit ethical dimension:

‘What kind of stories, and whose stories, should be told in IR?’  
‘Who should be IR’s storytellers? Who should IR scholars listen to?’

Often, the questions are repeated and slightly rephrased. This signals that the question itself is a work in progress, much like any attempt at a response. The process of articulation is ongoing—tentative and cautious. It doesn’t solidify into a fixed form. Instead, it unfolds through trial and error, feeling and probing, wording and rewording. I don’t usually re-record, as I wouldn’t be able to do that in the classroom either. I only edit out noises—if I catch them—that may be too distracting. After all, it’s not only about what the question is asking. Infinitely rehearsed, the practice is also about *asking questions*.

A gesture of rewriting more explicitly appears in other prompts, which ask students to delve deeper into a particular experience the readings have evoked. While discussing Michael J. Shapiro’s ‘global ethics of encounter’ in class (Shapiro, 1997, p. 32), a transformational writing process accompanied the readings, guiding students through steps that connected experimental, free writing with the political and ethical ambition of writing differently. With that, as Shapiro suggests, comes a commitment to work on ‘more promising stories’ that are ‘resistant to all static maps and all fixed identity stories’ (1997, p. 209). I narrate on the recording:

‘I would like you to think of an instance when you realised that you held presumptions about others or slipped into quick judgements about them – whether about someone specific or a group of people. Write down what comes to you, and include as many details as you can remember’.

In preparing for a shift, I aim to direct attention to the subtle movements of transition. ‘Slowly draw your reflections to a close. Stay in this space

for a moment, and prepare for the final task?. About ten seconds later—or as long as I can hold it—I continue:

‘Taking inspiration from Michael J. Shapiro, I would like you to rewrite this story as an “ethics of encounter”, where you restore each other’s humanity, multidimensionality, singularity as human beings. Now, I’d like you to rewrite what you’ve just written as “a more promising story”, as Shapiro encourages us to do – one that brings elements of curiosity, compassion, and perhaps forgiveness, back into the narrative’.

I would probably prefer to formulate the prompts more concisely now, but during the pandemic, making the improvisational aspects of the process tangible—audible and accessible—felt like a meaningful, humanising gesture on my part.

As a closing gesture, I invite students to revisit their writing and notice what surfaced in their reflections. For the final announcements, I try to slow down and speak from a place of self-presence as much as I can:

‘Please spend a couple of minutes reading everything you’ve written.

Underline or mark what emerged in your prose through the intention of writing as an ethics of encounter.

What new elements are now present in your story?

Notice what has changed.

Take a moment to stay with and appreciate what a different intention has enabled – for you and for your writing’.

In closing, not seeing my audience but hoping to connect at an invisible level, I offer some reassurances and encouragement for continuing the journey:

‘Please feel free to expand your writing and continue your story. You’re also welcome to bring your story to class if you’d like to share it. Thank you so much for participating’.

*inhabiting the frames*

Students have been writing for themselves, and as intended, I only got a sense of how they've been living in the frames through class conversations, anonymous learning reflection sheets, and course evaluations. The time dedicated to the recordings was seen as time 'taken out': a 'break from the academic-heavy day', time to 'distil thoughts', 'digest everything', and a 'pleasant escape for self-reflection'. Several students described the sessions as relaxing, 'almost like meditation', and an effective way to 'think more deeply about some of the topics'. Mental health benefits were also highlighted. One student remarked, 'I would say they represented ad-hoc therapy sessions for my IR traumas'. Another noted, 'In these hard times of pandemic and social isolation, it somehow made me go through a meditative and self-reflective process that really helped me calm down and think rationally'.

Some students wrote first thing in the morning, others the day after completing the readings, or after the class as 'after-discussion-writing'. One participant expressed a wish for a 'general one' they could use for all assignments. 'For now, I sometimes just pretend I hear Erzsébet's voice in my head telling me to breath in creativity'.

This made me think that remembering to  
b r e a t h e  
more often would already be a game changer.

The bridges I envisioned in designing this practice have indeed been built for many. Students noted that the recordings helped connect 'the lecture and readings through writing', but also linked text with lived experience, 'theory with real life', and 'abstract concepts with the personal'. They made space for seeing one's 'own presence in the discipline more clearly' and for understanding how they are 'positioned as a knowing being in the issues we covered in class'. There were practical benefits as well. By connecting abstract concepts to personal experience, students found it easier to recall and mobilise them later on. Learning across sessions became more integrated. It helped to be 'constantly in touch with all the subjects of the course'.

By 'doing IR the non-IR way', some learned that 'IR isn't only about reading and writing 24/7, but also about thinking beyond the limits'. One student shared, 'It helped me understand my view on the texts we had to read. I saw what I didn't understand – and what I actually did'.

Insights into sense-making were also harvested: ‘The writing exercises helped me see how I think and how I put my thoughts into words – and how contradictory my opinions can be’. These inner tensions became generative and led to realisations:

‘One writing exercise led to some far-fetched associations in my mind. And I was confused. So confused. Why I did come up with this text when the task was to write about something completely different? Then I had two thoughts that turned this into a learning experience: I realised that it’s not absurd, because I don’t move in an isolated manner. What happens around me affects my studies. Affects what I write. Second, I was able to reconnect to the topic. I was able to find missing links. So, those empty spots created at the beginning actually deepened my thinking’.

‘Free writing without any restrictions on my thoughts and feelings’ was generally appreciated. The limiting force of disciplinary writing was also acknowledged:

‘The writing helps brings distant intellectual concepts into practice. It gives you a window into how you might embark on the alternative forms of writing within IR, but it gently leads you there, rather than asking you to set aside all the structures you’ve learned and become accustomed to. I think it’s an important step in opening yourself to new styles and approaches, but I also think it’s hard to get yourself to do them because of the built-in resistance to creativity within academia. It was actually really helpful to have the weekly journaling, so that this style of writing was practiced regularly’.

Regularity created a sense of ‘something normalized’ around what ‘started out as a bit of an awkward process that was perceived as less essential’. One student notes that, compared to the texts from ‘narrative IR’, their own writing initially felt ‘a bit superficial’, but by the end of the class, they had eased into ‘the genre’ and became curious to explore world politics from more creative and diverse perspectives. ‘Academically speaking’, another student didn’t find the practice to be generative of ‘fundamental knowledge’, but they also noted that ‘it got you into the write frame of mind’.

The ‘the write frame of mind’ also appeared during challenging times, which was uplifting to read:

‘I can’t exactly recall when, but at that time I really felt distanced from the topic we were covering, and I wasn’t in the right mindset for the class. Then I thought, I’ll just do the exercise so I can contribute something to the class discussion. I didn’t write a lot that time, but it helped so much to get my motivation back. Doing this thing made me realize that it was worth the effort’.

With the shift in mind-frames, ways of knowing also started to change. In the learning reflection section, where students share ‘an example that will stay with you’, members of the group recalled moments where they came to see more about themselves within the discipline and recognised traces of the discipline in their thinking. Someone recalls writing about Carol Cohn’s ‘Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defense Intellectuals’ (1987) and arriving at the realisation that

‘a strong driving factor for my interest in critical IR is a fear of getting sucked in by “the allures of power.” Also, I think one of the reasons I started studying IR in the first place was to “help” [O]thers who were less fortunate than myself. This fact is very embarrassing to me today, because I now see so many elements of White saviourism in my motivation to study. Overall, the writing exercises seemed to help me get to know myself a little bit better’.

Another student reflects on their positionality within ‘the colonial matrix of power’ (see Mignolo, 2007, p. 156) in the following way:

‘for me, the first writing exercise on the topic of postcolonialism was very insightful. The question, “Where is your place in global coloniality?” still stays with me. Having spent most of the quarantines this academic year in a small Hungarian town, I feel that I can experience the historicity of my life. Rather than being a “student going West to find knowledge”, I now feel that I am a nomadic subject. I have the freedom to go back to my home country and live there if I choose, because there is knowledge even in the garden of my grandparents’.

Expanding the horizons of where ‘knowledge’ may be found and what forms it may take also brought back moments from childhood. In the week when we discussed Elina Penttinen’s *Joy and International Relations* and the ethical approach she describes as ‘open-hearted curiosity’ (2013, p. 13), someone writes:

‘I don’t remember exactly when, but we had to describe a moment of heart-felt curiosity. This invitation to explore my own memory allowed me to access a childhood episode that I had buried for many, many years. I actually took extra time after the exercise to fully connect with that unique emotional state, which, to be perfectly honest, I have never experienced ever since. My main preoccupation now is to somehow un-stultify that curiosity from the layers of tiredness, social norms, and other experiences that I’ve had up until now, and to bring it into my research’.

Ways of knowing that illuminate the affective beneath the intellectual—and chart old-new pathways of inquiry by paying closer attention to the subtle economies of sense-making—emerged in and through writing. In a second gesture at the end of the course, these moments were written, acknowledged, and affirmed as transformational experiences.

### *writing as moving*

As much as it facilitated crafting a personal connection to the weekly themes, low-stakes, low-pressure, regular writing also transformed relationships to writing itself. Someone shared that the recordings ‘helped stimulate my brain’, which they felt was ‘the toughest part of writing’. Concentration and focus improved, which enhanced ‘zero-degree writing’ in other classes, too. Through this, some students also gained insights into their own writing routines: ‘I learned how I write and what the best time is for me to write productively’. Several participants noted that they gained more confidence and hesitated less in putting their thoughts into words. ‘The writing process itself made me more comfortable with expressing my thoughts and complex emotions’. Occasionally, this was also about volume: ‘I noticed how much I could write on a page without thinking twice about what I was putting down’. For others, the experience varied each time: sometimes paragraphs flowed out, at other times only a few sentences, but they still felt they ‘had the time to think and engage with the topic’. Some felt their ‘writing style improved’ over the weeks, even though initially, maintaining the practice required significant effort. They reflected on how the practice evolved from long minutes of thinking before writing to ‘writing immediately’. Even a major obstacle was transformed:

‘The writing exercises became the best coping mechanism for my writing phobia. There were countless moments when I would be so scared of the blankness of a page that I couldn’t write for hours. I started to transform this fear positively through the writing exercises and began to see the blankness of a page as an opportunity to unfold my writing process’.

Writing wasn’t shared: it was meant to be a fully private, personal practice which at the same time quietly moulded class discussions and other realms of life. At a subtle level it made a difference to thinking processes and the learning journey overall. It generated ideas, even research questions for assignments. It also foreshadowed some unanticipated trajectories. ‘Influenced by the writing exercises I am now actually interested in writing a fictional story imbued with IR concepts’.

Students found some of the questions ‘very personal at times’, but because they were writing in their private space, many appreciated the opportunity to ‘express feelings and experiences without filtering my responses out of fear of others seeing them’. One student shared, ‘It was like a conversation with myself, helping me explore feelings and thoughts that I’ve generated throughout the course’. With this inward turn, free from an outside gaze, wonder at one’s own creative potential often emerged. Someone noted, ‘I was often surprised by what came up or what I wrote about, and I felt freer to follow that line of imagination because it was just for me’. Others described the process as ‘creative and soothing’, allowing them to ‘find a creative side’ of themselves ‘through writing’.

However, not having an ‘audience’ turned out to be a challenge for several others. In some cases, the free, non-hierarchical format didn’t work at all:

‘At first, I was confused about the writing exercises. It felt strange to do something just for myself, without any check-ins to see if I was doing it or doing it correctly. I know there was no ‘correct’ way to do them, but interestingly enough, the lack of oversight made this part feel very different from any other assignment. It was purely for me, and that was often reflected in the way I wrote. When I write, I know someone will read it—even if it’s just the professor grading a paper—there’s always an audience. When I write poetry, I consider a large number of people and their various perspectives, feelings, and moods after reading it. But here, there was no one to write for, no one to impress. The whole process of ‘introspection’ was very new, and often, I couldn’t convince myself to

engage fully. Sometimes I just skipped through the 2-3 minutes and wrote it in 20-30 seconds instead. I felt like my writing couldn't surprise me, and anything I wrote seemed like a confirmation of my existing knowledge, even if the questions were interesting and thought-provoking'.

Yet, when no one was watching, relationships of self-to-self could open up, revealing their generative potential:

'I realised how important an audience is for writing. It really changed my perspective when I considered that it was only for me. The motivation, the quality, the style – everything just dropped. I think I realised how much I care about the style of my writing when I was confronted with the fact that it didn't matter because I wouldn't be judging myself for it. But then again, I wouldn't say there was less pressure in this kind of assignment. I still wanted it to be a good read, even if it was only a reflection for myself'.

Perhaps it was in the niches where reflection became possible that something moved. With hindsight, 'writing and rewriting practice' might feel more fitting, yet in some ways, what was enacted truly called for *exercise*—physical perseverance to repeat twice a week what, at least initially, didn't quite align with the existing aesthetics of learning, let alone with one's own working routine. It required a particular kind of discipline to stay with and trust the process, and trust itself took time to build. One student notes that weeks passed before they could see the recordings as 'critical to complete'. This realisation may have only occurred at the end of the class when 'the value of it was further revealed'. Once the usefulness of the practice became clear to those who stuck with it, the demands of the learning infrastructure still intervened. Even though some felt they benefited from low-stakes, exploratory writing, a practice that emphasises inner work without external checks doesn't compete well with mandatory requirements, especially in other classes. 'Whenever I got overwhelmed with work and readings, this was the first task I dropped to save time'. In survival mode, there is little room for growth and even less for enjoyment. Yet, writing for writing helped create evidence that movement is possible, even in situations where the relationship between power structures and life becomes more sharply defined:

'I really enjoyed the writing exercises. They gave me the opportunity to explore my thoughts on the texts, specifically, and on IR more generally, in a deeper way. I managed to complete most of the exercises, though not all

of them. The time pressure throughout the semester was overwhelming, and some tasks inevitably had to be cut. I think I tend to assign less relevance to things I enjoy, which led me to prioritize other tasks over the writing exercises to stay on schedule. Looking back, I think that was poor prioritization. When I read through the exercises again, I was surprised by some of the insights I had gained and realized how helpful these writing tasks actually were’.

Low-pressure writing didn’t align well with what ‘learning’ otherwise required, despite its meaningfulness. In-class writing practices were preferred by some, ‘because I often felt too exhausted at home to sit down and write’. More time in front of the screen—even for ‘voluntary work’—had to be avoided. What already had a clear frame in time and space worked better:

‘The “pressure” of having to write something DURING online class pushed me to write something. The at-home work did not have that pressure, and my exhaustion led me to skip many exercises. But I did enjoy the ones I completed’.

Something was still gained through the practice, even if the questions didn’t always resonate: ‘Not all of them were useful, but I think it’s not the result that matters, but the process’. Another notes, ‘sometimes the writing takes you in surprising directions that end up making a lot of sense’. These are the types of experiences I had genuinely hoped to curate and make accessible through these processes.

### **‘pairs of eyes’ travel**

The writing and rewriting exercises culminated in a collective, workshop-style session towards the end of the term, where we journeyed through a set of guiding questions together. Similar to the structure of the recordings, I prepared four questions followed by a prompt to work with what had been written. I allocated six or seven minutes for each question, or as long as the group needed. It took about forty minutes to complete what I came to describe as the ‘pairs of eyes process’. It was a real challenge, in both its design and execution, yet its value in fostering an encounter with how we make sense of and relate to other realities—especially the lives of

‘others’ that the discipline often takes for granted as its starting point—became clear in how students shared their reflections and distilled their learning at the end of the class. It was an intense, experimental process that brought discomfort, but we all had to trust the process: that it would be ‘worth it’. This was one of our last sessions before the end of the course, and it felt as though the trust we had cultivated over the past ten weeks would carry us through.

And it did.

I owe the initial idea and key components of the process design to Andreea, who joined the course as a guest speaker and co-traveller during her PhD research. I was reflecting on the arc of KNR and what knowing, narrating, and (re)writing the discipline might mean in practice. It seemed that, after creating bridges between the personal and the academic, there should be an opportunity to bring the learning and the sense of connectedness—what the writing and rewriting exercise had unlocked—into what would traditionally be practised as writing the discipline. How can we draw on the openings and new horizons that ten weeks of relating-through-writing have enabled, if we shift our focus and zoom out once more, to what is happening elsewhere, beyond the immediate reach of our sense-making?

Andreea suggested the brilliant idea of working with a current event and exploring its emotional, political, and ethical complexity through writing. She sent me two articles from *The Guardian* that reported on the journey of a migrant caravan from El Salvador towards the militarised borders of the USA, crossing an earthquake-stricken town in Mexico on their way. Andreea found hope in the nuanced account of everyday negotiations and the striking hospitality shown by people in need towards others in need, set many thousands of kilometres from both of us. In her note, she wrote:

‘I remembered that Toni Morrison advised her students to always “write what you don’t know”. Until now, I thought this was advice only for literary people, but for your class, I think it’s perhaps not such a scary piece of advice’.

As per Andreea’s proposal, we could have focused on themes such as fear, solidarity, violence, and hope as possible orientations for writing, but we decided to keep the process more open and encourage students to write and, in any case, encounter ‘the unknown’. We selected three points of

view tied to specific scenes for students to engage with: a mother and her teenage sons in El Salvador deciding to join the caravan; the town of Niltpec welcoming the caravan; and US soldiers awaiting the caravan's arrival at the US-Mexico border. More poetically, Andreea described these perspectives as 'pairs of eyes' that students could identify with and connect to. In later iterations of the practice, as my own understanding of how students experienced the process broadened, I invited them to choose whether to see through or look into these 'pairs of eyes', or to witness the scenes from a distance. They could write from what they imagined to be the point of view of a character, or as an observer witnessing the events—whether as a member of the local community, a (foreign) researcher, themselves, or even a fly on the wall. It could be first-person writing, or any form that felt right or doable.

### *working with poetic possibility*

I introduce the process as a 'more imaginative way of writing', but by 'imagination', what is mobilised is our emotional capacity and ability to connect, while also uncovering our limitations in doing so. Sacks and Zumdick describe the space of imagination as an inner 'workspace' available to all of us (2013, p. 8). However, the images we create—and those that are created within us—co-construct reality in multiple ways. They emphasise that 'we can enter the real world with imagination, or create an unreal world' (2013, p. 66). In this sense, the work of imagination can deepen lines of separation, but it can also serve as a resource for transforming them, conjuring new horizons for more connected and less estranged modes of being, both within ourselves and with others.

What we set out to do in this workshop was to bring our attention to the images of both 'self' and 'other' that already reside within us, and, by stepping back, to reflect on how we use our imaginative capacity in the first place: what we can imagine and, equally, where we may find ourselves blocked. For Sacks and Zumdick, the '*art* of imagination' lies in an open, respectful, and non-judgemental receptivity to what presents itself as both inner and outer phenomena. Rather than distancing ourselves from or escaping what exists, imagination can be a way of 'staying close' to the complexity of life worlds and lived experiences, without attempting to change or manipulate them. This requires a specific mode of relation: 'it

means I must also become conscious of what I bring to the perception, of what I want or do not want to see' (2013, p. 66).

This relation unfolds from the 'poetic mode' of attending, which requires awareness of both self and other, as well as an understanding of how they are positioned in relation to each other within us. However, this openness to seeing how we see cannot be taken for granted—neither in everyday life nor in the process of worlding the discipline, especially in competitive environments that leave little time to feel, reflect, and think differently. Our formation as knowing subjects often eludes us as we absorb the languages of recognisability and display the markers of 'best academic practice' in speaking and writing within the discipline. Becoming fluent in IR often involves surrendering to the presumed safety of 'fictive distancing' (Inayatullah, 2011, p. 5) which disconnects us not only from the multi-dimensionality of the subject matter but also from the possibility of bearing witness to how our own perceptions have been and continue to be shaped by the knowledge practices we engage in. To transform the default modes of worlding the field and enable a deeper understanding of how we not only write about but also *write* the relations we engage with and are immersed in, the points-of-view workshop curates an encounter with our sense-making processes, working with and around both the limits and emancipatory possibilities of imagination.

### *encounters*

To begin, we do some grounding and breathing to enter 'the writing space', and in an online class, I invite students to turn off their cameras for more privacy. 'This journey is about how we write our lives and the lives of others. So, what I would like you to do is simply write whatever comes to you, without analysing or overthinking it'. I start by reading the title of the first article: 'Migrant caravan seen as safer option for travelling: "Going alone is risky"' (Brigida, 2018). The first prompt is a two-minute free-writing reflection on what is provoked by hearing these words as a warm-up. I then read a couple of paragraphs that introduce fragments of the lives of a mother and her sons in El Salvador—their fears, aspirations, and their reckoning with the unknown.

I allocate six minutes for free writing as the scene develops more detail and nuance. The goal is to keep writing flowing, regardless of the point of view or writing position chosen. In fact, it is often through the act of

writing itself that we discover where we are writing from and which ‘characters’ we can or cannot connect with. I emphasise that any obstacles or challenges that arise are important for our learning and are valuable places to be: ‘If you feel “I can’t even begin to imagine that”, please just write that down’. Participants are free to move in and out of the point of view they’ve adopted, whether it’s the ‘pairs of eyes’ of someone else or the perspective from which they’ve been observing the scene. The plural form of ‘pairs of eyes’ gestures to the complexity inherent in multiple places and ways of seeing, inviting awareness of it and often prompting writing that is non-linear, awkward, or academically ill-fitting. ‘You can also pause, shift perspective, write about the writing process itself, or reflect on what you find difficult’. I add, ‘If you feel stuck, check with yourself: “What’s thinkable for me here? What’s narratable?”’ I also stress that ‘Nothing’ and ‘I don’t know’ are fully legitimate responses. I encourage everyone to engage with the frames provided in a way that feels meaningful to them—where they feel they are moving to new places. Here, I draw on what the writing and rewriting exercise may have cultivated throughout the course: less fear of, and more comfort in, not knowing.

I then move on to the second article from *The Guardian*, which reports on the warm reception given to the migrant caravan by the residents of an earthquake-stricken town in Mexico, alongside the simultaneous deployment of 5,200 troops to the US-Mexico border by President Trump. The article describes how residents, ‘who still live among piles of rubble that once were their homes’, welcomed the caravan with home-made soup, medical tents, and diapers for children (The Guardian, 2018). The mayor, Zelfareli Cruz Medina, is quoted saying, ‘We wish we had a space dignified enough to offer our visitors’.

In the next six minutes, students are encouraged to engage with the ‘pairs of eyes’ from Niltepec, whether from a local resident or the mayor herself. The fourth prompt shifts focus to the point of view of a member of the armed forces at the border. ‘If nothing comes to you, take it slowly. Stay with the feeling. Remember, you can move in and out of the perspective, and the scene itself’.

In the fifth part of the sequence, I ask students to revisit their responses—first to the headline, and then to the three scenes. ‘Underline or otherwise mark any statements that feel strong or carry a certain intensity. Where you sense you’ve tapped into an emotion, or something that resonates with you on a deeper level – you don’t have to know exactly

what that is. Just mark the words, phrases, or sections that stand out to you’.

The final prompt introduces a concept from our readings: what Michael J. Shapiro refers to as ‘literary justice’, encapsulating what ‘refuses to be closed and cannot be closed’ in legal cases and other realms of social ordering (see Shapiro, 2015, pp. 1, 41). The aim is to accommodate—and make felt—the full range of perspectives that emerged while working through the scenes and the initial impressions of the events. ‘Now, write about the migrant caravan leaving El Salvador, arriving in Mexico, and heading toward the US border in a way that includes all these perspectives – yours included, from where you started and where you’ve arrived’. I allocate five minutes for this final writing task before we continue to process the experiences generated: we first distil some key learnings into the living document, then students reflect in small groups, and finally, we open the floor for a plenary discussion. The path from inner work to collective reflection is designed to create a safe space so that what has been worlded can also be storied (see Bernini, 2018, p. 299). The distance between the intensity of an experience and the possibility of articulating it in language, as I’ve learned, should not be underestimated. For something that may lie outside the ordinary scope of classroom interactions to be expressed in words, re-enter academic discourse, and do so with relative confidence takes courage, awareness, and careful curation.

*travelling alongside the limits of compassion*

‘So, what did you make of the process? How are we part of what we write about?’ I open the sharing circle towards the end of the class. It turns out that nearly everyone tried to put themselves in the characters’ shoes, even though it came with unexpected complications. Most participants shared a relatable point of reference first—being on the move, questions of belonging, and the experience of being a woman on the move, having to choose between the insecurity of staying or going. One student shared their experience working as a citizenship tutor in the US, tutoring an El Salvadorian couple at the time of the events, listening to their story of escape.

The majority of the conversation centred around the figure of the ‘soldier’. Some students sat that part out, unable to connect, or having given up after a few lines. However, most of the group sought to portray

the soldier as a complex human being, not just a vessel of sovereign violence. This was done by constructing a layered inner world fraught with tensions. In one version, the soldier, while waiting, recalls their—or their family’s—arrival in the US. ‘Imagine you are at the border, and either you or your family have experienced something similar. What do you do?’ This was both ‘powerful and scary’ to think about. Another account explored the internal tension of the soldier’s self-perception: the prestige of being a US soldier, with a ‘dream of being powerful, strong, and a protector of the country’, while their actions were seen as violent and brutal, ‘not very prestigious in the end’. Perhaps the character tries to convince themselves by adopting the official narrative about the caravan, suppressing their doubts. ‘I focused more on how violence also impacts the perpetrator themselves’, one student shared.

Another student layered two different perspectives, ‘going back and forth between them’. One perspective echoed the ‘invasion’ narrative of needing to protect the borders, while the other reflected the voices of service members who felt helpless, thinking that ‘this was the opposite of what the US military was supposed to do’. This led to a realisation that it was more difficult to imagine a similar split of perspectives in the Mexican town, where the residents were showing hospitality to the caravan. They added, ‘But maybe there were people in this village who were also thinking, “Actually, we’ve just had an earthquake, we don’t want to be helping people, but everyone else is doing it, so I feel pressured to go along with it”’. They noted that their perception became more empathetic towards those who accepted the migrants. Ultimately, they reflected, ‘It became much clearer to me that even within what may seem like one group, there are so many perspectives’.

Personal experience with the military also influenced one’s ability to engage with the ‘pair of eyes’ of the soldier. For one participant, to their surprise, this was ‘the easiest part of the writing’. They shared, ‘I had flashbacks of the soldiers I saw deployed in Russia, quelling protests, for example. I saw them as so young – almost kids, much younger than me’. Having encountered vulnerability in this way helped them ‘imagine this internal fight that he or she is struggling with’. For another participant, a different experience limited their ability to engage in what Naeem Inayatullah calls ‘generosity to the antagonist’ (2013, p. 335):

‘I also tried to make the soldier educated, someone who was aware of the refugee crisis and empathetic at the same time. But I couldn’t carry

it through, because my own experience with soldiers and the military has been very violent. It was hard for me. I think, at the end of the day, for any author or writer, it's really important to have some experience reflected in their writing. So, even though I really, really wanted the soldier to be different, it didn't come out... unfortunately... But I tried. I did try'.

The conversation unfolded to reveal other layers of the limits of empathy in encountering the unknown, directing attention to our own sense-making processes. One participant noted, 'When you asked us to go through all the sections we wrote, what I saw was just me being in the text'. Others joined in: 'I was there with my own thoughts'. 'Putting ourselves in the space of the unknown' revealed to one participant how 'we think we understand, or we think we feel, how these people experience difficulties, but we can't really put ourselves in their shoes'. They observed that 'pressing our brains to feel what it would actually be like' while engaging with the scenes uncovered where and how compassion was lacking. It also highlighted how 'there are no clear-cut answers regarding what is wrong with the system'. I emphasise that 'no one is born a soldier, a diplomat, or an academic: none of us are inherently cut out for the roles we perform', and how we inhabit these roles through educational trajectories moulded by state power.

At this point, we encounter our own formation as knowing subjects and recognise how this shapes, and sometimes limits, our ability to observe and understand complex realities both within and beyond ourselves. How we read others' lives is often an extension of our experiential fields and what we can connect with. The different perspectives and voices we imagine and create are also within us. These are experiences of 'affective equivalence' (see Ahmed, 2015, p. 391), where the established categories used to order the social realm break down, allowing the phenomenological complexity of living beings to emerge beneath the labels. These moments also serve as learning opportunities for developing critical affective literacy. Here, not only does the 'other' appear as equal in the multi-dimensionality of their humanity and vulnerability, but the fragmentation of the self and the plural, irreducible planes of our sense-making are also revealed. 'Soldier', 'migrant', 'resident' now reflect what we carry within us. The limits of compassion towards one another point to where we lack connection within ourselves. Some of these unconscious borders may have a name or acquire one through reflection, while others remain obscure. Yet, acknowledging the unknown and its influence on

how we come to know anything can make us slower and more careful in the logistical ordering of our world. We end with an open question: ‘How can we engage with complexity, both within and outside, without trying to resolve or flatten it?’ What might our ‘more promising stories’ sound like from this place?

*knowing, narrating otherwise*

In a final assignment submitted as a narrative paper, a member of the group reflects on a transformational process that shifted her own perception of herself. She writes about ‘the process of reclaiming selfhood in the discipline, and through my re-writing workshop experience as a case study’, which allowed her ‘to represent how I found myself in “narrating others”’. Writing for writing revealed an experience of ‘powerlessness’ and gave her the opportunity to confront it, embrace it, and work with it, ultimately leading to a transformation in her inner landscape and sense of agency. She quotes from her workshop notes, sharing what the invitation of world-travel through the ‘pairs of eyes’ process enabled her to see:

‘I put myself in a position where I was able to express fear. I put myself in a position where I could feel warmth and empathy. Then, I put myself in the position of realization. I could feel what it’s like to let go of my assumptions and open my mind to something “new”. There was only one position I couldn’t put myself in: the brave woman who doesn’t have the privilege to be fearful. First, I felt THEY ARE POWERLESS; now I feel I AM. That was MY JOURNEY in IR’.

Her learning also points to the arc of the course, which we entered and navigated through the contributions and approach of ‘the narrative turn in IR’. I read her reflections as a practice of living-theorising, where the ways of knowing that unfold through experiential engagement increased awareness around both the practices of worlding and world-making. What began as a disconnect between disciplinary knowledge and life evolved into the crafting of a self-to-self relationship through contemplating how the ‘other’ appears within. This form of truth-writing is open to encountering the inner limits of moving between worlds and seeks to transcend them, pointing towards an affirming, growth-oriented ‘other world’ where the self continues to learn about itself and embraces the other with respect and appreciation:

‘Through self-reflexivity, I saw my limitations not just personally but also professionally. After the writing experience, I was thinking about how I should write about these people if I am not even able to understand them, their situation, their story. Eventually, if I would conduct research I would treat them as data since I am not able to connect with them immediately. Here the threat of dehumanization also arises. What was fascinating in this experiment was not that I could not position myself into all the characters of the story and I could not connect with them instantly, but the fact that even when I was forcefully trying to engage with the characters, I could not always succeed. If I am not able to do that consciously, how should I be able to engage with the characters of my “IR story” unconsciously? The rise of this question had me thinking that this effort that authors put into autoethnographies, narrative writings what makes their “IR story” more valuable’.

She continues, recognising the efforts of others in modelling self-transformation within the field:

‘The effort we must appreciate is that authors like Löwenheim, Doty, Cohn, and Dauphinee are not afraid to deconstruct themselves and face their own fears, concerns, and experiences. As MacIntyre also noted, autoethnographies are a tool for researchers to face their vulnerabilities and embrace them in front of people they may never know (Barr, 2018, p. 1109; MacIntyre, 1985, p. 213). I also faced mine, but I don’t regret it. I got closer to the IR I want to represent. MY IR, not somebody else’s’.

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folding back and forth



## writing as transformation

The spark that ignited this book spiralled out of students' reflections and feedback, which initially emerged from improvised, often spontaneous, writing-based exercises in class. I was struck by the richness of the experiences shared, and the development of distinct languages of self-reflection that became an integral, normalised part of engaging with the field of International Relations. Had I not followed these unfolding trajectories—each carrying the sense of something shifting, evolving, and becoming enriched—I would not have considered writing about them. This energy of transformation, captured in fragmented narratives that conveyed subtle but significant changes in perception, meaning making, everyday conduct, imagination, and ethical commitments, spiralled forward, giving rise to new forms.

My hope is that these life-affirming pathways will continue to grow, multiply, and diversify. As such, there is no real conclusion to this book or to the sensibilities threading through these pages. The 'notes from co-travellers' in the front matter offer not only generous readings but also glimpses into the work of attention—one that engages not only with the text but also with the spaces between and around the words, expanding the realms of world-making and writing towards more integrative, reparative orientations.

In the spirit of these writing processes, perhaps now—among countless other moments—would be an ideal time to write directly into this book what resonates with you, what reflects *your* journey. This is an

opportunity to continue ‘thinking through writing’ (Shapiro, 2013, p. 25; Vilardi and Chang 2009, pp. 4–5), weaving your own thoughts and feelings into a genuinely co-created intertextual, intra-textual thread. It can be a gesture of continuing archipelago writing, attuning to the connective medium of water, within which countless micro-islands appear and disappear—islands of new text or other shapes where awareness meets awareness. You could express and explore these emerging relations through other constellating practices, too. Such as cutting and pasting, collaging, doodling, decorating with sticky golden stars.

I’ll time four minutes for you, but no matter the clock, these pages and spaces are fully yours to inhabit.

Take your time. Take (up) your space.

‘Take a deep breath and release.

Attune yourself to where and how your fingers touch the pen or keyboard.

Four minutes, starting now’.

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## everyday transformations

What initially seemed like random spurts of free writing—something I saw as the lowest-stakes use of a trained skill in a highly competitive academic environment—gradually evolved into a regular habit. This, in turn, grew into an everyday practice of sense-making that eventually fed back into my scholarly work. But first, it began to infuse my pedagogical practice. The evolution of my own experiential writing unfolded alongside the staging of writing experiments in the IR classroom. A ‘method’ of discovery began to emerge for me, while I continually refined the writing prompts based on the insights I gathered from students’ responses and my own observations.

Slowing down and staying with what there is, attuning to life-enhancing orientations, and embracing the unknown have become foundational practices that help me centre myself amidst the daily pulls to intellectualise, rationalise, overthink, or dissociate. Interviews with students revealed that one key area where we share a tacit, yet profoundly political concern lies in our formation as ‘knowing subjects’ (see Foucault, 1994, p. 256), shaped towards embodying logistical, instrumental, and disconnected forms of subjectivity. Seeking remedies and designing processes for healing (see hooks, 1994) required a shift in mindset, entering what Shelley Sacks and Wolfgang Zumdick describe as the ‘artistic mode’—a state of ‘allowing’ where a relationship with self, others, and the world is open and receptive (2013, p. 5). In this mindset, our capacity to connect, find resources, gain new insights, and feel, think, and imagine otherwise expands, drawing us closer to what surrounds us rather than prompting us to escape from it.

It takes effort and practice, however, to remain open to not-knowing, surrendering intellectual mastery in favour of shared vulnerability. Framing writing practices in the spirit of ‘allowing’ helped students tap into the horizons of poetic possibility (see Klinkenborg, 2013, p. 31) while crafting ‘letters to authors’, feeding ‘the living document’ in each seminar, and exploring various modalities of ‘writing for writing’. As they navigated the intersections of the affective landscapes of the discipline and their own lives—encountering the folds of the outside within and the contours of their formation—they also cultivated critical affective literacy. This literacy allowed them to connect with plural realities, both within their personal trajectories and in approaching and writing about other realities, elsewhere—perhaps now more cautiously and with greater care.

As writing shifts from being merely an instrument of knowledge production to a medium for observing, experiencing, and creatively shaping gestures of world-making, the intricate ecosystems I describe as the micro-of-the-micro begin to come into view. The fleeting inner currents of moment-to-moment perception become palpable. Attuning to the micro-movements of attention facilitated enhanced perceptual awareness, giving rise to new languages—ways of speaking, writing, and reflecting—that brought these subtle inner phenomena into discourse. By taking these micro-events seriously as forms of knowing inherent in our unique sensoria and ecologies of sense-making, students unlocked a greater sense of agency in engaging with both course material and life material in their interwoven forms. International Relations revealed as ‘inner relations’ (Strausz, 2024a, p. 422) not only brought what seemed like distant phenomena closer but, within these experiential horizons, pathways for negotiation and (un)becoming became tangible. Other, ‘more promising stories’ (Shapiro, 1997, p. 209) that embrace the storyteller in their complex entanglements emerged in this way.

This came with the added gift of softening the top-down edges of educational roles—the kind of ‘expertise’ attributed to the field, to me as an instructor, and to the kind of knowledge desired. I certainly began to feel freer within democratising relationships that perhaps began to shift towards being ‘in constellation’ (Krenak, 2024, p. 50) with each other—moving from intellectual dependence to recognition of interdependence, drawing closer to each other by coming closer to ourselves, by investing in the skills and capacities of ‘teaching oneself’ (see Rancière, 1991, p. 99) beyond the hierarchical dispositions of academic sensibilities.

Working with attention and cultivating a sensitivity to the micro-dimensions of experience—viewing them as sites of learning, living-theorising, creative exploration, and collaboration—began to emerge in my mind as acts of ‘curation’. Care for our becoming, along with an openness to more wholesome and egalitarian presents and futures, emerged as a form of activism that extends beyond the physical or virtual boundaries of the classroom. This slowly gave rise to a new conceptual vocabulary as I started to notice the evolving features of processes that were initially guided more by the excitement of exploring something together in class than by a carefully thought-out structure designed to facilitate other modes of relating.

In my own reflections on KNR and the writing practices, I identified two key components in staging encounters with our sense-making and

mapping out more hopeful horizons of thinking, being, and action. I describe them as:

experiential diagnostics and creative remaking.

Experiential diagnostics draws attention to the sensory fields of perception and the lived experience of sense-making. It invites us to connect with concepts and events through our capacity to feel—mapping living, embodied intersections between what we encounter and what we carry. It calls upon us to attune to the feeling behind our thinking, which not only reveals more nuanced, complex, hybrid, and complicit (see Ling, 2014, p. 580) landscapes of worlding, but also harnesses our access to the non-linear realms of sense-making as a pathway towards creative remaking. Engaging with the registers of feeling enhances our ability to hold ambiguity, uncertainty, and contradiction without the need to resolve them. In such open states, creativity may manifest as poetic possibility. Writing differently—experientially, experimentally—can unfold as rewriting, folding into new ways of knowing and narrating, and, through that, being and being together. It becomes possible to remake experience, ‘recraft’ our habits of inhabiting structures (see Blaney & Trowsell, 2021), and reorient our efforts towards what may be uniquely important to each of us, both within and beyond the discipline. International Relations as ‘inner relations’ transforms the notion of ‘discipline’ into a personal ethos—one that emphasises the effort of simply showing up, making space, and engaging in the labour of inner work. Rather than moulding oneself to fit a set of internalised, often imagined expectations, discipline can be re-envisioned as a personal and political commitment to unmaking subjectivity and fostering self-transformation.

Such everyday transformations didn’t always appear spectacular as they unfolded—often, they were only recognised when prompted by a reflexive exercise, such as guided writing, class discussions, learning reflection sheets, or course evaluations. Nevertheless, their impact became palpable over the twelve weeks of ‘Knowing, Narrating, (re)Writing International Relations’ (KNR). Shifts occurred in relations and relationships. Opening to plural ways of knowing gave rise to greater sensitivity and self-reflection in engaging with the present moment, as well as in making knowledge about the lives of others that IR traditionally centres. Class discussions developed more intimate dynamics. Quick judgements, rehearsed opinions, despair or the over-confidence of analysis began to fade, making

way for slower, more hesitant, yet thoughtful and respectful modes of listening, speaking, writing, being, and being-with.

Such micro-avenues may not yield immediate results in an outward sense—the structures and power dynamics we navigate certainly take much longer to unmake, both within and beyond the university. Some of these structures have already proven to be more rigid and enduring than we might have hoped. Writing-based reflection works from the inside out—in its subtle, semi-formal, unregulated, and uncanonisable ways, it provides personal and collective processes and spaces to pause, observe more, feel more, care, recover, and recompose from a more connected place, responding to the numbness of ‘cold thought’ and its material consequences (see Sacks, 2023). Self-curating learning journeys require sustained attention to what blocks us, what enables us, and what else and what more exists, wherever we look. Embracing the generative power of writing as both a site for inner work and a channel for becoming otherwise must be learned through ongoing practice and reflection on that practice. Working with attention in this way may not only foster personal transformation—by reclaiming psychic energy from the currents of the ‘attention economy’—but also support the creation of collectively crafted presents and futures, including new articulations of freedom (see, e.g. Doran, 2017).

### ‘political writing’

Transformation, as a shift in ways of knowing and modes of relating, runs through both the history and content of the online course titled *Political Writing as Transformation: Openings to Enhanced Focus, Creative Practice, and New Social Imaginations* (Strausz, 2024b), developed in conjunction with this book. The course was designed as another fold, where writing-based reflection can extend beyond the discipline of International Relations and even the university, returning to the more personal realms of sense-making and becoming an everyday space for working through. As we put pen to paper or begin typing, our awareness shifts. Even if briefly, we become more grounded in our bodies—building on these moments of self-presence, we may write ourselves out of being stuck and into more inspired and generative states of mind.

Originally, the course was titled ‘Writing as Transformation’—the ‘political’ in the title, somewhat resonant with the evolution of this book, appeared as an external addition along the way. Yet, the ethos of

transformation—the one I seek to inhabit and cultivate as an everyday practice—requires working with, and sometimes working around, what there is. As a ‘reparative reader’ (see Sedgwick, 2002, p. 149), I relate to the new, unexpected discursive arrival as an accretion. How does ‘writing’ become enriched by the marker of ‘political’, suggesting a less ambiguous and more straightforward disciplinary positioning? As the gap between the invitation to explore the micro-processes of sense-making through writing and the genres traditionally viewed as ‘political writing’ now narrows, I choose to embrace the ‘political’ as an evocation. Writing becomes political when it is reclaimed and reappropriated as a vehicle for transformation. As a reparative writer, I write into the planes of possibility—whether intentional or not—that are opened in this way. How this can be done must be reinvented in each context, by those who choose to engage with and explore the horizons of growth within circumstances of constraint.

This online course, for me, stands as a testament to how ongoing investment in designing practices for more expansive and integrative ways of knowing and being can bring about expansion and integration. Recording reflexive writing practices for a broader audience—where participants can pause the recordings and engage with the frames at their own pace—emerged from creating a sequence of questions as ‘writing and (re)writing’ exercises for KNR. Unhinged from the classroom and even the university, *Political Writing as Transformation* offers three writing practices, each shaped by student feedback and collective exploration. Transformational experiences in the IR classroom and beyond may continue to unfold, mostly in unexpected ways, and also through what has been recorded as:

the practice of ‘the loving document’, inspired by ‘the living document’. Encouraged by the warmth of anonymous interactions in class, this guided process fosters a supportive self-to-self relationship, where we listen to our fears and connect with the wisdom we carry

‘dear critics and censors’, motivated by ‘letters to authors’, helps us encounter our critical inner voices with compassion, drawing on the intimacy of epistolary writing

‘message of self-to-self’, which evolved from the ‘writing and (re)writing’ exercises. A sequence of questions encourages us

to map how we think and feel about a project where we may feel stuck or are about to begin. This process helps us reconnect with the spark and our inner resourcefulness, generating a 'message' – a trajectory, provocation or inspiration for moving forward – that arises from multiple planes of reflection

Working with attention here is oriented towards

softening our gaze as a gesture of self-care

letting go of what limits possibility and imagination

accessing the wealth of our inner resources

'Pause the recording and take a moment to appreciate any shift you may experience'.

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## INDEX

### A

- Academic habit, 28, 54  
Academic self, 15, 65  
Academic subjectivity, 64  
Acts of knowing, 100  
Adichie, C.N., 42  
Aesthetic divisions, 7, 9  
Aesthetic partitioning of the sensible, 60  
Aesthetics, 16, 96, 129, 226  
Aesthetic sensibilities, 31, 153  
Affect, 99, 103  
Affective decolonisation, 13  
Affective equivalence, 22, 183, 250  
Affective labour, 151  
Affective landscapes, 77, 102, 104, 110, 111, 130, 141  
Affective landscapes of IR, 33, 44, 47, 97, 102, 114  
Affective learning, 202–205  
Affective life worlds, 99  
Affective literacy, 113  
Affective possibilities, 60  
Ahmed, A., 250  
Ahmed, S., 97, 99  
Alamo-Pastrana, C., 133  
Allowing, 58, 66, 74, 112, 262  
Anaesthetic, 226  
Anarchive, 29  
Anonymity, 203  
Another politics, 14  
Aradau, Claudia, 59  
Archipelago writing, 33, 141, 125–131, 260  
Archive of the senses, 49  
Archives, 104, 200  
Artistic mode, 74  
Assignments, 223  
Attention, 24, 112, 142  
Attention, curating the work of, 167, 173  
Attention economy, 265  
Attentive hearing, 128  
Attentiveness, 163  
Attentive receptivity, 182  
Attunement, 229  
Autobiography, 185, 224  
Autoethnography, 185, 224  
Autotheory, 65, 224  
Awareness, 82

**B**

Bailer, S., 28  
 Ball, S.J., 65, 67, 79, 81  
 Bearing witness, 205  
 Become *otherwise*, 76  
 Becoming, 14, 63, 67, 80, 82, 119, 263  
 Becoming otherwise, 74, 76  
 Benjamin, Walter, 48  
 Bennett, A., 7, 55  
 Berberich, Christine, 102  
 Berlant, Lauren, 73  
 Bernini, M., 111, 113, 120  
 Biesta, G., 164  
 Bingham, C., 164, 228  
 Blaney, D.L., 28, 54, 264  
 Blank space, 78, 219  
 Bleiker, R., 22  
 Bodymind, 29, 60, 73, 79, 112, 124, 127, 218, 226, 232  
 Booth, Ken, 185  
 Brain hemispheres, 10  
 Brostoff, Alex, 10  
 Butler, J., 97

**C**

Campbell, Neil, 102  
 Care, 6–8, 28, 40, 66, 71, 76, 114, 122, 129, 160, 172, 199, 227, 263  
 Care for becoming, 174  
 Care for the self, 227  
 Cartesian mind/body divide, 17, 218  
 Carver, Raymond, 119  
 Cascade of answers, 187  
 Cavarero, A., 200  
 Chang, M.K., 21, 260  
 Choi, S., 9, 14, 185  
 Closs Stephens, A., 99  
 Co-creation, 13, 34, 202  
 Co-creative labour, 50, 210

Cognitive mastery, 72, 151  
 Cohn, C., 72, 151, 185, 239  
 Collage, 33, 44, 89, 96, 109, 113, 260  
 Collage practice, 33  
 Collaging, 260  
 Collaging as research method, 103  
 Collective archive, 201  
 Collective journey, 209  
 Collective learning journey, 121  
 Collective writing, 202, 203  
 Colonial matrix of power, 239  
 Compassion, 162, 251  
 Compassionate (re)writing, 66, 68  
 Conley, Tom, 81  
 Connective distance, 67  
 Connective Practice Approach, 74, 81  
 Constellation, 10, 14, 26, 29, 58, 263  
 Co-presence, 13  
 Co-traveller, 170, 259  
 Covid-19, 19  
 Cowden, S., 100, 159  
 Co-writing, 21  
 Creative method, 46  
 Creative remaking, 34, 77, 226, 264  
 Creative writing, 31  
 Critical affective literacy, 21, 22, 183, 250, 262  
 Critical attitude, 64  
 Critical pedagogy, 72  
 Cruel optimism, 73  
 Cultivating, 162  
 Curated, 24, 193, 229  
 Curating, 209  
 Curating and education, 171  
 Curating learning journeys, 19, 28, 33, 265  
 Curating the work of attention, 33  
 Curation, 28, 31, 114, 171, 229, 263  
 Curator, 173  
 Curatorial sensibility, 33  
 Curatorial space, 173

**D**

Dauphinee, Elizabeth, 234  
 Dear critics and censors, 266  
 Decolonize, 62  
 Deleuze, G., 22, 32, 63, 76, 78, 79, 81, 99, 111, 169  
 Democratic education, 161  
 Depth of field, 120, 138, 141  
 Dias, Jamille Pinheiro, 10  
 Disciplinary aesthetics, 13  
 Disciplinary life, 101  
 Discipline, 28, 157, 184, 189, 264  
 Disconnection, 157  
 Discovery, 9  
 Distribution of the sensible, 23  
 Doran, P., 265  
 Doty, Roxanne Lynn, 185  
 Drainville, A.C., 92

**E**

Ecologies, 21, 223  
 Ecology of senses and meanings, 223  
 Edkins, J., 6, 12, 14, 185  
 Emancipation, 30, 162, 167  
 Embodied practice, 49  
 Emig, J., 10, 169  
 Empowerment, 113  
 Encounter, 170  
 Encounter with our sense-making processes, 246  
 Engaged pedagogy, 91  
 Enhanced perceptual awareness, 22, 23  
 Enskillment, 160  
 Epistemic praxis, 161  
 Epistolary pedagogy, 182  
 Epistolary writing, 266  
 Equality, 162  
 Erasmus, Zimitri, 182  
 Erstad, Ola, 159  
 Ethics of encounter, 235

Ethics of relationality, 181  
 Etho-poetic moments, 64, 66, 68  
 Everyday practice of sense-making, 262  
 Everyday transformations, 77, 81, 161  
 Experience book, 32, 66, 77  
 Experiential diagnostics, 34, 77, 226, 264  
 Experiential knowledge, 94  
 Experiential ways of knowing, 77  
 Experiential wisdom, 69, 92  
 Experiential writing, 8, 22  
 Experimental writing practice, 32, 77  
 Experimentation, 169  
 Explication, 164  
 Exploratory writing, 68

**F**

Farinati, L., 126, 128  
 Felt discipline, 100, 101  
 Feltness, 99  
 Feminist curatorial praxis, 28, 33, 172  
 Fictive distancing, 64  
 First person writing, 68  
 Firth, C., 126, 128  
 Fischer, Berit, 171  
 Flourishing, 158  
 Fold, 29, 76, 193  
 Folding, 29, 32, 79, 81, 170  
 Folding in, 32  
 Folding of the outside within, 76, 79, 99  
 Folding out, 33, 80  
 Folding over, 33  
 Folding with awareness, 80  
 Fold of the outside within, 23, 76, 79, 82, 99, 111  
 Foucault, M., 7, 46, 47, 62, 64, 66, 78, 79, 81, 227  
 Fournier, L., 65  
 Free writing, 50, 64, 218, 262

Fujii, L. A., 121  
Fullam, J., 228

## G

*Germano, W.*, 118  
Giroux, H.A., 5  
Gleaning, 48  
Global South, 137, 143, 144

## H

Habit, 13, 262  
Harney, Stefano, 67, 122  
Healing, 26, 71, 158  
Heath-Kelley, 81  
Heidegger, Martin, 161  
Hellinger, Bert, 62  
Heterotopia, 46  
Hidden curriculum, 5, 9  
Hooks, bell, 26, 71, 77, 91, 185  
Hudson, Robert, 102  
Hungry translation, 119, 137  
Hutchison, E., 22  
Huysmans, Jef, 59  
Hybrid, 131, 264  
Hybrid classroom, 90, 219  
Hybridities, 62, 80  
Hybrid teaching mode, 219

## I

Ignorant schoolmaster, 33, 123, 161, 163, 165, 170  
Imagination, 245  
Inayatullah, N., 8, 64, 92, 118, 121, 122, 133  
Ingold, T., 160  
Inner experience, 111  
Inner landscapes, 61, 226  
Inner relations, 21, 54, 225, 232, 263  
Inner work, 17, 24, 170, 189, 226, 264, 265

International Relations (IR), 14, 21, 63, 91, 92, 97, 99, 101, 111, 113, 114, 133, 145, 149, 152, 157, 192, 206, 225, 232, 259, 263, 264  
Interview islands, 136, 137, 141, 147  
Interviews, 123–125, 129, 136–138, 142, 157  
Intuition, 13, 83  
Intuitive ways of knowing, 83  
IR, affective landscapes of, 204  
IR classroom, 168, 193, 219  
IR experience, 104  
IR pedagogy, 92  
IR-scapes, 105, 107, 110  
IR theory, 14  
Islands, 130, 138

## J

Jacotot, Joseph, 163, 165, 168, 229  
James, William, 112  
Journaling, 42, 111  
Journaling thread, 126, 128, 184, 200  
*Journeying*, 159

## K

Kangas, A., 96  
Klee, Paul, 48  
Klinkenborg, V., 10, 32, 129, 168, 226  
Knowing as becoming, 49, 147, 190  
Knowing body, 172  
‘Knowing, Narrating, (re)Writing International Relations’ (KNR), 14, 18, 25, 90, 91, 93, 94, 120, 149, 169, 184, 201, 206, 212, 218, 223, 225, 244, 264  
Knowing subjects, 7, 9, 28, 62, 91, 94, 101, 149, 169–171, 184, 195, 200, 223, 227, 246, 262  
Knowledge cultivation, 71

Knowledge practices, 59, 91, 101  
 Knowledge production, 71  
 Krasny, Elke, 28, 173  
 Krenak, A., 10, 26, 263

## L

Language archives, 91  
 Languages of intimacy, 191  
 Latent narrativity, 113  
 Learning about learning, 26, 33, 118  
 Learning habits, 195  
 Learning journeys, 29, 100, 140, 158, 171, 174, 201  
 Learning lives, 159  
 Letters to authors, 18, 33, 183, 189, 223, 262, 266  
 Letter writing, 181, 183  
 Lewis, Tyson E., 59, 162, 184  
 Life-affirming, 73, 93, 172  
 Life-affirming openings, 226  
 Life-affirming orientations, 71, 262  
 Life journeys, 225  
 Lifescapes, 114  
 Life-writing, 65, 66, 68  
 Liminality, 49, 50, 119  
 Liminal spaces, 65, 67, 93, 159, 161, 172  
 Limit-experiences, 64  
 Lind, Maria, 172  
 Ling, L.H.M., 15, 62, 80, 131, 264  
 Listening, 126, 128  
 Living-theorising, 225, 232  
 Logistical subjectivity, 33  
 Loving perception, 225  
 Löwenheim, O., 185  
 Lugones, Maria, 225

## M

Manning, Erin, 50  
 Massumi, Brian, 30  
 Mastering otherwise, 155

Mastery, 165  
 McGushin, E.F., 64, 79  
 McLean, S., 130, 131  
 Message of self-to-self, 266  
 Methods, 43, 59, 161, 165, 167  
 Micro-experiments, 68  
 Micro-movements of attention, 76, 263  
 Micro-of-the-micro, 43, 67, 76, 129, 137, 232, 263  
 Micropolitical awareness, 174  
 Micro-practices, 158, 230  
 Micro-processes of sense-making, 266  
 Mignolo, W.D., 239  
 Minor gesture, 50  
 Mitchell, Audra, 60  
 Modern university, 229  
 Modes of attending, 69  
 Moten, Fred, 67, 122  
 Motta, S.C., 7, 55  
 Multiple emotional worlds, 15  
 Mulvey, Laura, 48  
 Muppidi, Imadeep., 185  
 Murakami, Haruki, 57

## N

Nagar, Richa, 12, 119, 185, 210  
 Narrative turn, 15  
 Neoliberalism, 79  
 Neoliberal university, 65  
 Nicholls, K., 118  
 Nicutar, A., 39  
 Nieuwenhuis, M., 9, 140, 200  
 No-stakes writing, 98  
 Not-knowing, 22, 27, 31, 76, 78, 171, 262

## O

O'Leary, T., 66  
 O'Neill, P., 28, 171  
 One-liners, 206, 207, 219

Online course, 19, 34, 199, 265  
 Open-hearted curiosity, 72, 239

## P

Pairs of eyes process, 251  
 Pandemic, 187, 215, 219  
 Pandemic pedagogy, 208  
 Pandian, A., 130, 131  
 Paper Boat Collective, 130  
*Parrhesia*, 227, 228  
 Pedagogical device, 201, 216, 219  
 Pedagogical experiment, 163  
 Pedagogical practice, 79, 157  
 Pedagogies of the folds, 32, 83  
 Penttinen, E., 21, 40, 72, 73, 76, 152, 239  
 Perception, 57, 60, 61, 67, 78, 80, 81, 137, 172, 263  
 Perry, Lara, 28, 173  
 Personal archive, 93, 200  
 Placeholder, 58, 61, 93, 132, 189  
 Poetic mode, 226, 232, 246  
 Poetic possibility, 16, 169, 226, 264  
 Poiesis, 64  
 Political writing, 267  
 Post-colonial, 16  
 Price, M., 29  
 Private free writing, 18  
 Public, 171

## Q

Querejazu, A., 67, 129

## R

Rancière, J., 23, 30, 33, 59, 123, 161, 163, 164, 167, 168, 185, 187, 228, 263  
 Raqs Media Collective, 172  
 Reflexive writing, 18, 266  
 Relation of self-to-self, 170

Remaking subjectivity, 79, 171  
 Reparative reader, 72, 266  
 Reparative reading, 228  
 Reparative writer, 72, 266  
 Representation, 129  
 Re-story, 42  
 Rice, Ryan, 172

## S

Sacks, S., 58, 60, 67, 74, 81, 93, 111, 226, 232, 233, 245, 262  
 Särmä, S., 96  
 Schick, Kate, 8  
 Scholarly gaze, 112  
 Schwartzman, R., 208  
 Scott, David, 181  
 Second World, 147  
 Second World subjectivity, 140  
 Sedgwick, E.K., 72, 228  
 Sefton-Green, J., 159, 160  
 Self-actualization, 72  
 Self-care, 66, 68, 267  
 Self-curation, 174, 227  
 (Self-) discovery, 164  
 Self-fashioning, 79  
 Self-making, 169, 228  
 (Self-) reflexive, 23  
 Self-reflexive practice, 173, 223  
 Self-transformation, 10, 26, 64, 82, 252, 264  
 Self-understanding, 228  
 Selmeczi, A., 9, 14, 119  
 Sense-making, 57, 166, 223, 226  
 Sensing and making sense, 58, 70  
 Sensorium, 60  
 Sensory registers, 173  
 Shapiro, M.J., 15, 169, 225, 231, 235, 236, 260, 263  
 Sheik, Simon, 171  
 Shilliam, R., 16, 71  
 Singh, G., 100, 159

Situated solidarity, 210  
 Slow Ontology, 70, 262  
 Society pedagogicized, 164  
 Socratic tradition, 227  
 Somatic politics, 218  
 Soreanu, R., 101  
 Sotirin, P., 63, 80  
 Spaciousness, 61, 77, 167, 227  
 Stanley, L., 182  
 Storying, 113  
 Storyteller, 263  
 Storytelling, 138, 224  
 Stultification, 164  
 Subjectivity, 28, 32, 79, 99  
 Syllabus, 117, 152, 201  
 Szarejko, A.A., 208

**T**

Teaching through writing, 8, 21  
 Textual itinerary, 15, 225  
 The living document, 18, 33, 199, 223, 262  
 The loving document, 266  
 Theorizing, 168, 185  
 Theory, 71, 83, 144, 185, 186  
 Thinking through writing, 17, 21, 24, 64, 231, 260  
 Timperley, C., 8, 17, 218  
 Tlostanova, Madina, 140  
 Transformation, 48, 61, 69, 81, 105, 259  
 Transformational device, 47  
 Transformational ethos, 174  
 Transformational experiences, 54, 66, 162, 240  
 Transformational practices, 20  
 Transformational space, 169  
 Transformational writing process, 235  
 Transgenerational memory, 97  
 Translation, 119, 161  
 Trodd, Tamara, 49

Trowsell, T., 28, 54, 264  
 Truth, 59  
 Truth-telling, 227  
 Truth-writing, 227, 251

**U**

Ulmer, Jasmine B., 70  
 Unbecoming, 79, 158, 263  
 Uncertainty, 170  
 Universal teaching, 163  
 Unmaking and remaking of subjectivity, 226, 264

**V**

Vilardi, T., 21, 260

**W**

Way of knowing and becoming, 8  
 Ways of knowing, 6, 12, 14, 17–19, 22, 31, 33, 55, 57, 58, 63, 69, 72, 80, 89, 169, 171, 239, 240, 264  
 Welland, Julia, 99  
 Wellbeing, 72  
 Williams, J., 154  
 Willink, K., 125  
 Wilson, M., 28, 171  
 Witnessing, 49  
 Witnessing body, 39  
 Working with attention, 11, 267  
 Working with questions, 74  
 Work of attention, 48, 259  
 Worlding, 60, 113  
 Worlding through writing, 73  
 Worldist dialogics, 16  
 World-traveling, 225  
 World-traveller, 225  
 Writing and rewriting exercise, 230, 233  
 Writing around, 76, 83

Writing as cartography, 78  
Writing as discovery, 18, 32, 83  
Writing as moving, 243  
Writing as skill, 11  
Writing as thinking, 182  
Writing as transformation, 34  
Writing-based reflection, 8, 19, 20,  
24, 29, 31, 33, 34, 170, 265  
Writing-based teaching, 20  
Writing blocks, 195  
Writing differently, 8, 170, 264  
Writing experientially, 57, 62, 77, 83  
Writing experiments, 24  
Writing for writing, 18, 33, 68, 83,  
223, 262

Writing prompts, 24  
Writing relations, 67, 83  
Writing sovereignly, 65  
Writing the self, 67  
Writing to transform, 83

## Y

Yet-unknown, 26, 61, 155

## Z

Zembylas, M., 13  
Zero-degree writing, 240  
Zumdick, W., 58, 60, 111, 226, 232,  
233, 245, 262