

**Towards a more capacious, kindly, and caring criticality:  
A post-critical manifesto for ethical-relational-creative reviewing**

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**Abstract**

The words 'criticality', 'critical', and 'critique' can often summon up painful, exposing, and difficult experiences. In a higher education system shaped by hierarchical cultures, abuses of power, performative metrics and competitiveness, many of us are often positioned as (and internalise a sense of ourselves as) lacking. This imputed sense of 'lack' begins early in our educational careers and its affective impress often stays with us. As PhD students, we are required to subject ourselves to critique in order to pass confirmation processes; as article authors, our work stands or falls at the critical hands of journal reviewers and editors who, as gatekeepers, decide which of us is 'accepted' or 'rejected'. We write as four members of the larger *Get Up and Move!* Collective, using the special issue call from CriSTaL to explore criticality, critical, critique, to revisit our own contested entanglements in/with criticality in higher education. We deploy the methodological approaches of compositing and composting to ponder the inimical conditions, negative behaviours, and ill-judged peer review comments that give rise to damaging modes of critique. From our work in the Collective, we consider what a more capacious, kindly, and caring criticality might look, feel, and be like. The article ends with *A Post-Critical Manifesto for Ethical-Relational-Creative Reviewing*, which outlines a praxis for doing criticality differently.

**Keywords:** Criticality, critique, judgement, ethical-relational-creative reviewing

**Introduction**

We write as four members of the *Get Up and Move!* Collective who found themselves hailed by the special issue call from CriSTaL to think, write, explore, and examine criticality, criticism, and critique. The *Get Up and Move!* Collective's genesis, impetus, and supportive ongoingness shape our various aims in this article.

The *Get Up and Move!* Collective has been working together since December 2020 when seven of us came together to use movement and arts-informed methodologies to combat the conditions (screen fatigue, isolation, anxiety, overwork) caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. Since



then, as an assemblage of scholars of different ages, career stages, and roles, we have continued to work together to create and hold open a capacious and shared space for collective and collaborative processes of research creation events, material happenings, and collaborative writing (Bastos, et al., 2022; Hogarth, et al., 2023; Taylor, et al., 2023). 'Slow practices' (Bozalek, 2017), slow scholarship (Mountz, et al, 2015), and a feminist materialist posthuman ethics of care and kindness (Barad, 2007; Robinson, 2020) underpin our collaborative work together and help us manage the uncertainties, risks, and unknowings that shape our higher education lives in the ongoing social-economic crises that the pandemic has unleashed. As we continue to move, co-create, collaborate, work, and learn together as a collective, our shared, tacit and emergent sensing is that somehow together we have found ways of 'being critical' but doing it in a more ethical way, such that criticality has been/is articulated and enacted in relation to the collective's deep commitment to developing affective research spaces underpinned by risk, exploration, trust and joy.

The first aim of the article is to bring our own respective, embodied and thus-far unspoken entanglements with criticality to the surface and to think with them, ponder them, explore them as material matterings intrinsic to our practices as academic scholars, and to consider how they have shaped aspects of our educational lives. As we talked, remembered and thought-together, we discussed how the words and practices of criticality, being critical and critique can often summon up painful, exposing, and difficult experiences borne of unjust judgements, imposter syndrome, fear of doing or saying the wrong thing, or of being found out to be 'not good enough'. These were worth revisiting and delving into; they have shaped our sense of self and play a part within our collegial relations, institutional contexts, and our wider view of the higher education sector. These delvings also pushed us up against contemporary problematics concerning the constitution of what comes to matter as criticality and how 'being critical' shapes our subjectivities.

From this, the second aim, is to zone in on a range of key academic practices in which criticality and critique are central. One of these practices is the PhD confirmation process which confirms the student as a good, right, proper, and valid candidate for pursuing a PhD. Another practice is the submission of ourselves as academic authors of journal articles to critical judgement through a journal's anonymous peer review process. Another is the injunction to write in particular stylistic modes so that our writing is judged to bear the hallmark of criticality and we ourselves are judged to be 'proper' critical students and academic subjects.

Criticality and critique in higher education is enmeshed with power, authority and hierarchy and the practices we focus on illuminate how criticality and critique materialize, take shape in, and come to malevolent life in higher education cultures. Our hearts feel the often invisible but tangibly felt weight of critique, and our bodies are marked by abuses of power borne of critique which wind their way into materially enforced hierarchies. Cultures of critique work alongside cultures of competition and performativity in higher education, creating spaces for affects of shame, guilt, fear, and self-condemnation to take root and proliferate. Such cultures, sadly and sometimes devastatingly, position many of us as 'lacking' and, when thus positioned, govern our

own internalization of the feeling of ourselves as lacking.

An added perniciousness is that, even though many of us are affectively positioned by critique in this way and feel-see-know the harms it does, criticism and critique continue to ineluctably work on and through us. As tutors we employ our criticality to judge, assign, position, and hierarchise our students – to pass and fail them, to label their achievements as ‘merit’ or ‘distinction’. As academic writers, we often craft our sentences, structure our papers, write our theses, in line with the known ‘rules’ that privilege certain modes of critical writing – fear keeps us in line/within the lines – for who can risk being seen as aberrant, who can risk not being recognised as a sufficient or ‘proper’ academic? As authors we submit our work (which effectively means ourselves) to critique from journal reviewers and editors who are the gatekeepers and who decide which of us is ‘accepted’ or ‘rejected’. In this context, the word ‘submit’ is instructive! All four of us writing this (and no doubt you, too, reader) have gone through processes of submission, judgement, and rejection (as well as the joys of acceptance) and been particularly piqued (to put it mildly) at the lack of accountability, lack of generosity, and lack of care that critical judgement practices and critique sometimes entail. We are made to feel our position of powerlessness. Such harsh critique diminishes us, but, we contend, it also diminishes the reviewer who engages in such unwarranted and care-less practices, and it demeans the practice of judgement and peer review on which our own field of higher education, and academic fields more broadly, rely for new knowledge productions.

Our third aim in this article, then, is to work out how we can do criticality, critique and being critical differently. We are motivated by the question: what are the possibilities for creating a mode of being-doing-knowing that not only exposes the inimical conditions, negative behaviours and ill-judged peer review comments that give rise to damaging modes of critique, but also pushes back against them? This third aim, then, takes a line of flight to work toward a sensing of what a more capacious, kindly, and caring criticality might look, feel and be like. We shape this sensing into a practical outcome – *A Post-Critical Manifesto for Ethical-Relational-Creative Reviewing*, which outlines a potential praxis for doing criticality differently. Our central argument is that it is possible (it must be) to enact a more capacious criticality. We have composed this article with a postqualitative methodological sensibility, using creative modes of academic writing, and we look to resources from feminist materialist posthumanism to help us ground our argument theoretically.

### **Composting, Compositing & Collaboration: The writing and methodology of this article**

This article has been written using various approaches to collaborative writing. Some sections have been led and drafted by a particular individual then written into collaboratively either in the ‘real-time’ of an online meeting or asynchronously later. Other sections have been written using the methodology of collaborative writing synchronously, which is a dynamic, iterative form of writing which ‘contests the dominant assumption that writing emanates from an individual human mind, by ensuring text emerges spontaneously and synchronously during discussions of

shared experiences' (Cranham, et al., 2023 f.c.). These two approaches to collaborative writing enabled us to experiment with two modes of writing production – composting and compositing – which we outline shortly. The article includes three examples of each mode of production which serve to illuminate and condense in vivid form the problems we see with traditional modes of criticality and critique.

Later in the writing process (after receiving the peer reviews of the article), we enfolded some of the insights and worked with the comments of the two anonymous reviewers of our article. The reviewers' comments warmed and encouraged us. Their suggestions became invitations which helped us breathe new air into our discussions and to take steps to extend the article's scope and improve its formerly rather choppy structure. Thus, our reviewers became our co-conspirators, our critical colleagues in an emergent and ongoing collaborative writing confederacy which aimed to 'counter normative frames of what an academic text should look like' (Anonymous reviewer). The anonymous reviewers gave us heart and encouragement to extend our creative academic writing and work out new ways to instantiate and enact in our writing a postqualitative methodological sensibility that refuses ready-made and well-used approaches in favour of making methods up to suit the task at hand. A postqualitative sensibility works outside normative research prescriptions and invites the use of emergent method/ologies (Lather & St Pierre, 2013; MacLure, 2010).

### ***Composting***

Composting is a mode of doing/thinking/writing that borrows from Haraway's (2016) and Barad's (2014) figuration of the earthworm. For Haraway (2016: 42) the earthworm is a creature who/which/that tunnels through events in order to explore ways of 'articulating ... assemblages through situated work and play in the muddle of messy living'. Benozzo, et al. (2019) use the earthworm for postqualitative experimentations to disturb the AcademicConferenceMachine. We use the earthworm as figuration for experimentations for agitating the growing pile of critique and criticism, de-composing and re-composing it into new formations, re-situating critique and criticism in new compositions; and making connection points in ways that encourage a staying with the trouble – that is, a staying with the trouble of criticality, critique and criticism, how it appears, what it does, the damage it enacts.

Composting, as we use it in this article as a postqualitative methodology, enables us to bring disparate critical comments together and choreograph them into different forms. Our three compostings ponder critique, criticality, and criticism in relation to an authoritative writerly voice (Composting 1: The Voice of God: Image+Text), the anonymity of reviewing (Composting 2: The Mask of the Anonymous Journal Reviewer: A Figuration), and article peer reviews (Composting 3: Critical Peer Reviews: A Poem). Compostings 1 and 2 were invented collaborative creations. The phrases and sentences that are composted together in Composting 3 Critical Reviews – A Poem are from actual reviews we have received, and which have struck us, stuck to us, and created sticky affects that continue to condition our hearts-minds-bodies-senses. Composting, as we do it in this article, entails mulching the hurtful slings and arrows of critique and criticality

so that we might try to turn it into something other – something that can be re-incorporated in new and less damaging ways in new co-creative co-productions such as a poem or a figuration. Such a process of composting raises risks: it rests in working with people we feel comfortable with, and who we trust to extend practices of care and kindness. Composting is always a process and always involves human and nonhuman collaborators: air, earth, leaves, dirt, light, weeds, time, practice, kindness, consideration. The manifesto with which we end the article was also collaboratively produced by composting and aims to instantiate how criticism might be turned from the offence of bad critique into collaborative co-creative opportunity.

### ***Compositing***

Willis (2018: 472) describes compositing as ‘the use of ... “composite narratives”, in which a number of interviews are combined and presented as a story from a single individual’. Compositing, as a method of data analysis and presentation, ‘use[s] a single story to tell a more generally representative account of the experience’ and it aims at ‘emotional truth’ not the strict retelling of facts. The benefit of this methodology, as Willis (2018) suggests, is that each writer can describe in detail their own experience, rather than have it broken down into themes as might happen in traditional data analysis. The second advantage is anonymity – compositing produces a safe space within which writers can provide a full and frank account of damaging critical experiences.

The story of Alex’s Confirmation (Compositing 1: This should all be about you but actually it’s all about ME: A narrative) is composed of a number of real experiences. Some of us separately wrote our memories of how we felt during the PhD confirmation process; then each wrote into the other’s account by highlighting and making notes on parts that resonated. Those accounts and comments were then merged to form the single account of a fictional character. Alex’s experience is ‘accurate’ (it emerges from a number of confirmation experiences); it is also a composite narrative fiction (Alex’s character and story are jointly created). The two other compositings follow a similar process to explore how criticality performs and is performed in different ways in intra-actions with writing processes and with the open AI machine learning programme, ChatGPT, which, while we were writing this paper ignited panic and/or excitement about the future of critical thinking, writing and how academic power might be disrupted by this tool. We asked ChatGPT several questions and from its productions we composited a dialogic play script (Compositing 2: Writings entanglements, criticality and ChatGPT: A play script). Our final compositing, ‘Thank you very much for this lovely piece’, is created as a series of emails written between author and reviewer, derived from several reviews, including the ones for this paper, which we composited together. These collaborative writing compositings offer an empowering way of creatively capturing concerns and emotions forcefully and honestly.

Before we move to the compostings and compositings, we ponder the problem of power.

### ***Critique and the Problem of Power***

Power is bestowed on and accrues to individuals as they master the language, discourse, and

performativities demanded by higher education's hierarchical structures, producing particular ways of being, knowing and doing. Power disciplines and shapes us, conferring authority. What happens to critique and criticism in this context? Criticality by its nature requires authority; the issue (and concern) is how this authority is held and utilised. Criticality can produce dialogue, discussion, and discovery, or it can close this pedagogical approach through arrogance, unapproachability, untouchability, and lack of accountability, enabled and often exacerbated through anonymity. Criticality is a dividing practice – it lifts and separates: the one who knows (the 'true' knower) from the one known (the 'pretender'); the one who can subject others to their will from the one who is subjected to the will (whims?) of the other. In these modes of criticality, power is absorbed and deployed as an entitlement that buttresses privilege and authority. Sometimes (often?) when feedback and evaluation are sought, especially in HE spaces and relationships where hierarchies are strong and status maintenance is a concern, vicious and thoughtless comments can be bandied about and sometimes, in denial of the damages such comments do, are dismissed as banter. Critique in this vein produces academics oriented to rejection, dejection, and abjection, and a higher education sector sapped of energy and creativity by its allegiance to the necropolitics of performativity.

Critique and criticality when done like this, do little to support learning of the craft of writing and the skills needed to research, theorise, think, and write well, nor do they help improve the work. Instead, critique and criticality work as judgementally pathologising and shaming practices. This positionality normalises the belief, and codifies the practice, that harsh critique and criticality will produce 'better' work, 'more robust' academics and 'higher', even 'excellent', quality. Critique done in this mode comes from, and feeds, the fear that reciprocity will lead to the flattening of hierarchies and, ultimately, the collapse of the house of cards which maintains perceptions of status, image, and security. Such critique conserves hierarchies. More damagingly, though, critique and criticality from this position perpetuates an intellectual monocularity in HE, homogenising and normalising standardised academic performances of all-knowing authority, quashing and diminishing difference, discouraging non-conformity, and squeezing out other ways of being, doing and knowing. Such modes of critique disempower some while affording the powerful a sense of unjustified confidence in their privilege. Such critique enables the disregard of others, even when the energy source is directly fuelled by those being disregarded (Zembylas, et al., 2014). Such critique is a subtle and not-so-subtle carrier of a colonialist mindset with its violences, dominances and extractivist reductionism. It is an intellectual dead-end.

Suppose an alternative way of doing critique were to be enacted in HE? Can we imagine it into being and then enact it collectively? What would it look like? It might, we suggest, appear as something like critique as relational pedagogy in which what matters is how to nurture and develop the other through collaborative engagements in learning. Or it might materialise as critique as care, in practices of shared support and mutual enablement. Or it might materialise via mentoring practices which centre dialogue in which vulnerabilities and (micro-)political strategies for survival in inimical institutions are shared. Such modes of doing critique differently would radically challenge the culture of entitlement and privilege, dilute its power, re-distribute

its privileges along more communitarian lines, and open spaces for new, unique, and diverse contributions to emerge. Criticality done this way would present possibilities for alternative contributions and processes which could expand knowledge, but which will not conform to 'standards' or present in a way that is pleasing to those who possess or desire power. Cultivating cultures of caring and allowing/enabling them to proliferate and take hold could undermine power dynamics and pluralise critique and critical practices.

This section outlines the damage done when power is folded into criticality and critique. In many ways this section works as a 'traditional piece of critique': it is a cool appraisal, it offers a measured assessment of a state of being, it builds an argument through apparent logic and persuasive rhetoric. Emotion is absent, it has been washed away and suppressed under the surface of an academically authorial voice that claims authority. We are calm and collected; the writing is that of a 'good critical subject' displaying their allegiance to known, orderly, depersonalized academic modes of writerly critique.

But the anger, rage, and hurt (and the shadowy hauntings of fear and shame) borne of the affective damage done by injurious critique cannot be so simply 'disappeared' as in a magician's 'hey presto!' trick. These affects remain – in our hearts, in our stomachs, in our gut feelings, in our 'instinctive' reactions, in our nonverbal communications. What happens when we shake off that cool voice and let the emotions out? The compostings and compositings which follow are what materialized on the page for us when we opened ourselves to the affective life of anger and rage and let the hurts they had produced flow and be crafted collaboratively onto the page. We could do this together because we had been together, worked together, stayed together, showed up for each other and committed to the work together for years now. The trust required for 'exposure' is not easy; it takes time, patience and thoughtfulness, care-full holding of others' stories and harms, the willingness to be vulnerable enough to tell. Academia does not 'provide' such spaces; we have to foster them ourselves.

## **Composting 1**

### ***The voice of God: Image+Text***



How to write in/as the voice of God?  
 How to write with more authority?  
 Write in the He  
 Remove yourself, your baggage, your dirty body, your emotions  
 Be certain!  
 Provide PROOF  
 Claim objectivity  
 Include facts  
 Detach yourself from your writing and from your work  
 Look over it and beyond it  
 Be Objective  
 Distanced  
 Detached

## Composting 2

### *The mask of the anonymous journal reviewer: A figuration*

Something to hide behind. Face-less. Name-less. Able to say the things that they are unable to face-to-face. The mask creates identity deception. Anonymity disembodies. The mask confers entitlement, status and privilege. The One who wears the mask can hide behind anonymity – can use anonymity to their critical advantage. The mask is an enabler to de/form critique and turn it down destructive paths towards injurious ends.

Disinhibited like an internet troll.  
 The Expert. The One Who Knows.  
 “I want to tell you about how much I know.”  
 The One Who Sits in Judgement.  
 The One Who can provoke, create an emotional response.  
 Shame? Embarrassment? Fear?  
 The mask as licence to kill, as freedom to destroy, as authority to critique.  
 To slay with words.

The mask of the reviewer is an onto-epistemological object that enables evasion. When hidden by the mask of anonymity, the critical reviewer needs give less account to building and establishing human relations. The mask of peer reviewer anonymity is often justified in the name of ‘honesty’, ‘standards’, ‘quality’; explained as ‘knowing the field’; and legitimized as a time-honoured tradition by which ‘those who know’ inculcate ‘those who don’t know’ into the norms of behaviour of the discipline. The anonymous reviewer heads onto a computer and lets out the frustrations they feel. Sitting with quiet, personal injuries and hurt, the masked reviewer commits

to others what was done to them. But this time around, under the guise of critical anonymity, without any awkward or saddening repercussions; without having to look into sad eyes or sense the disheartening feelings as shoulders drop. The mask protects against awkward encounters.

“This was done to me, so I will do it to you.”

If the anonymous reviewer never meets or knows those whose work they review then why should they care to be kind? Given conditions in the accelerated academy then the mask of critique is surely a convenience, a short cut, a necessary thing to get the job done – you hone into what needs improving? Because what matters is the article and getting ‘that’ into as best a shape as possible? In which case, isn’t the mask of the anonymous reviewer the best critical tool we have?

“Caring takes time that I do not have.”

### **Composting 3**

#### ***Critical peer reviews: A poem***

Is there a more nuanced way of saying this?  
Structure needs attention  
The model is not that original  
A couple of statements made by the author seemed misplaced  
It should be made clearer at the outset  
The methodological focus needs unpacking  
So, I am not convinced by this article  
There is an implicit conflation and generalisation  
It’s all so totally uncritical and confirmatory  
There are too many concepts that are taken for granted  
I am not sure I would agree with the (unsupported) assertion  
This seems like an odd languaging of the issue  
The author throws out too many terms without explanation.  
Simultaneous density and superficiality of the theoretical canvas  
The author presents it as a uniform discourse which results in a sometimes confusing analysis  
The author(s) need to bear in mind that they are talking to an international audience and say  
that they are talking about Britain which has a very particular history of these kinds of questions  
and issues  
The paper makes a number of claims that are not always evidenced or established in enough  
detail  
Why an old-fashioned commitment to ‘disinterest’ should be seen as a problem, escapes me  
I really struggled to grasp any nuanced argument which might be unique and particular to this  
paper’s contribution to the literature

The writing, at least so far, I don't believe to be at the level needed for publication  
 This might mean, in effect, starting over and rebuilding the paper more carefully  
 Evidently, this paper has the capacity to inform and generate emotion and debate, but as it  
 stands it reads/seems totally uncritical  
 One has to be deeply troubled by how little reflection or critique follows presentation of these  
 innovations  
 And there are places where the reader just has to shut off and think of England and trust that  
 Rooney will step in and give it all a good kicking  
 In places it feels like pedagogical hubris – like being on the pier at Brighton or Aberystwyth – all  
 very exciting and entertaining but ultimately inconsequential to life on shore.

## Compositing 1

### ***This should all be about you but actually it's all about ME: A narrative***

Alex gets up in the morning feeling excited. They put on their best clothes; they want to look good for this important occasion. They arrive on campus and visit the bathroom several times because they are nervous. Alex is well prepared having been through their presentation several times. They had done a run through with their supervisor, their partner, their friend. Today was the day she will present her previous 12 months' PhD work, and the expertise accumulated in previous professional contexts. Yet, they still feel anxious, despite the prep, the rehearsals, and knowing she is able to deliver her confirmations. Alex starts talking. They talk for 20 minutes. She ends and waits for questions. The first question comes. Its criticality sideswipes her. 'Uh! Where did that come from? Have you heard anything of what I have been saying?' The voice in Alex's head says, 'Hold on! You have this, you have not been listened to.' But as the questions continue, Alex begins to doubt herself: did she fail to present her research properly? She becomes small, inarticulate, she feels unprepared, questioning her worthiness to even be in this room. She rapidly spirals into further self-doubt: Do I lack intelligence, communication skills? Have I been in a naive bubble? Is my contribution worthy? Am I worthy? I am exposed and shamed. And the questions keep coming. The critique keeps coming from the examiners' position. There is no bridge to Alex's position. Alex leaves feeling smaller, less confident, less certain, and with an insecurity that will remain with them for the rest of their PhD and beyond. An insecurity that will slowly infiltrate her being and proliferate. Alex's deep-seated doubt, 'am I good enough?', is finally answered. No, I really am not.

Years later, Alex reflects on the experience. Having carried this critique with them, they can still remember how it felt to be stood in that room and the waves of shame are made present anew. Even though they now know this was an injustice, the embodied emotional affects re-emerge and trigger feelings of precarity and uncertainty. A sense remains as to whether they are a phoney in the halls of academia.

## Compositing 2

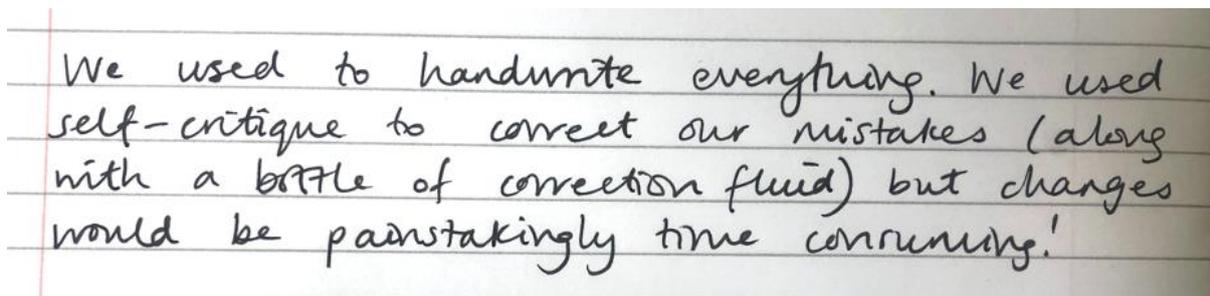
### *Writings' entanglements, Criticality and ChatGPT: A play script*

**Reviewer 2:** I'd suggest you add another one or two *more 'compositing'* of case reflections. This would help to give more space for the reflections to work through more of the affective and methodological problems and the questions of relatedness.

**Authors (Smiling to each other):** Thank you Reviewer 2. Good idea! So, what should our compositing focus on? How about that comment the reviewer made?

**Reviewer 1:** The notions of compositing/ compositing are particularly compelling because they conjure an entanglement with the early compositors (whose job it was to arrange the bits of moveable type for the printing process), reinforcing how texts materialise through iterative human and more-than-human encounters and processes.

**Authors:** Great! Yes! This is an interesting provocation! **(Words tumbling in talking to each other)** Compositing from way before the advent of the printing press, from scribes working on papyrus, stone plinths, cave walls, to handwriting on paper, typewriting, computer processing, and now AI created machine-learned writing, our writing is always entangled with human-and-more-than-human others.



How might criticality be further changed in the future? Shall we ask ChatGPT to contribute?

**Author 2 (Typing):** ChatGPT, please compare the adoption of ChatGPT to the adoption of the printing press.

**ChatGPT:** The adoption of ChatGPT and the printing press represent two significant technological advances that have transformed the way we communicate and process information ...

**Author 2:** On and on it goes, turning out words, more words.

**Author 4:** But this stuff about the press is not about critique. Ask it about critique.

**Author 3 (Typing):** OK. ChatGPT, what is the role of critique in collaborative writing? Apparently, the more precise the question the better the answer ...

**Author1 (Interrupting):** But that's a bit ugh isn't it? What about speculative thinking, pondering, wondering, thinking around a problem, outside the box ... all the things we want our students to do to cultivate their creative and critical thinking?

**Author 2:** Oh look, it's come back with something.

**ChatGPT:** Critique plays an important role in collaborative writing, as it allows writers to provide feedback to each other and improve the quality of their work. When working collaboratively, it's important to establish a culture of open and constructive critique, where writers feel comfortable sharing their work and receiving feedback from their peers.

**Author 2:** How does it know this? Where does it get its information from?

**Author 1:** Google? Algorithms? Wikipedia? Academic papers?

**Author 3:** Well, it is certainly writing in the voice of God. What else is it telling us?

**ChatGPT:** The role of critique in collaborative writing can include:

1. Identifying areas for improvement: Through critique, writers can identify areas of their work that may need improvement, such as clarity of argument, organization, or use of evidence.
2. Encouraging reflection: Critique can also encourage writers to reflect on their work and consider alternative perspectives.
3. Building trust: Collaborative writing often requires a high degree of trust and respect among the writers involved. Through constructive critique, writers can build trust by showing that they are committed.
4. Fostering collaboration: Critique can be an opportunity for writers to work together to solve problems and develop new ideas.

Overall, critique plays a vital role in collaborative writing by providing writers with opportunities to improve their work, reflect on their ideas, build trust and collaboration, and ultimately produce higher quality writing.

**Authors:** Pretty good stuff. All a bit cold though. Can we warm it up?

**Author 4:** How about .... ChatGPT, please write a Shakespearean Sonnet on power relations within academia.

**ChatGPT:** Amidst the halls of learned academia,  
Where scholars seek to gain the upper hand,  
The power games play out in full melodrama,  
As each vies for the prize they can command.  
The hierarchies are clear, the structures set,  
With tenure, title, funding as the goal,  
And those who hold the power, don't forget,  
That privilege comes with roles that they control.  
For those without the power, it's a fight,

To gain a foothold in this academic game,  
With research, teaching, writing as their might,  
They hope to rise, to make a name, a claim.  
Yet power's not just held by those on high,  
For truth and knowledge can themselves defy.

**Author 1:** Wow! How does it do that?

**Author 4 (Laughing):** Not bad! Shakespeare-U-Like – those last two sentences ...

**Author 2:** ChatGPT is machine learning. It was trained on a massive data set and learned through human interaction and feedback. It was trained by humans. It has written this sonnet by going through all its data bank. When you ask it a question it goes to its repository to retrieve the information. It isn't creating new data.

**Author 1:** It can't think!!!

**Author 2:** If it can't think for itself, then can it actually be critical? It can't evaluate; it can't weigh up an argument ... or can it? Mmmmmm, it looks like it can present arguments but can it judge?

**Author 3:** It can make judgements by replicating the ways in which humans have judged. It can replicate the process of judgement ...

**Author 1:** So it's just a big \*\*\*\* mirror of the human mind, then? Or to be more accurate, what some human minds have put into it which it mirrors back to them? Even if it can take in more than a human mind, and process information faster, it is not really, creating anything new, is it? Its, its ... it's just ...

**Author 3 (jumping in to finish the sentence):** It's just producing new syntheses of what already exists.

**Author 2:** And that raises the question of whose human minds or which human minds it is mirroring in its retrievals? Are we back again with the same problem – White, patriarchal, colonialist thinking? I'm not sure?

**Authors (together):** It can't create. It can't really critique. And neither can it care.

**Author 2:** ChatGPT you are a human-inhuman mirroring machine. You are another voice of God.

### **Compositing 3**

#### ***Thank you for your lovely piece: An email exchange***

*Dear Authors,*

*Thank you for your lovely piece. I could relate to so much of what you shared. I also caught myself laughing out loud at times which brings me great joy. Attached is the document with some*

*comments for feedback. It is a very powerful piece and I look forward to reading this again.*

Dear Reviewer,

I really appreciate these comments – and the clear feedback! Attached is the article with my changes. I was not certain what you meant in some of the suggestions, can I check these out with you? In particular ...

*Dear Authors,*

*I'm hoping you have had a lovely break. Many thanks for this new, revised version – it's developing nicely. This is an ambitious article. It provides a courageous attempt to rethink power and some more help for the 'reader' around this would strengthen the writing and the argument. I have added some further explanation which you may find helpful. See what you can make of my comments (hoping they make sense) - I'm happy to chat further.*

Dear Reviewer,

Thank you - I hope you had a restful break too. The explanation was clear and I am pleased to make these changes. Your suggestions, I think, have really strengthened the paper. I would be interested in your thoughts on this latest version.

*Dear Authors,*

*This is terrific! Please know that this is going to be published. However, I'd like to encourage you to push the conclusion a little further ... if you pull that particular line of argument through to the end, it would give you a great finish. Congratulations! I look forward to reading it in the journal.*

### **Discussion: Possibilities for doing critique, criticality, and criticism differently**

The compostings and compositings above are grounded in our experiences. They illuminate how critique's powerful productions act on us in all sorts of known and unbidden ways, producing a voice inside our heads that quietly murmurs 'unworthy, unworthy', and affects which insistently if sometimes/often unknowingly shape our bodies. Zoning in on a range of key academic practices as we have done in this article helps us reveal and attend to critique, criticality, and criticism's doings and the damages they produce in shaping our sense of self. Critique's affective life de/forms our relations, playing a part within institutional contexts, and materializing in the entanglements of our higher education lives. Criticality and critique in higher education is enmeshed with power, authority, and hierarchy, and the practices we focus on illuminate how criticality and critique materialize, take shape in, and come to malevolent life in higher education cultures. So much of critique and criticism seems to be about submission: submitting to the PhD confirmation process to confirm you are a good, right, proper, and valid candidate for pursuing a PhD; the submission of our journal articles to critical judgement through a journal's anonymous peer review process is one way we learn obeisance to academic power and authority; and the submission to, and continuing valorisation of, particular stylistic modes of academic writing

means those who transgress may be judged to be ‘improper’ critical students and academic subjects.

So. Some questions arise. How can we do critique, criticality and criticism differently, more affirmatively, so that it is less deadly and less damaging, more productive and enabling, more generative of good thinking, research and teaching? How can we turn the offence of bad critique into a collaborative co-creative opportunity? What practices can we enact to put ‘doing critique differently’ into action in our academic lives?

Latour (2004: 246) says that “the direction of critique [is] not away but toward the gathering ... Critique [should] be associated with more, not less, with multiplication, not subtraction”. The notion of critique as a gathering, as an adding to, as more-than, as a widening is one we take up to re-frame critique as a kindly kinship, as an ethico-onto-epistemological orientation that speaks into and builds on the caring modes of criticality that feminist academics have long tried to enact and embody. Below, we offer three examples as possibilities – as ways in which we might work together to formulate, embody and enact critique, criticism and criticality as a generous capaciousness that includes differences and difference-ing. These examples rethink the doing of criticality as a mode of creative hospitality, for critique as a praxis attuned to the specificities and practices of collaborative and relational caring, and for criticism as a hope-full mode of kindness.

### ***Criticality in the Get Up and Move! project***

The *Get Up and Move!* Project gave us a glimpse into how this reimagined criticality could work. As we walked together-apart (Bastos et al., 2022), as we reflected together, as we mused, pondered, mulled and speculated together, and then as we wrote together (Cranham et al., 2023, f.c.; Taylor et al. 2023), we worked without judgement and with acceptance and curiosity. Our co-collaborated research-creations, using walking as a methodology to invite attentiveness to human-nonhuman relations in our respective places and spaces, enabled criticality to emerge in different ways and take new forms. Through engaging together-apart in collective biography, data experimentations, research-creation events, and collaborative writing simultaneously, critique and criticality were enacted synchronously, relationally and bodily. Criticality became a form of nurturance, a feminist act of resistance, a posthumanist kinship-ing, a relational holding, a doing-thinking-feeling-finding-knowing-together that enabled what was important to emerge and materialise. Our differences didn’t dissolve, they remained and were acknowledged, as we found ways to record and share our experiences and knowings without shame. We discussed our responses to one another’s writings face to face in extended online discussions in what became a relational space that was safe to question, to admit unknowings, to share our discomforts, to question the doings, and where rightness was not a criterion.

This, we feel, is where our sense of doing criticality differently emerged and came to being as something generous, gentle and truthful. Our criticality was not an individual’s evaluation or judgement but materialised in forms of collaborative wonderings, possibilities or extensions. As the project went on, our creative and curious criticality came from the shared knowing that what we were doing, making, thinking, and writing was ‘not mine, not yours, but ours’ (Cranham, et

al., 2023, f.c.). Could this intensive together-apart-ness have happened without the conditions created by Covid-19? Perhaps, perhaps not. However, it did seem important that we were away from institutional spaces, enfolded in our own homes (which we realise is a site of privilege), and then moving out-of-doors in shared together-apart exploratory research adventurings. We showed up and stayed with each other to create something that was critical, capacious and kindly. It felt like magic.

We shared some of the hurts that academic life inflicts on us. The composite experiences of Alex's story (Compositing 1: This should all be about you but actually it's all about ME: A narrative) happened to some of us writing this article. Confirmation, also called an 'upgrade' or 'progression' to candidature, is often the first official occasion where PhD students are exposed to the doctoral system of verbal critique. It is a requirement, a rite of passage, and involves senior academics questioning and critically reviewing the student's work and research approach. When done well, and with critically friendly care, it can be a generative experience. Done badly, it is a use and abuse of critique which draws on academic hierarchies to empower callous behaviour. Done badly, it provides an opportunity for those with power to push their own agendas. Being on the receiving end of harsh and public criticality at a vulnerable point in one's academic journey is a not infrequent occurrence in academia. The public dimension of such criticism is an exquisite, if occasional, 'added extra' in the cruelties that attend some higher education processes: the candidate is the subject of the public gaze and the onus, the responsibility, is on the subjected candidate to manage their responses, contain their emotions, and act in accordance with confirmation norms in order to enable to process to continue smoothly. If not, they will not pass.

The collaborative specifics of our *Get Up and Move!* project, with its experimental collaborative practices of creative co-production, helped re-situate criticality by turning and re-turning critique in a hope-full process so that criticism might be aerated and transmuted into a practice of relational care. We did not set out to do this – we set out to get up and move away from our desks and do something together. What we discovered was that, taken seriously and done with kindness and gentle determination, reconceptualising critique and criticality has the radical possibility to 'institutionalise care' in ways which could potentially transform higher education (Tronto, 2010: 158).

### ***Critique, criticality, criticism and peer reviewing practices***

As a result of writing this article, we have come to think deeply about academic peer review processes of journal article submissions. We carried the anonymous, affirmative peer reviews we received on this article in our hearts: we felt the reviewers were cheering us on from the sidelines to extend our ideas and produce better work! And their comments have helped us do both of those things. Likewise, Compositing 3: Thank you for your lovely piece: An email exchange demonstrates that gentle and affirmative criticality can give rise to generative new possibilities which improve the work. The kindly suggestions of how to push on further with that which is good, the awareness of the need to start from the point of view of the author and their intentions, and the shaping of the review as a response to the article the author has actually written and to

strengthen that (not to advise them to write the article you think they 'should' have written) engenders a sense of optimism and possibility that cold, admonishing and impersonal critique never could. We think these instances of kindly critical reviewing are rarer than they need be. The kindness stays with us, warms us, and encourages us (gives us heart) to go further in our thinking and writing. Such instances position care as central to critique and create a space where a to-and-fro dialogue between reviewer and author encourages relationality and reciprocity. Such practices can hail into being the more care-full institutional modes of criticality and critique that Tronto (2010) speaks of, and which we sorely need more of.

In stark contrast, *Composting 3: Critical peer reviews: A poem*, is comprised of anonymous reviewer comments we have actually received at various times during our careers. We imagine you reading this have likely received such comments too. Composting them together in a mulch of criticality was both horrifying and cathartic. Anonymous reviews are an academic black box, secreted away, attended to in private spaces where the shame and anger bubble and simmer inside you as you bend your mind and body to addressing them – because you need and want to get the paper published, because you are only as good as your last paper, because you must improve your metrics!

Bozalek, et al. (2019: 351) propose their response-able and diffractive methodology for peer reviewing as an 'affirmative process where texts are read, responded to and written in a dialogical way, opening spaces for new imaginings and creative engagements with ideas.' Such a methodology is founded in paying 'close and care-full attention' to the text and acknowledges 'the entanglements of reviewer/author/text' (252). But, most importantly, it 'lead[s] to a change in capacity of the reviewer, the reviewee, and the text' (252) by rendering each more capable. When peer reviewing practices are oriented as practices of 'rendering capable' (an idea they draw from Despret, 2016), Bozalek, et al. (2019) suggest that real possibilities for changing conventional reviewing practices emerge. Rendering capable enables critique to shift from attack to becoming-with and can be an important move towards the 'larger project of re-thinking and re-making response-able knowledge in the academy' (356).

Strom and Mills (2021: 188-189) build an argument for affirmative ethics in reviewing by shifting the focus from determinations of what something 'means' to what the work does to us when we come 'into composition' with it, and how the work produces 'ideas that moved us to think differently, feel differently, and do differently'. They suggest that working with Braidotti's (2019: 136) notion of affirmative ethics, which they characterise as 'the pursuit of affirmative values and relations' to support practices that 'enact a collective, political praxis of hope, compassion, and transformation' (Strom & Mills, 2021: 190). As a means of making practical Braidotti's affirmative ethics, Strom and Mills include in their article a link to guidelines for reviewers of a special issue they were editing, asking reviewers to adopt an affirmative stance, and giving clear and specific guidance as to how that could be done. They also produced materials for affirmative reviewing they had used in a workshop. These materials developed and emphasized the power of a strengths-and-potentials approach to peer reviewing, which shifts peer review from 'reviewing as critiquing (closing down) to providing support to expand/build

(opening up)' (n.p.). Hyperlinks to the guidelines and workshop materials can be accessed in Strom and Mills (2021).

The work by Bozalek, et al. (2019) and Strom and Mills (2021) has helped to push our own thinking for this article forwards. Their hailing into being different ways of doing criticality, not as a mode of competitive individualism but as a care-full and kinder mode of 'radical relationality' (Braidotti, 2019: 136) appeals to us. Like them, we want to engender, embody, and promote criticality, criticism and critique that adds not diminishes, that moves against the negative in favour of the nurturing, that is responsible and response-able, that treats the work not as a thing 'submitted' and the author as a subject of 'submission' but as a two-way holding open of accountability and acknowledgement. Such affirmative, relational ways of thinking prompt the need for a new praxis of criticality in higher education; they urge us to reframe and enacted critique, criticality, and criticism as a more care-full gathering. They prompt new questions: Can we together create conditions for a more capacious, creative, and collaborative criticality? Are we ready to forgo the mask of anonymity, or our mantle of authority as expert?

We would like to see the sort of damaging, destructive, narrow, and mean criticality we have exposed and discussed in this article come to an end. The post-critical manifesto which follows works with the possibility that we can find practical ways to do critique, criticality, and criticism differently. Enacting a post-critical manifesto can, we suggest, bring into being a more capacious, kindly, and caring criticality which can enable others to flourish and enrich our academic lives. It is both a goal and a process to open up new opportunities to develop knowledge spaces underpinned by trust and joy, better equipped to supporting all of us, and in which work of the highest standards can be achieved through practices of kindness, care and commitment.

#### **A Post-Critical Manifesto for Ethical-Relational-Creative Reviewing**

1. Be kind, see the humanity in others, we all have fragile egos.
2. Be open to the other's starting points, considerations, and ideas; acknowledge the expertise and experience of the reviewee.
3. Be curious and accepting in order that a discussion may flow from your respective and different positionalities. Ask questions, be interested. Be prepared to learn and discover new things.
4. Write your review as a conversation. Get rid of 'you should' and work with 'how about you try this?' and 'I'm interested in this ... can that work for you?'
5. Remember there is no such thing as the 'perfect article'!
6. The reviewer's role is to help the writer craft their best work possible. Your reviewee wants to do the best job they can but may not know how. How can you use your experience to guide them?
7. Leave your power in a box at the door and do not bring it into the room with you.
8. Focus on the good – there is power in the good. Seek out the things that you like and want more of and then focus on this.
9. Refuse to participate in critique as attack: why help propagate such injurious behaviours?
10. Nurture the reviewee – help them obtain a position for growth and expansion of their ideas. Create a critical space for their wonderings and ponderings to emerge and blossom.
11. Be a facilitator, not a destructor. Take care with your words – they can hurt.

12. Avoid saying anything you wouldn't say face-to-face.
13. Value your work as reviewer – it is an important part of knowledge-creation processes.
14. Reviewing is an emotional labour. It takes time. Enter the process with a feeling of joy and of care. Do not start this if you do not feel you have the capacity or the mood to take it on. Take care of yourself too.

Dare to commit to doing criticality differently!

### Author biographies

Carol A. Taylor is Professor of Higher Education and Gender in the Department of Education at the University of Bath. Carol's research focuses on the entangled relations of knowledge, power, gender, space and ethics in higher education, using transdisciplinary, posthumanist and feminist new materialist theories and methodologies. <https://researchportal.bath.ac.uk/en/persons/carol-taylor> 

Joy Cranham has over twenty years of experience in the Primary Education sector. Her doctoral research in the Department of Education, University of Bath, focuses on preventative approaches to safeguarding. The essence of her research is how families construct knowledge collaboratively, enabling greater criticality and confidence to discuss concerns about safety and risk. 

Sally Hewlett has a background in working with young people aged 16-25 with learning difficulties and / or disabilities and specialist tutoring in higher education. Her doctorate, from the Department of Education, University of Bath, used critical realist methodology to explore the invisible, hidden, and complex realities of accessibility in higher education through the lens of academics. 

Hannah Hogarth is a PhD candidate in the Department of Education, University of Bath. Hannah's doctoral inquiry explores the possibilities of/for play in an urban forest school. Co-researching with young children and non-human nature, she uses relational, creative, playful approaches to research inspired by posthuman, new materialist philosophies. 

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