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Inconvenient academic workers? Collective (Re)humanisation through the dialogue of a Freirean Reading Circle

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ABSTRACT

We argue that academia's performative obsession is inherently dehumanising. We seek to rehumanise academia by sharing a method for collective research and writing. Through a fresh approach to Freirean Reading Circles (FRCs), we offer a series of images and conversations from our circle meetings to demonstrate aspects of humanity often erased in traditional academic writing. Although FRCs can be adapted to different cultural artefacts, our choice of the Japanese novel *Convenience Store Woman* is purposeful. We explore the novel's theme of what it means to be both human and worker, and challenge the patriarchal bias of 'great' literature. Grounded in Paulo Freire's ideas, we demonstrate how academia's dehumanising tendencies can be challenged from within. To humanise our writing, we celebrate the joy and messiness of collective processes, foregrounding the human selves often hidden in sanitised academic writing. We invite you, as readers, to resist dehumanisation by extending our emancipatory project.

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Introduction

> 'You play the part of the fictitious creature called 'an ordinary person' that everyone has in them. Just like everyone in the [University] is playing the part of the fictitious creature called [an academic worker].' (Murata 2019, 93)

The acknowledged 'dark side' of academia is how higher education's marketised and metric-based culture encourages individualist, competitive behaviours (Anderson, Elliott, and Callahan 2021; Jones et al. 2020). Under these conditions, collegiality, or cooperation and companionship between academic colleagues, becomes a 'nostalgic fantasy' (Kligyte and Barrie 2014). As Korica (2022) asserts, reclaiming collegiality is the first concern in improving academia, as well as 'be[ing] human first'. But how can these spaces be carved out in a system, with its overwhelming workloads and precarious contracts, that is distinctly dehumanising? In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire (2017) outlined how dehumanisation occurs through objectification by power and that conscientisation, a process of raising critical awareness, is required for (re)humanisation. Freire (2017) suggested that for transformation to happen, humanisation needs to take place within systems of oppression. While the broader literature has discussed the need to humanise organisations by focussing on improving job quality (Guest, Knox, and Warhurst 2022), we adopt a radical social perspective. Dehumanisation is closely associated with social disconnection and exclusion (Haslam

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2022) and, therefore, humanisation requires inclusion, empathy and creating a sense of belonging. For this paper, our shared dialogue based on our collective reading of a fiction novel, *Convenience Store Woman* (*CSW*), served as conscientisation regarding the academic publishing system, which we assert is increasingly dehumanising.

Freire's work has had significant influence on critical pedagogy due to his claims about the oppressive nature of education as a relational transmission of dominant knowledge from higher-status 'expert' actors to lower-status subject recipients. Such hierarchical relations, in which certain groups are both perceived and treated as lesser to maintain dominant power, are inherent to dehumanisation (Kteily and Landry 2022). We suggest that these insights also have relevance to relationality within academia due to the taught nature of the 'publication game' (Butler and Spoelstra 2020). Indeed, as subjects of this game, we suggest that we too (author and reader alike) are passive recipients of the dominant way of 'doing' academia and reproduce these rules through our compliance with them. This relationality was tested when our writing was described as 'half-assed homework' during the review process and we found solace by prioritising collective care. To enact this collective care, we reassert the importance of the role of the reader/reviewer as empowered agents (Korica 2022) joining us as authors in doing academia differently.

Our 'different' approach is to challenge the performativity of the publication game by enacting a pedagogic technique called a 'Freirean Reading Circle' (FRC) (Callahan and Rudra 2015). This method is a humanising process of collective reading and relational dialogue. By adopting the lenses of different FRC roles (such as 'Creative Connector' or 'Devil's Advocate'), we collectively constructed reflexive dialogues that transcended our individual perceptions within academic institutional structures. This supported us in 'embracing the humanity of the other' (Trifonas 2018, 367) that is the enduring spirit of the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. We situate our engagement in the FRC within the broader literature of embodied ethics in research that calls for the recognition of corporeal vulnerabilities (Fotaki and Harding 2017; Mandalaki and Fotaki 2020). By sharing our very human vulnerabilities we present ourselves as 'flesh-and-blood writer[s]' (Weatherall 2023) with real lives and relationships.

Though conscious of our privilege within an academia that offers some flexibility and autonomy, as business school academics who must pursue high ranked research outputs we vulnerably recognise the alienation we increasingly feel from the version of academia we hold dear (Fleming 2020). Neoliberal academia squeezes and confines the humanising body of commons between colleagues and students alike (Mandalaki and Fotaki 2020), a connection we believe ***should*** be an end in itself. Instead, we, as academics, are compelled by self-preservation to pursue the next high-ranking publication. Such demands create a pressure that renders many business academics vulnerable to alienation from colleagues, students and selves (Fleming 2020).

Through our alienation and vulnerability within a relentless research game, we break with scholarly convention to recognise your role as the reader in this collective process (Weatherall 2023). To follow the example of one of our reviewers who described how they assumed the role of Dialogue Developer as they read our work, we invite you into our Circle to do the same. Perhaps you might engage with furthering the conversation of our ideas presented here (i.e. the role of Dialogue Developer), or challenge our ideas and pose alternatives (i.e. the role of Devil's Advocate). Through engaging you in questioning, challenging and critiquing our interpretations, we seek to demonstrate both the inclusive nature of the Circle and its life beyond a finite set of meetings and participants. We hope the dialogue we start here will manifest in other spaces – social media, classrooms, conferences, water coolers, and the written word and create a broader, humanising sense of belonging.

We begin this dialogue by introducing the reading that served as the vehicle for the relational dialogue we initiated with the FRC. As a collective, we were inspired to write together because of our shared joy of reading, our mutual friendship and history, and the love of writing and reading differently to resist. We selected the novel *Convenience Store Woman* (*CSW*) by Japanese writer Sayaka Murata not only because we all felt the themes were pertinent to a discussion about humanisation, but because it is a multi-layered text that had spoken (and still speaks) to each of us in

different ways. Further, from a practical perspective, and accepting the dehumanising pressures of academic life, the short nature of the novel not only allowed us to fit reading into our hectic schedules, but also supports us to invite you to do likewise, if you are willing and able. Though we discuss our Circle in relation to *CSW*, we do so as an illustrative example to demonstrate how our collective, humanist dialogue was nurtured in interaction with a stimulating fiction, and recognise that there are many other readings (both fiction and non-fiction) readers could also select from their own library. *CSW* offers a confluence of contemporary context, relevant themes of alienation and consumerism, and popular readership that renders it a pertinent text for our Circle discussion of academia.

The novel, whose original title directly translated from Japanese to English is *Convenience Store* ***Human***, playfully problematises what it means to be 'human' in a Japanese culture struggling with a clash between traditional family values and precarious work (Jaseel and Rashmi 2022). The novel offers a first-person narrative voice and inner monologue of Keiko, the protagonist who works in a convenience store. We shared in her cognitive dissonance as she navigated the social relatedness, and necessary performance, of 'being' and 'becoming' a schoolkid, a daughter, a sibling, a worker, and co-habiting 'human'. We saw the world through her eyes and heard her unfiltered, ruthlessly pragmatic thoughts about work and life.

Where *CSW* differs from conventional theoretical understandings of performance is that the protagonist, Keiko, offers more of the uncomfortable thoughts and feelings that humanise us all. As we explore in this article, these are the intrusive thoughts we fear to admit, even to ourselves. The novel offers an open canvas whereby the Freirean shared 'problem' of academic dehumanising dialogues in relation to a relatable metaphor (i.e. the novel). Indeed, we found that the 'abstract [ideal] worker' paradigm (Acker 1990) we all navigate, even when we try to resist it, could be problematised in relation to Keiko's interpretation of the 'ideals' we co-construct at work. As we engaged in the FRC, we, as readers of this novel and writers of this narrative, recognised how we internalise these ideals as the dominant rules of being a 'human' in academic organisations, and society. The novel reminds us that these dominant rules suggest that non-conformity should be hidden beneath the respectable performativity of work. In this way, the novel reinforces ideology (De Cock and Land 2006) whilst simultaneously opening possibilities to raise critical dialogue as a wider Reading Circle.

In the following sections, we situate our paper as an extension of organisation studies (OS) scholarship that draws on fictions to theorise and teach about organisation(s) (e.g. De Cock and Land 2006; Sliwa and Cairns 2007; Savage, Cornelissen, and Franck 2018). We develop this established approach by highlighting the parallels between *CSW* themes and academia before introducing Freirean Reading Circles as a method to support the kind of collective writing we engage in here. We then offer our respective positionalities before reconstructing our individual roles through which we demonstrate the unfolding of our critical awareness (conscientisation). We conclude by considering the broader implications of our work for OS and academia.

Fiction and organisation

An esoteric truth conveniently ignored is that 'all organizations *are* fictions' (Savage, Cornelissen, and Franck 2018). Anyone who has formed a micro-organisation of colleagues in a team can attest to the very human, fictional creation of *the way we do things around here*. The moment a colleague leaves, that fiction you shared becomes irrevocably different. In *CSW*, both an 'ordinary person' and 'a store worker' are parts to be played, referred to by Keiko as 'fictitious creature[s]' (Murata 2019, 93). Just as Keiko consumed the products of the store, and the store was a product of her actions, so are we, as academics, integral creators and reproducers of *our* organisations and *our* academia. Through active engagement with fiction, we join existing scholarship in embracing the unique insights that novels offer for sensemaking and critical theorisation within OS. Early scholarship from Knights and Willmott (1999) exhorted the valance of workplace-focused realist fiction for their insightful thematic explorations of the realities of work. They disrupted methodological convention by highlighting the rigorous research undertaken by the fiction author to represent a version of reality as akin to ethnographic research. More recently,

Beyes, Costas, and Ortmann's (2019) discussed modes of engaging with the novel to 'foster and improve practical and critical sensibilities' (p. 1793) and highlighted the importance of engaging with counterfactuals and 'kafkaesque' radical imaginings of reality. Similarly, Michaelson (2016) argued for the use of 'great novels' for the enhancement of business school pedagogical engagement with ethical dialogue. Though much of this scholarship is concerned with what De Cock and Land (2006) categorised as 'great literature' (also see Michaelson 2016), a fatal flaw blights many recognised 'great literatures' due to the patriarchal publishing biases that see female authors underrepresented, even in recent academic scholarship of fiction in OS. Alongside the gender and ethnicity arguments for showcasing Murata's *CSW*, we assert the value of engaging with esoteric and unconventional fictions, dare we say 'pop culture' (for a recent OS exemplar, see Griffin, Harding, and Learmonth 2017), that capture the zeitgeist and connect to the human problems of our time.

One such pressing problem is the dehumanising pressure of academia to speed up while at the same time, fatigue slows us down to become 'ambivalent creature[s]' (Jääskelainen & Helin, 2021). As we have already alluded to with our reaction to a reviewer's comments, our approach to reading and writing differently, while prioritising collective care, can be dismissed as 'a non-serious reading of the text' (De Cock and Land 2006, 521). Furthermore, our enjoyment of reading and writing via our Circle could relegate our process to mere 'entertainment' and frivolity. However, by centring our reading circle on *CSW*, we join established scholarship that showcases the value of popular fictions (Griffin, Harding, and Learmonth 2017; Parker et al. 1999; Rhodes 2001) as sites of real learning about what is really going on in organisations. In contrast to the academic constraints that necessitate discussions of writing differently, the author of *CSW* describes writing as a freeing process:

> 'Writing was the only place I could be selfish and express myself; where I could liberate myself emotionally' (Murata in McNeill 2020).

This ethos is in harmony with our ambition to rehumanise writing as a place where academics can connect with themselves and others through authentic emotional expression.

The novel is a genre of fiction that not only recognises, but challenges, plays with and transgresses boundaries. Murata's writing reflects her lived experience of confronting strict social norms, and also suggests possible, and sometimes transgressive, alternatives. The protagonist of *CSW,* Keiko, found comfort in her long-standing job in a convenience store as it afforded her social acceptance. As Keiko aged, this acceptance became strained and initially, Keiko attempted to submit to social pressure to become 'normal' by adopting the idealised identities of wife and mother. This project was eventually abandoned when Keiko accepted herself as an inhuman 'convenience store animal' (Murata 2019, 162). Murata's writing prods at well-established dualisms and although we see this story unfold through Keiko's eyes and from her perspective, its contradictions are never resolved.

Thus, the novel retains the paradoxical essence of experience in a way that is difficult to achieve in conventional academic writing. Traditional literary analysis has followed academic conventions in separating the private emotional experience of literature from the formal, public discussions of the meaning of texts (Kusch 2016). By drawing on the novel as the prompt and inspiration for collective reading/writing, we blur this boundary (Phillips, Pullen, and Rhodes 2014) by collectively, as a Circle, examining the many layers of meaning.

Method—what is a Reading circle?

We structured our collaborative work around what we call 'Freirean Reading Circles' (FRCs) (Callahan and Rudra 2015). Although there are many different types of reading circles, we based our Circle on Paulo Freire's ideas about using culture circles for adult education. The FRC was originally adapted for use in higher education by Professor Robert Hill at the University of Georgia and its use spread organically via his students.

The FRC is comprised of four to six members, each of whom assumes a different role or lens for the assigned reading material. While the label for these roles often varies, the responsibilities of the role holder remain the same (see Table 1). Each member reads the text/s using the lens they are assuming for that circle. They then complete a preparation sheet that addresses the responsibilities of their assigned role. For example, the Devil's Advocate develops a series of thought-provoking questions and arguments that critique the views of the author and provide alternate perspectives; the Passage Picker locates several significant passages in the reading that are interesting, controversial, or contradictory in the way that they discuss core concepts in the reading, back up key information, or summarise the author's points and then articulates reasons for selecting the passages. These prep sheets are shared with members prior to the meeting of the FRC and form the basis for engaging in relational dialogue and learning, developing critical awareness in the process.

During the FRC, dialogue can only develop by being present as equals, each contributing a unique perspective of the reading based on their assigned role and taking shared responsibility for collective reflection. The beauty of the FRC is that, by design, it rejects instrumentality and facilitates a multiplicity of ideas that lead to rhizomatic learning (Deleuze and Guattari 1987) with each new voice added to the Circle. In our Circle, we followed our intuition as academics (Kump 2022) and employed our shared affects (Fotaki, Kenny, and Vachhani 2017; Vachhani and Pullen 2019) to draw on the Illustrator's images and offerings as the opening tangible stimulus (Harper 2002) for our dialogue. Through our intuitive immersion, the dialogue developed with an unplanned interplay of roles, guided by themes that we had independently prepared, and enabled by our mutual respect and comfort in 'facilitating' each other.

This facilitation is normally performed by a nominated 'Dialogue Developer' (Table 1). However, our dialogue could not be completed until we could invite the reader of this paper to play their part in the 'rhizomatic assemblage' (Masny 2016) we, and you, create. In effect, the FRC we constructed was intentionally incomplete. In this unknown and unknowable connection we share, our FRC has a life beyond the data we collected as collective participants. It is always 'becoming' with each iterative interpretation and in each new context (including classrooms and academic desks of reviewers/readers). In addition to other writing that invokes reading circles (e.g. Jaramillo et al., 2024; Weatherall 2023; Ahonen et al. 2020) to write and resist together, we seek to widen our Circle by inviting readers and reviewers alike to become part of reclaiming humanity within academia.

Although we use it here as a platform for research and (re)humanisation, the original conception of the FRC has multiple pedagogical purposes. At the most basic level, the participants (learners) engage in advance with the (usually academic) readings in a structured way and are prepared to learn during class sessions. Through FRCs, disciplinary knowledge is shared, peer learning communities develop, and participants learn more about themselves and others. Perhaps most importantly, the FRC is a metacognitive approach that teaches learners *how* to read critically. Grounded in

Table 1. Freirean reading circle roles.

Core roles	Responsibilities	Critical Reading Lens
Devil's Advocate	Challenge or critique key ideas in the readings	Evaluate
Passage Picker	Identify key passages and guide discussion of them	Understand
Creative Connector	Make connections to contemporary or historical artifacts (e.g. movies, music, world events, politics)	Analyse
Dialogue Developer	Develop questions based on input from other roles and facilitate discussion	Create
Supplementary roles	**Responsibilities**	**Critical reading lens**
Illustrator	Capture the meaning of the readings in a creative way (e.g. drawings, sculptures, photographs, food)	Apply
Vocabulary Enricher	Develop a list of key words from the readings and define them in your own words	Understand

Bloom's taxonomy, each role provides insight into the kinds of lenses required for critical reading, enabling learners to get more when they read texts in the future.

In the sections that follow, we present a series individual monologues (akin to Keiko) that built upon the synchronous FRC roles we adopted to generate our collective dialogue. Through our reflections on positionality, we consider what meanings we bring to the reading of and writing with the text. We begin with an introduction to our vulnerable selves to represent some of the thematic dialogue that can emerge from an FRC. We then model how an FRC can unfold by sharing our role-based reflections of participating in the collective engagement of the Circle.

Positionalities: humanising our roles to fit in the circle

Illustrator (Steff)

Naturally, my own positionality as a queer, millennial, white, German influenced my reading and interpretation of *CSW* and whilst there are themes that resonate with me, there are layers of the novel and its Japanese cultural context that I can only glimpse at from afar. Having this in mind, the core theme that resonated the most with me from the very first page is a sense of belongingness and connection or rather the lack thereof which plays a role in my own positioning within academia and broader life. In my queer identity, seeking to fit in, and the struggles to navigate external expectations of gender and sexual orientation with one's own becoming is not unfamiliar. Still, today, living in a western world that seemingly celebrates LGBTQ*, as a queer person and a queer scholar I am feeling an increasingly more intense loss of spaces that feel home, familiar and safe.

My positioning within academia is similarly shaded by a continuing search for a fit within its competitive marketisation. I have been officially groomed into this academic game since I started a PhD though arguably this started way before. I can perhaps declare that I am 'infected' – to draw on Keiko's metaphor – by pressures to engage in 'scientific' norms. On reflection, such pressures always inhibited my sense of writing. I recall vividly a situation in school, during a two-hour essay exam when after an hour I still sat in from of a blank sheet of paper – frozen and bound by the need to start at the beginning. My teacher suggested to boldly start with the second sentence allowing me to break free of convention, starting somewhere in the middle of my story.

Whilst the task of the Illustrator felt alien to 'doing' academia 'properly', embodying the role in the FRC was similarly liberating. I am grateful to the many colleagues and scholars who open up such spaces to challenge limiting conventions and I was excited for the opportunity to approach writing differently in this way and within this FRC that represents community to me. Jamie, what was your experience becoming the Creative Connector?

Creative connector (Jamie)

To be honest, Steff, in my many years of facilitating FRCs, I've found the Creative Connector role to be simultaneously the most fun and the most challenging; and in this case, it was a little revealing, too. As a feminist scholar and active trade union member, I picked up on the gendered contexts and the dehumanising workplace undercurrents in the book. I initially sought cultural touchpoints to capture these themes. From a personal perspective, though, I particularly resonated with the way that Keiko felt like an outsider. As an American living in the UK, I am regularly surprised at how true the old adage 'Two countries separated by a common language' (and culture!) rings. So, while the assumption by many is that I simply 'get it', I find that I often speak at cross-purposes—a module isn't a week or two-long teaching segment, it's a term-long course in the UK; a pavement isn't the road after all, it means a sidewalk here (and this one can get you killed!).

With our group of colleagues on this project, though, I have never felt like an outsider. Indeed, Mark has often helped me navigate the linguistic culture to ensure my direct American communication style doesn't shock my British audience (like where to put 'please' in a sentence). Nevertheless, the way that popular culture shapes, and can be shaped by, individual identities was apparent in layered ways for our group. I quickly became aware that I am significantly older than my colleagues

because my cultural anchors reflect my age. Having been a teenager in the 1970s and 80s, I thought of music by Pink Floyd and Rush as creative connections to the reading. Although Rush was significant to me because my first concert was their Exit Stage Left tour, other Circle members were not as familiar with my reference to their song, Subdivisions. 'I know Rush through my dad,' Mark said, the only one who had heard of the band. ('Thanks, Mark,' I thought!)

Devil's Advocate (Mark)

Sorry about that, Jamie. I recall the awkwardness of saying this, even as it left my mouth. I wish I had acknowledged it more in the moment. My journey into academia from a place of total inexperience with the 'ivory tower' has been a 'rite of passage'. In elaborating my positionality in this section, I am conscious of Rhodes's (2009) discussion of the academic trend towards stating positionality in an instrumental way. I do not wish to proclaim my privilege as an easy sidestep to nullify my authorial biases. I also recognise the ease with which I can share my positionality as a straight, white man who lives a comfortable life in the UK, sharing this without inner conflict is a privilege in itself. I know my positionality impacts the degree to which I can resonate with the lived experience of Keiko's othering in the novel. I am constantly aware of my privilege as a man in relation to my close colleagues Helen, Jamie and Steff. I am also conscious that my reading of the novel is infused with an ambivalence between representing masculinities and connecting with friends as a fellow human being. I prefer to highlight my sense of responsibility and dedication to use my platform as an opportunity to amplify social justice concerns in academia, namely my focus on caring ethics and caring masculinities, topics particularly close to my personal life as a husband and dad to two children, and as an academic.

Amongst my formal steps on the road to academia, in my first year as a PhD candidate, I engaged in playful debate with a fellow student, which could be described as 'male banter'. He was an archetypal devil's advocate and pseudo libertarian (though I know he would refute that label). Recalling these discussions, I can smile at the provocative statements he made to trip me up, but I am also grateful that I had such a person colouring the daily grind of early career academia. Remembering him makes me consider the role of respectful debate in academic discourse, especially considering rising misogyny in public discourse (Beavan 2020; Manne 2019; McCarthy and Taylor 2024) and the persistence of patriarchal academia (Prothero 2024). To this day, I look back on these formative dialogues as utopian ideals of a mutually respectful academic community I yearn for. What about you, Helen?

Passage picker (Helen)

I find your yearning for community very familiar Mark. After entering academia following a professional management career, my embodied feeling of not belonging as a 'matter out of place' (Douglas 1984, 35) was labelled as a psychological condition that the dominant discourse tells me I'm responsible for managing – impostor syndrome. Described by Breeze (2018) as, 'sensations of not belonging; feeling that one's competence and success are fundamentally fraudulent and inauthentic', impostor syndrome is only too common in a 'predominantly middle-aged, White, male academy' (Edwards 2019). Therefore, aspects of Keiko's perspective on (not) fitting in resonated with me and I welcomed the opportunity to recover a sense of community through our reading circle. As Passage Picker, I selected the sections of the novel that resonated with me on a personal level. Although this provided some comfort that my experience was more universal, it was only after discussing these passages in our reading circle that I felt a sense of shared meaning and belonging in my own context, and for me that is at the heart of a humanised academia.

Engaging in and reflecting on the Freirean Reading Circle

There is no set order to how each role unfolds in the FRC. In this section, the Illustrator, Steff, begins by sharing the immersive stimuli that catalysed our Reading Circle. From drawings and visual artefacts, to food, drink and convenience store sounds, we were transported to another space and time.

Next, we share insights from the Creative Connector, Jamie, whose choices of music, film and TV found us smiling and bouncing examples off each other. Mark discusses the Devil's Advocate role as a provocation to disrupt our connections and problematise social norms and assumptions. As the Passage Picker, Helen's vibrantly tabulated book was a visual representation of her organisation, critical thinking, and attention to detail, and was a vital lubricant for our discussion.

Illustrator (Steff)

Conventionally, management scholars use words to convey meaning, following 'scientific norms' of how research can be presented (Gilmore et al. 2019). However, there are increasing calls to centre the writing project back to embodiment and material experiences shaping us (e.g. Kaasila-Pakanen et al. 2024; Jaramillo et al., 2024; Valtonen and Pullen 2021). Taking the role of the Illustrator, I break writing convention and offer a vehicle for collective dialogue bridging the divide between art and science (Rhodes 2015). And whilst I cannot shake the ever-looming sense of impostor, the spectre whispering 'this is (you are) not good enough – you do not fit', I came to realise that this 'new' and academically alien medium allowed momentary reprieve.

In my reading of *CSW*, my attention was immediately drawn to how Keiko experienced life through her embodied senses. Focusing on bodily affect resonates deeply with the 'writing differently' project (e.g. Boncori and Smith 2019; Brewis and Williams 2019; Pullen 2018) and aligns with how I saw my role as the Illustrator in sensory meaning-making. Thus, in an effort to immerse the FRC in Keiko's experience, I brought along Japanese food (including Keiko's beloved canned coffee) as well as playing Japanese convenience store soundscapes (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v = 8VMWFu7MlQM).

Keiko invoked taste and smell when elaborating on daily food promotions such as yakitori and rice balls. More centrally, we understand how integral hearing and sight are to Keiko. They function as 'important sensors to catch every move and desire' and 'picking up signals' (Murata, 2019, 4) to serve customers and the shop. Her body is a tool that 'reflexively respond[ed]' (p. 3) to cues with routine behaviour, for example, the welcome phrase 'Irasshaimase!' whenever a customer entered. In addition to store sounds, listening to people, their intonation, speech and visual were also important to Keiko as she 'absorb[ed] the world around her' (p. 32). This was a strategy she developed very early in life to be able to fit in by mimicking 'normality' so that she was not perceived as 'foreign matter' (p. 60).

Before moving on, please afford some time to take in and interpret for yourself the first image that emerged.

I aim to express my deep sense of Keiko's journey, her acute awareness and fear of being/becoming a foreign object and needing to be 'cured'. She described specifically two early memories of not behaving like others and being reprimanded for that (bottom left in Figure 1). One was an event where she suggested cooking yakitori from a dead bird found at the park. The second is depicted quite literally by a shovel, when her response to breaking up a fight between peers in school was to hit one of them with a said shovel. These and other incidents raised alarm in adults around her, and she became labelled as odd and began 'believing that I had to be cured' (p. 12) (top left in picture).

Helen: '… I was thinking the top left says to me about like intrusive thoughts because she has quite a few intrusive thoughts, which she knows. She can't or shouldn't share with people.'
Mark: 'Yeh, the mask.'
Helen: 'Like when she sees the nephew, and the knife is on the table. And'
Steff: 'Oh, I thought that was like oh, this could go into a very dark place.'
Jamie: 'Yeah.'
Steff: 'Yeah, … I wanted to black that all out, because that's a really dark space. … She's talking about a cure. And her sister's talking about her being rehabilitated … .'

Keiko's way to escape from this dark place was to become silent and invisible. She vowed to 'keep my mouth shut … . no longer do anything of my own accord and would either just mimic what everyone

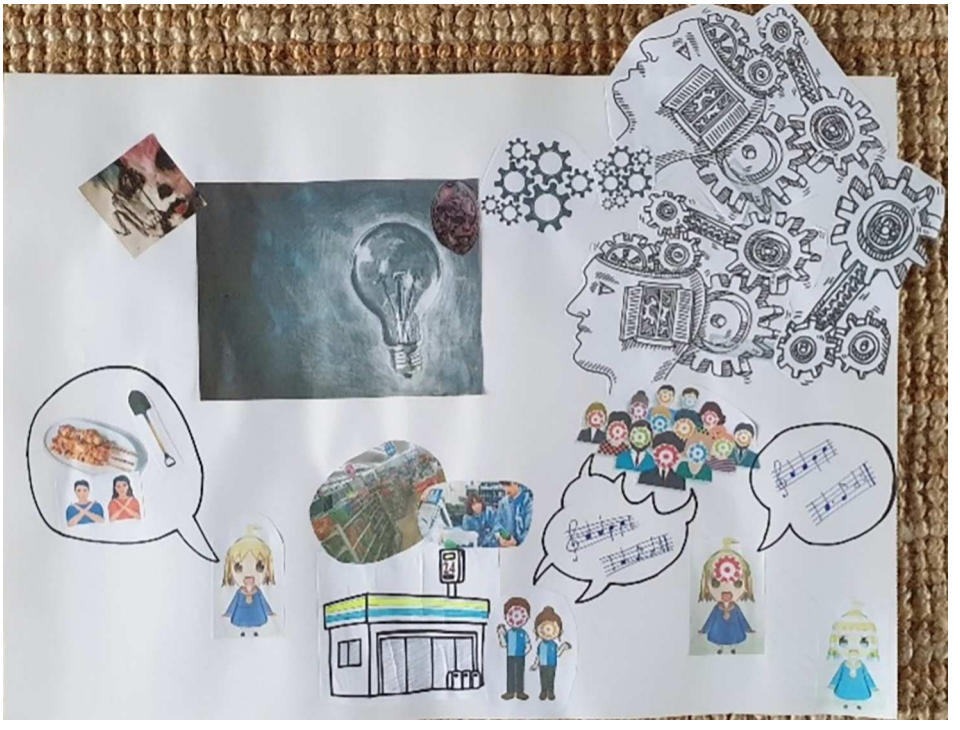

Figure 1. The Illustrator's first visual: From 'odd' to 'invisible'.

else was doing, or simply follow instructions' (p.10). Ultimately, she found her role as a convenience store worker and a 'part in the machine of society' in which we all play a role (p.19) (right and bottom in Figure 1).

My lens as a queer scholar on Keiko was instantly the pressures of heteronormative society to become intelligible (Butler 2004, 2011) and a (re)productive member. Keiko studied her surroundings and mimicked others in order to fit in. For example, her clothes and makeup choices resulted from observing colleagues closely. In addition, Keiko admitted that her speech was 'infected by everyone around me' (Murata 2019, 26) to 'maintain herself as human'. For her to become intelligible in society, she could not fulfil gendered ideals (e.g. heteronormative family) but instead, she excelled at the role performance of convenience store worker, the' ideal worker' as Mark put it in the FRC. Other than being a store worker she confessed to 'not have a clue how to be a normal person outside that manual' (p.20). In this process, she seemed to fade away and lose her sense of self. She became alienated from her own body whilst at the same time becoming a part of the larger system. I aim to expand these notions in the second image (Figure 2).

Throughout *CSW* Keiko observed life – the machinery of society – from her comfort space of the convenience store. As the ideal worker, she found safety in the store routine (24/7). She became and felt like part of the inventory 'I'm as much a part of this store as the magazine racks or the coffee machine' (p. 22). She blended in, became silent and dehumanised herself. She was not a foreign object anymore but became part of something greater with value in society.

Keiko's feelings of otherness and abjection from the very start resonated with my sense of intersecting struggles as an academic and queer person (in the past and today). However, where an anticipated 'coming out' never happens, Murata (2019) left uncertainty which opened space for multiplicity in interpretation and dialogue on what each of us 'do' to fit in and survive. Keiko constrained herself, arguably either self-imposed or as a response to a machinery that devalues odd cogs that do not contribute (re)productively to the system. It allows us to gaze on our own lived experience in

Figure 2. The Illustrator's second visual: Absorbed by the machinery of the system.

society and as academics who comply with the rulebook of a scholarly convention to become and perform as a valued part of the larger organism. Jamie, what are your thoughts as a creative connector?

Creative connector (Jamie)

On the one hand, I have always found this role fun because it provides the (academic) freedom to indulge in popular culture artefacts within a context that often denigrates popular culture (Smith 1999). On the other hand, it is also challenging because there are so many possibilities, and those possibilities are often idiosyncratic to the reader (Callahan, Whitener, and Sandlin 2007; Guenther and Dees 1999). These open possibilities enable a popular culture to help shape identities through the way observers create, re-create, or ascribe meaning to artefacts (Giroux and Simon 1989).

As noted earlier, idiosyncratic to my own experiences, I began my reflection on popular culture artefacts by recalling Rush's song 'Subdivisions.' The reason I thought of the Rush song was because of the way Keiko felt she did not fit in, so she decided that she would 'no longer do anything of [her] own accord, and would either just mimic what everyone else was doing, or simply follow instructions' (Murata 2019, 10).

Steff: ' … like you know about being foreign and sticking out. She uses that a lot.'
Mark: 'Oh right, yeh.'
Helen: 'That it would be pushed out of society, anything foreign. I think, yeah.' … 'Oh, yeh, 'a convenience store is a forcibly normalised environment where foreign matter is immediately eliminated.' Is that what you were thinking of?'
Steff: 'Yeah, and she's she talks about being foreign matter a few times after that as well.'
Jamie: 'And that kind of fits with the Creative Connector where I used Rush's song Subdivisions, where it talks about 'conform or be cast out, be cool or be cast out, misfit so alone'. So the whole idea of, of you have to normalise or be an outcast.'

Nowhere is the dreamer
Or the misfit so alone
Subdivisions
…
Conform or be cast out
Subdivisions
…
Be cool or be cast out
(Rush, 1982)

The theme of alienation and being pushed out resonated throughout the book. As Keiko said, 'The normal world has no room for exceptions and always quietly eliminates foreign objects. Anyone who is lacking is disposed of' (Murata 2019, 80). Keiko tried to create the presentation of an identity that fits in by mirroring those around her, 'My present self is formed almost completely of the people around me' (Murata 2019, 25); she likened this to an 'infection'. This shifting Keiko shaped in an effort to find her place in a world that felt foreign can be viewed through the metaphor of the movie *Everything, Everywhere, All at Once* (2022). In that movie, the central character shifts spontaneously through different identities in multiple universes. Like the movie, Keiko's shifting presentation to others still maintains an underlying 'sameness.' Keiko commented that structures never change, just the way they present does (p. 53). Like the character Evelyn in the movie, Keiko realised that while she saw things as so different, everyone around her saw things the same as they always were.

Yet, it was that sameness that created and reinforced the ability easily eject those who did not fit. The rotating door of convenience store employees, all singing a chorus of 'Irasshaimasé!', were automatons that could be quickly replaced. I brought up Pink Floyd's iconic song, which fortunately everyone had heard of!

All in all it's just another brick in the wall.

All in all you're just another brick in the wall. (Pink Floyd, 1979)

The power of the Creative Connector is that each connection can stimulate additional connections, strengthening skills for integrative thinking, critical awareness, and building relationality. We sought other cultural touch points. Some cultural anchors cross generations, but do not necessarily cross group members.

Jamie: 'I also put down maybe could that also be the Borg? Like assimilation you know, you have to fit in and conform, otherwise … '

Perhaps because the Star Trek franchise spans more than 30 years, the Borg connection immediately resonated with Steff and Mark, as all of us enjoy the Star Trek suite of entertainment.

Mark: 'Resistance is futile.'
Steff: ' … there is the notion in the Borg of foreigners as well, because when they become more individualised and they, they revolt and have their own matrix, they are cast out as well and cut off as a foreign element.'
Jamie: 'For the latest, on Picard, … if you are foreign and you haven't been already pre-altered. Then kill them.'
Helen: 'So in this group, I'm the foreign element.'

Oh, wow, now someone else is left out; creative connection is hard! Showing the breadth of possibilities, though, Helen noted how our conversation sparked the idea of another creative connection:

Helen: 'That was my favourite quote from the Barbie movie. 'Either you're brainwashed or you're ugly and weird. There's no in between.'

Though the Creative Connector strives to find commonality and cultural touchpoints, our Circle demonstrated some irreconcilable generational and cultural facets of collective writing. Mark will introduce you to the Devil's Advocate now as a purposeful disruption of comfortable collective reading.

Devil's advocate (Mark)

What does it mean to be a Devil's Advocate (DA) and why is this role so common in social discourse? I suggested earlier that I feel an affinity with this role through my formative experiences in academia, but in truth, I came to this role after nearly a decade of experience as the son-in-law to a veteran devil's advocate. My wife testifies to a lifetime of 'what about this' and 'no, you haven't considered that'. In a time where the fabric of democratic debate has been jeopardised by serial conceit, subterfuge and downright lying, the role of the Devil's Advocate can be a hiding place for polemics guilty of 'whataboutery' and the misappropriation of conflicting traumas to jostle for competing concerns (Little and Rogers 2017).

As a Devil's Advocate, my reading of *CSW* conjured reflections on what it means to be a worker and 'person' within organisations, especially patriarchal ones. My role offered me the permission to question my own established beliefs and sense-check our shared ideology. Drawing on Jamie's popular culture connections, I played DA with the popular culture phenomenon of the *Barbie* movie (Gerwig 2023), which emerged as a cultural connection that Helen and I shared. When watching and laughing along to this movie, my inner devil found reasons to be less optimistic in the provocative depiction of 'just Ken' as a figure of mirth. Through my concern with the manosphere (Bates 2020), and the 'anti-woke' rhetoric that is driving young men to embrace misogynistic ideologies of 'involuntary celebates' (incels) and 'Men Going their own Way' (MGTOW) (Ging 2019), I feared that this movie might also contribute to further entrenchment with disaffected young men. That was until my wife highlighted that the primary audience was young women, a point vindicated by the role the movie has played in galvanising the Chinese feminist movement (Li and Ho-him 2023).

Perhaps the most contentious of my provocations for this role was reconsidering Keiko as the 'ideal worker' I could imagine any manager would openly hope for. Not only did she know the manual inside out, she also consumed the food and drink from the store to become a cellular embodiment *of* the convenience store. The uncomfortable truth I confronted was my own complicity in reproducing the ideal worker paradigm in my interactions with colleagues pursuing deadlines and prioritising work over self. Yet, Keiko differs from the implied imposition of the patriarchal ideal, she was satisfied, and 'whole' in her role as a cog in the machine 'going round and round' (Murata 2019, 4). Though my initial notes were anchored to the critique of workers as dehumanised 'cogs in a machine', Keiko had a symbiotic relationship with the convenience store. Furthermore, when she stopped working, her relational sense of self was erased. Later, she proclaimed, 'My very cells exist for the convenience store' (Murata 2019, 161). My immediate contradictory provocation was '*is this not the ideal worker we all wish worked for us*'? The ideal worker will perform the duties we seldom have time or energy to complete. The boring, tyring, necessary grunt work. So long as the work is done, how much consideration do any of us really pay to the human cost to our peers?

This has been an acute concern for our collective during the writing process with various competing priorities consuming our precious time. While the feminist ethos of writing differently calls for 'corporeal ethics' of relationality (Gilmore et al. 2019), there was still a deadline to meet and words to commit to the page. Perhaps, a radical act of corporeal ethics could have been to ***not write***, and instead prioritise life and an ethics of compassionate care for our personal circumstances (Fotaki and Harding 2017) or to submit the unfinished manuscript (Weatherall 2023). Yet, doing so would have erased the potential engagement we could articulate here, now, with you. Our silence, and the nihilation of our lives from the writing process, would have reinforced the sanitised publishing system that our Circle aims to disrupt.

In our FRC, Steff contemplated the prospect of not pursuing career advancement and promotions:

> **Steff:** … if an academic starts on a lecturer scale and says, no, thank you. I don't want to be a senior lecturer. Oh my god. Can you imagine how they would be, you know, perceived, what's wrong with you? Why are you happy just being an AL, [or] doing part-time work? You should be head of department or professor XYZ, you know …

In academia, the ideal worker is untethered from familial responsibility, free to pursue the cornucopia of academic challenge and climb the ladder. Yet, the inclusive, contradictory, and emancipatory academia we aspire to co-create will remain a pipe dream while our messy experiences are devalued in writing, and pushed to the margins of scholarship. Reflecting on my role as Devil's Advocate, I find myself drawn to the complexity of unanswered questions in the space between polarised positions. The Devil's Advocate turned my gaze to the integration of masculinities and femininities and fictional, visionary possibilities of more humane academia (Korica 2022). Perhaps, by delving deeper into the substance of the fiction, we can come to a greater collective understanding. Helen, over to you!

Passage picker (Helen)

As a researcher of embodiment, I reflexively recognise the 'intentional threads' (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 121) that draw me towards certain passages. Their meaning stands out to me not because of a psychological interpretation, but a felt connection due to my prior experiences. As Keiko did not enact a traditional gender role by engaging in a heterosexual relationship that would ultimately lead to marriage, she saw herself viewed as 'some ghastly life form' and 'a foreign object.' (p.80). These suggestions that Keiko was less than ideal, and even less than human, for contravening social expectations shaped her identity and life trajectory. Like Keiko, we are encouraged to look within and work upon ourselves without questioning or attempting to challenge the broader social (and other) structures that keep us in check. Resistance is deemed futile. Around the midpoint of the novel, Keiko expressed puzzlement at Shiraha's resistance to work;

> 'Well, I guess anyone who devotes their life to fighting society in order to be free must be pretty sincere about suffering.' (Murata 2019, 93)

As an individual act, resistance is gruelling and all-consuming. It may be less painful, as Keiko discovered, to comply as a useful, useable tool (Murata 2019, 82–83). Yet this also involves accepting outsider status and appropriating the stigma of being an abnormal, inhuman animal (Murata 2019, 161–162) as a badge to wear with pride. Keiko had to accept being different from others if, conversely, she wished to belong. Sharing her feelings with someone she initially believed to be 'just like me' (Murata 2019, 67) leads to Keiko being further ridiculed, foregrounding the risks we expose ourselves to when we call on others to recognise our differences. By approaching collective expression through an FRC focussed on a shared text, we were able to recognise our varied experiences as a familiar feeling of incongruence with being a 'quote–unquote normal person' (Mark).

While theories such as Douglas' (1984) notion of boundary maintenance represent society as something tangible that we actively shape as participants, Keiko's metaphor of *infection* (Murata 2019, 11, 94, 131) reflected her powerlessness in having social norms invade her 'self'. That others perceived a need to 'cure' Keiko of her difference echoed the conflicting logics around whether it is Keiko, or conversely society, that is diseased. As academics, we face the question of the extent to which we engage in systemic norms or whether we undertake the difficult project of resistance. By discussing Keiko's example in our Reading Circle we were able to explore the potential possibilities and penalties this presented while operating an ethics of care towards one another.

The role of Passage Picker appealed to me as appearing to offer the sense of control many of us seek by organising this messy reality into a series of key themes or soundbites. However, its

culmination in the Reading Circle led to a real sense of becoming a part of a more coherent and diverse whole. This is a familiar concept in embodied phenomenology in which the concept of flesh (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 114) represents the inseparable interplay of part and whole as difference and similarity. The Passage Picker role can initially appear to promise that meaning can be tied down, but ultimately provides the freedom to identify those parts of the text that speak to those individual experiences we each bring to our reading.

Discussion

Keiko's internal hierarchisation, echoing that imposed upon her by society, placed being a store worker above being human. When her efforts to fit into society led to her private life being discussed at work, she perceived herself as 'downgraded … from store worker to female of the human species.' (Murata, 2019, 125). Similarly, as academic workers, our lives outside work become inconvenient, with the expectation that we are academics first and humans second. Keiko's work ruled her life to the extent that her body was made up of food from the store, it regulated her body clock and her physical appearance, even when she wasn't at work (p.144). By following the manual, mimicking others and becoming part of the machine, Keiko felt like she was making a form of contribution. However, by rendering herself invisible through silent compliance she not only lost her sense of self but alienated herself from others. While Keiko understood this as dehumanising, she ultimately had to accept it as the only thing that would allow her to be seen as human by others. This encroachment feels only too real to us. Therefore, despite the temptation not to write, discussed by the Devil's Advocate, we understand that we cannot remain silent if we want things to change.

Through the freedom of expression permitted by the Reading Circle roles, especially the Illustrator and Creative Connector, we seek to disconnect notions of being human from the imposed need to embody an ideal worker. As noted by the Passage Picker, it was our shared feelings of incongruence with being 'normal', and not our common identity as academic workers, that evoked a sense of connection. Although norms and ideals impose on us a sense that, as individuals, we must be, in Keiko's words, cured or rehabilitated, our recognition of the intertwined nature of sameness and difference shifts our attention towards systemic issues. Relatedly, the question that echoes throughout our reading circle is how to resist. Thus, we turn to our role, individually and collectively, as creators of the fiction that is academia.

Organisations as fictions we create

It is the fiction that bound us together in appreciation of the fictional qualities of organisations (Rhodes 2015; Savage, Cornelissen, and Franck 2018), and the importance of our stories as part of our creation. Our reading circle method stands to restore the joy of reading *together* as colleagues and friends (Grenier et al. 2022). Our collective reading and writing subverts the instrumental masculinised rationality typically expected of academic writing and aspires to be a writing that resonates (Rhodes 2009) and (re)humanises. With this paper, we model the relationality of collective writing as an ethics of the commons with our academic audience (Mandalaki and Fotaki 2020). Perhaps the dialogue we have shared of our developing personal and critical awareness has persuaded you to discuss a fiction you have read with a colleague?

The freedom of the FRC integrates our chaotic human experiences in a plurality of co-creation with our audience (Grafström and Jonsson 2020); it serves as a vehicle for our conscientisation. At our final face-to-face meeting, our rhizomatic discussion extended out to cultural artefacts that excluded Helen as a non-'trekkie', political tensions with our respective involvements in trade union disputes, personal strife with the UK school concrete crisis impacting Helen, and protracted house moves for Steff and Jamie. None of this richness would ever grace the pages of a conventional paper. It is peripheral, inconsequential; it is life. Yet, for our collective process, it defined the affects we externalised as we wrote, just as Margaret Atwood shares her deeply personal loss as an integral

theme in her latest fiction (BBC Open Book, 2023). As dehumanisation frequently stems from a lack of empathy (Kteily & Landry, 2022), sharing these experiences invites us to recognise the factors outside of academia that shape our identities and thus make us human.

Our text is as much a fiction as Murata's reconstruction of her own lived experience in a Japanese convenience store. Just like Murata's fiction, so our collective writing captured something between us that is not written here about human responses to our contexts. As Keiko resisted changes in her routine, we also experienced reticence to trying something new. In our first 'in-person' meeting, we tried mochi, and became 'like animals' (Reinhold, 2018) in our range of responses to the cured egg yolk. Our fear of trying something new manifested in our response to trying cured egg yolk. We discovered that we had created a fiction about this new snack from our misplaced assumptions:

Mark: What is it? What is it this one? I'm gonna …
Helen: What is it? Yeah.
Jamie: It's that egg thing.
Steff: It's actually quite sweet.
Mark: I'm gonna do it.
Jamie: Oh, gross. Salty egg sweetness?
Steff: I can't taste egg
Helen: Have you not seen those, what do they call them? Like, is it a million egg or something? They […] bury them in charcoal and it's like green and …
Mark: Thanks for saying that while I'm eating mine.
Helen: Sorry
Steff: It's not that bad is it. But I think that's why I think no way like that because I kind of … the taste doesn't fit the description.
Helen: Is it savoury then?
Steff: No, it's sweet.
Helen: Can I have a little bit of yours because
Mark: It fits the normal, it's kind of just really unusual.
Steff: Strange isn't it. I'm having one of those.
Helen: Sounds like your description of Keiko.
Mark: I like the sesame one. It's very strange.
Jamie: Okay, cool.
Helen: Actually, it's okay

From Steff's and Jamie's initial aversion, to Helen's intrigue, and Mark's surprise, we experienced the shared consumption of this Japanese snack as a metaphor for our experience of writing this paper.

At times, the writing was excruciating and impossible, while the reading was joyful and unifying. We shared feelings of self-doubt, worry, joy and disconnection between the planning and thinking that are inexorably part of the humanity of our text. When receiving our reviews, we all recoiled at some pointed critiques, but found solace in our ability to laugh about it–together. Our experience can be considered as a call for academics to reconnect with those moments of common humanity; of laughter shared, and sympathy offered. Without these collective acts of humanity, we do a disservice to the responsibility we bear to write differently (Rhodes & Brown, 2005) in pursuit of a more human and less alienating academia.

Our collective writing was not a neat process to reduce messiness to meaning, nor do we proclaim to have distilled meaning from allegorical reading. Our writing is dirty and we take inspiration from Pullen and Rhodes (2008) whose text 'defies the pursuit of conceptual clarity, linear argument and knock-down conclusion' (p. 243). In our collective project of conscientisation, we privileged community and care.

In that appreciative spirit of community, we wish to thank Alison Pullen and Carl Rhodes for their pioneering call for 'dirty writing' (Pullen & Rhodes, 2008), and Ruth Weatherall for her emancipatory vision of writing and reading differently (Weatherall, 2019, 2023). Weatherall's discussion of the 'unfinishedness' is especially apt for this paper as an exploration of collective reading and writing. It is 'what it is', it could have been more, but it could have been less.

On freirean Reading circles for academics

We conclude with a reminder of the role reviewers, editors, and readers have played and will play in the creation and re-creation of this text through their – your – reading of it (Weatherall, 2023). Our text is much richer for your interpretation, like a new branch to a rhizome (Masny, 2016) with each intuitive thought, reviewed suggestion, fervent conversation, or passing comment. In this way, you are or will become a part of our collective, so thank you. As a Dialogue Developer, you will have curated the text you have read. As a Creative Connector, you will have allowed your mind to consider popular culture artefacts that popped into your consciousness. As a Devil's Advocate, you will have challenged or disagreed with our arguments, but kept reading anyway. As an Illustrator, you will have found ways to represent the article to others with images that can be shared with others for greater accessibility. And, as a Passage Picker, you might have taken something away from this paper, perhaps to share with a colleague. Your reading of and engagement with this text is essential to its life beyond the temporal present that disappears even as these words are written.

The roles we played in this process of writing differently can be emancipatory for scholars trapped in the drudgery of reading alone to write for publications. We contend that the humanising relational aspect of FRCs defies the alienation of contemporary higher education. Though *CSW* was a fiction choice guided by resonant affects of joy and alienation, we assert that it is the FRC as a process of structured dialogue with a text that liberated us from conventional collective reading/writing, rather than the text in and of itself.

We suggest that there is a uniquely freeing element to choosing a text that is not 'canonical' or 'great literature'. Indeed, we see great value in popular fiction (including films and TV shows) that speak to the lived, and often funny experiences of people at work in our contemporary societies (e.g. TV shows like Superstore). By removing the elitism and patriarchal tendencies that can be inherent in text choice, we re-humanise academic discourse to be for everyone, allowing for theory to emerge naturally, or not at all. We suggest fictions should be chosen to explore new territory, such as the intersection of race and gender in Zakiya Dalila Harris' (2021) *The Other Black Girl (Book and TV Series)*. Furthermore, the FRC, when purposefully enacted, can be an equaliser of collective reading/writing to reduce hierarchies that can be unspoken, especially between scholars, in collective projects. In response to the recent dystopian vision of 'Sackker Studies' in this journal (Orhan, Bal, & van Rossenberg, 2024), we see the re-humanising ethos behind the FRC as part of the collage of hopeful academia envisaged by Korica (2022). In our FRC, we all had our role and we all performed it as authentically as we could. These circles, especially when combined with popular fictions, can serve as an inclusive foundation for metaphorically exploring phenomena of interest for organisation studies scholars without the baggage of deference to 'great' authors and exclusive allegories.

Although FRCs were first a tried and tested collective and relational method to scaffold critical reading of scholarly work for students in higher education across the US and UK (Callahan & Rudra, 2015), we extend the scope of this method to incorporate fiction as texts that offer new and resonant insights to scholars and students alike. As co-authors, we continue to use the FRC method in our teaching and have gained much from adopting these roles for this paper as a means to challenge the alienation we felt as academics and to rehumanise our work. Jamie inherited these circles from her colleagues, and developed them for the next generation. Mark, Helen, and Steff will continue to carry the torch for the generation that follows. The conscientisation that emerged from this process is relevant both as a research and pedagogic tool. We hope you might join us on this journey (see Figure 3).

> [We can] hear the [Academy's] voice telling [us] what it wanted, how it wanted to be. We understood it perfectly. (Murata, 2019, p. 159)

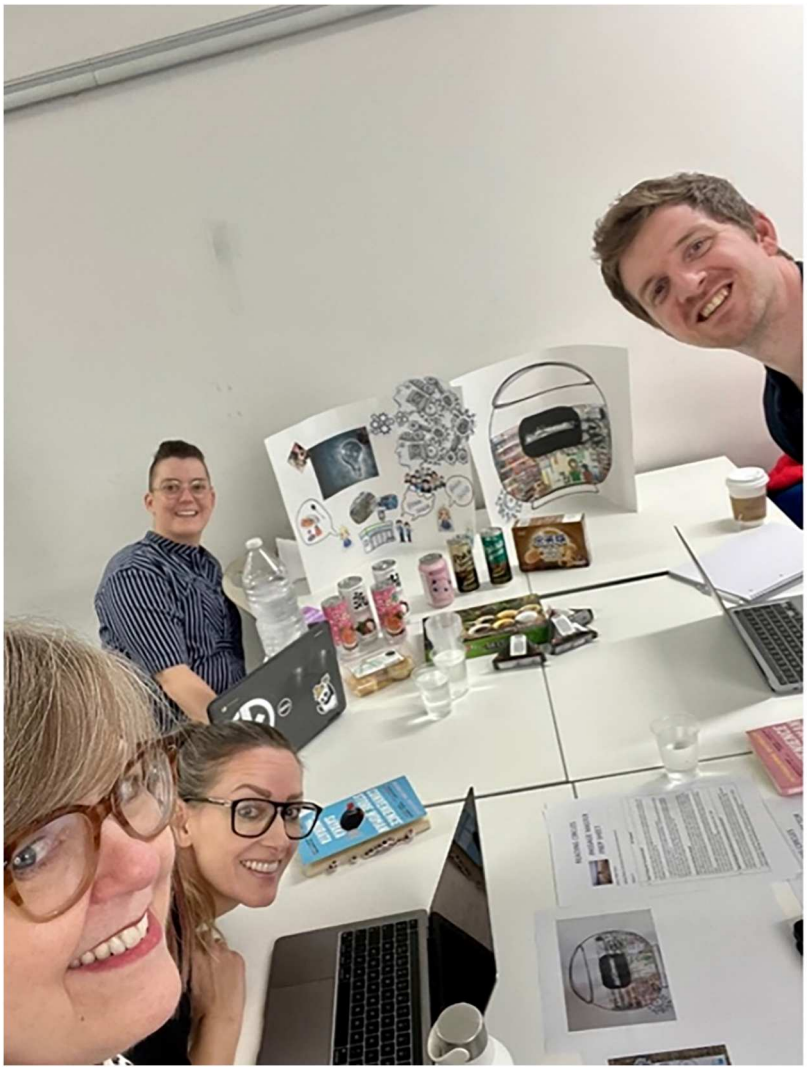

Figure 3. Image of authors doing their Freirean Reading Circle.

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