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Creativecritical relations: Outgrowing current crises of connection

Abstract:
Creativecritical writings and methods in the humanities are examples of what Anna Tsing et al. call arts of living on a damaged planet (Tsing, Bubandt, Gan, & Swanson, 2017). Exploring creativecritical writing as "arts of living", this essay addresses life writings that reflect a vibrant more-than-human relationship: the topic of gardens and gardening. Combining elements of creative practice and critical analysis to generate and explore new ways of relating to knowledge, creativecritical writings make room for the uncertainties of embodied self-experience and self-reflection, shifting the focus from the largely disembodied knowledge practices which traditional university teaching relies on. The present exploration of what nouns, actions and methodologies to attach to the adjective "creativecritical" takes place in a global climate of threat: "The urgencies of the Anthropocene, Capitalocene, and Chthulucene demand [a] kind of thinking beyond inherited categories and capacities, in homely and concrete ways" (Haraway, 2016, p. 7).

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Introduction: crises of connection

In this essay I read creativecritical writings and methods in the humanities as examples of what Anna Tsing et al. call arts of living on a damaged planet (Tsing, Bubandt, Gan & Swanson, 2017). More specifically, this essay addresses life writings that reflect a vibrant more-than-human relationship: the topic of gardens and gardening. Combining elements of creative practice and critical analysis to generate and explore new ways of relating to knowledge, creativecritical writings make room for the uncertainties of embodied self-experience and self-reflection, shifting the focus from the largely disembodied knowledge practices which traditional university teaching relies on. The present exploration of what nouns, actions and methodologies to attach to the adjective "creativecritical" takes place in a global climate of threat: "The urgencies of the Anthropocene, Capitalocene, and Chthulucene", as Donna Haraway writes, "demand [a] kind of thinking beyond inherited categories and capacities, in homely and concrete ways" (2016, p. 7).

The current acceleration of change and its overall character, often captured with reference to the Anthropocene with its vocabulary of emergency and extinction, have triggered anxieties that manifest themselves in the form of multiple entangled crises of connection. Scholars in disciplines ranging from psychology, biology, theology and pedagogy to literary study note, in different contexts and discourses, that despite unprecedented digital connectivity and global mobility, Western societies are suffering from a mental health crisis marked by loneliness, numbness, anxiety, disaffection and a loss of solidarity [1]. Recently the situation has become exacerbated by the arrival of widely accessible generative AI: digital tools such as ChatGPT lend urgency to the need to better understand human identity [2]. In this regard, creativecritical knowledge practices, with their emphasis on self-reflection, embodiment, affect, place and matter combine everything that AI has not (yet) got. I argue that creativecritical writings can help us better understand ourselves as the often illogical, inconsequential and ultimately unquantifiable beings that we are. Creativecritical garden life writings can enhance our appreciation of change and growth, both on the personal plane and in our surroundings, opening a path for relational perspectives and imaginaries.

While manifesting on an interhuman plane, crises of connection are causally entangled with an "increasing disconnect between humans and nature" (Muhr, 2020, p. 249). It appears that the current extinction of experience (Pyle, 2003) is due to a disruption between human life-worlds and nature that goes back centuries, as observed by Alexander von Humboldt in an 1810 letter to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (Wulf, 2016, p. 568). In the present, the gulf has widened to such an extent that, as a species, we seem unable to fathom where to start taking the steps necessary to repair what we are doing to the environment. Donna Haraway proposes the irreverent period label "the (Great) Dithering" (Haraway, 2016, pp. 118, 144) to evoke this collective state of shock and possibly begin to break from stasis.

Well, the Western creation myth of Genesis starts in the garden, and so do many individuals in crisis: whisked to the countryside by (and with) an imperious husband at the outbreak of World War Two, Margery Fish makes a new life for herself in middle age, both as a gardener and as

the author of several gardening books. The first of these, *We Made a Garden* (1956), not only conveys practical advice but also recounts how the marriage morphs into a threesome with the garden as a live spatial partner that outlasts her husband (Fish, 2002). As pioneered in Elizabeth von Arnim's autofiction *Elizabeth and her German Garden* (1899), Fish "gardenwrites" a new career into being.

There are numerous more recent cases of how garden writing has created and revived both the gardens and the humans involved: poet Kate Llewellyn (*The Waterlily*, 1987) and Alice Vincent (*Rootbound*, 2020) garden their way out of heartbreak. *Modern Nature* (1990) by Derek Jarman documents how the filmmaker mixes nature, art and writing to realise an artistic vision on the edge of the land, clinging to his garden in the face of the Dungeness nuclear plant, and to sanity while faced with the devastation wreaked by AIDS. Recently widowed Debi Goodwin finds hope in the eponymous *Victory Garden for Trying Times* (2019) and recounts how working with live matter helps her grow resilience to face the future. In *The Ballast Seed* (2023), journalist Rosie Kinchen turns to horticultural therapy to treat her post-natal depression. In Australia, many life writings collected by Katie Holmes document how women settlers especially have used gardening to make a home in a strange place (Holmes, 2011; Holmes, Martin, & Mirmohamadi, 2008, 2004).

These and many more examples of "making with" and "becoming with" (Haraway, 2016, p. 5) point to garden life writings as an accessible sympoietic [3] meeting ground for a mutual transformation of human-nature relations. Thus, in an attempt to seek solutions to disconnection, in this essay I take the creativecritical enquiry beyond the human plane and include more-than-humans in the process. I will do so by Examining life writings dedicated to gardening, garden spaces and plant lives, I explore different ways creativecritical garden writing allows us to experience place relations as vibrant and interactive, to develop a different appreciation of the Here and Now and, in the process, loosen some fixed ideas about solving human social problems solely in the human social sphere.

After a brief clarification of the conceptual nexus of the role of life writings in the context of crises of connection and garden life writing as environmental creativecritical knowledge practices, my exploration of garden writing as a creativecritical practice will focus on three texts: Rebecca Solnit's *Orwell's roses* (2021), Fran Sorin's *Digging deep* (2016) and Alice Vincent's *Why women grow* (2023).

Life writing and creativecritical knowledge practices

Literary critic Simone Drichel attributes the crisis of connection to an investment in human individualism, or an "inverted version of the old cultural ideal of autonomous individuality" (Drichel, 2019b, p. 2) which not only causes a drop in solidarity in present-day societies but also manifests as a collective failure to constructively think in relational terms:

> 'relationality scholarship' seems to have made very little impact on the popular imagination, which continues to be dominated by idealisations (and illusions) of

> freedom, independence, and autonomy, especially in our anxious neoliberal times. (Drichel, 2019b, p. 2)

This is especially troubling since individuality has been debunked in both the humanities and natural sciences in favour of relation and belonging which neuroscientists affirm to be essential to human wellbeing (Cacioppo & Patrick, 2009; Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010). The human capacity for collaboration is not just the secret of our evolutionary success (Brown, 2018; Harari, 2016), but the notion of individuality is now practically an oxymoron. In the field of human immunology, Thomas Pradeu observes:

> At least in the domain of the living, an individual is never strictly indivisible – contrary to the etymology of the term 'individual.' As a result, to understand what creates the unity of a living being consists of determining how it is the unity of a plurality, which is to say why, although it is formed of diverse partially isolatable constituents, the organism is still a united whole. (Pradeu, 2012, p. 2)

Historian Yuval Noah Harari concurs: "[A]ll biological entities … are composed of smaller and simpler parts that ceaselessly combine and separate" (Harari, 2016, pp. 103–104). Drawing on key papers in the life sciences "summarizing the evidence against bounded units from anatomy, physiology, genetics, evolution, immunology, and development" (Haraway, 2016, p. 67), Donna Haraway relegates human individuality to the realm of myth and works with constructions such as "holobiont" or "symbiotic assemblages" in place of monolithic human entities (p. 60).

Pradeu also highlights the importance of context and embeddedness when including the environment in his quest for identity: "What makes a being's identity in the living world?" (Pradeu, 2012, p. 3). In the context of pedagogy, Robert Kegan coins the neologism "embeddual" (Kegan, 1982, p. 102) to stress the importance of belonging. The garden life writings examined below illustrate how a realisation of such embeddedness dawns in human-garden relations.

For literary studies of (what used to be known as) writings about the self or about exceptional individuals, this relational turn has made for a shift in perspective as well as vocabulary. Paul John Eakin replaces "the self" with a kind of "awareness in process" or "registers of self and self-experience" (Eakin, 1999, pp. x–xi). Like Philosopher Sam Harris, literary scholar Bruce Hood frames human consciousness as a process (Harris, 2020; Hood, 2012).

In this relational vein it makes sense to regard life writing as an umbrella term that covers a wide array of non-fictional writings that explore human lives [4]. One of the super-powers of life writing is to reflect not only on the evolving self but also on the many human and more-than-human "influencers" who shaped and continue to shape it, enacting comparative reflections in the reader. Relational life writing is crucial for an exploration of human identity, consciousness and memory because it is in contact, often in friction and conflict, with significant others that human identities define themselves. In this sense, relational perspectives

are key to an attempt to overcome current crises of connection. As Kim Schoof argues, it is time to think of relationality as a plural concept, a spectrum of different approaches:

> I would like to make another attempt at rethinking relationality as a concept in autobiography studies … [M]y reconceptualization is meant explicitly as an attempt to dissolve the dichotomy between relational life writing and its traditionally higher valued counterpart autonomous autobiography. (Schoof, 2023, p. 1)

A plural conception of both the human self and the notion of relationality are especially useful when dealing with garden life writing where human self-reflection blends with acts of "biographing" other than human lives, such as plants and their histories of colonisation, or the living plurality of a spatial entity filled with myriad lives acting in concert. The crisis of connection on the interpersonal and human plane is familiar; acts of gardening and acts of putting these into words defamiliarise this crisis, disrupting normal responses and enacting changes that bypass human rationalising defences. Therefore, the writings examined below let in new experiences of connectivity, attachment and mutual transformation as well as self-reflection. In what follows, I explore what might happen if these were framed as creativecritical methods.

Having spent centuries in the wings while fiction took centre stage, life writings, formerly dismissed as "artless literature of fact" (Eakin, 1992, p. 29) have become popular in an age of selfies and of mapping human self-definition on a variety of spectra. In academia, life writings can also be seen as a creativecritical trailblazer of the "precarious ethical and moral ground" on which Kylie Cardell and Kate Douglas place life writing (Cardell & Douglas, 2018), of finding ways to put difficult experiences into words and engaging students on a personal level. As early as 2011, Margaretta Jolly notes that this troubles academic institutions:

> English departments haven't uniformly welcomed the creative life writing newcomers. Arguments typically brew over assessment: how to mark a poem is a bad enough problem, but marking an autobiographical poem? A contradiction in terms for many still, despite the crisply technical marking criteria that creative writing lecturers will usually wave about in frustration! This is not because autobiographically inspired writing can't theoretically be assessed in the same way as any other, but because in practice it can be difficult to respond to a student's representation of painful experience with a third-class mark because it was poorly written. (Jolly, 2011, p. 883)

Despite advances toward ungrading [5], 19th century Darwinian circumstances and individual competition-based assessment practices in many institutions hamper progress. Creativecritical knowledge practices expose to what extent conventional notions of the "critical" in cultural and literary studies depend on repressing the personal voice in favour of generating transferable, verifiable and transparent data. Due to their subjective nature creativecritical practices contest the dominant academic climate that promotes quantifiable, reproduceable scholarship subjected to criteria of transparency. "Data", like "fact", the kind of empirical objects that traditional academic methods and discourse mostly revolve around, are literally and grammatically things of the past, as eco-philosopher and activist Timothy Morton points

out (ESSEC, 2023). Much of the Anthropocene, by contrast, cannot yet be grasped, because it is emerging, not yet a given, and therefore needs to be imagined and named:

> The array of names needed to designate the heterogeneous webbed patterns and processes of situated and dynamic dilemmas and advantages for the symbionts/holobionts is only beginning to surface as biologists let go of the dictates of possessive individualism and zero-sum games as the template for explanation. (Haraway, 2016, p. 60)

The very term "creativecritical" invites us to think in connective terms of togetherness, relation, perhaps even attachment. For seminal educators such as Goethe, Humboldt or Ken Robinson the collation "creativecritical" would be a tautology. Haraway's sympoietic approach simply declares any separation between creative and critical work, art and science as a "category error" (Haraway, 2016, p. 105). Creativecritical knowledge practices in research and teaching explore ways in which our "bodied" selves can serve as research tools and develop ways of constructively engaging with individual experiences and unquantifiable affective dimensions. They include and in part re-experience the body in its routines and rhythms, all of which perceive us as embedded in space, in places with which we are in mutually transformative relationship, in interaction with materials and matter, both alive and other. This is where creativecritical writings go beyond rebranding the essay as a genre that combines personal reflection and critique. They advocate change and constructively bridge gaps that deserve to be bridged. The connectivity of the creative and the critical expose to what extent academic work has become dehumanising, turning us into creatures that are easily controlled by algorithms. Powered by affect and embodiment, creativecritical knowledge practices affirm that we need more than that. Neuroscience provides evidence that the body helps us learn and remember: "Feelings are not an independent fabrication of the brain. They are the result of a cooperative partnership of body and brain, interacting by way of free-ranging chemical molecules and nerve pathways" (Damasio, 2018, p. 12). As I attempt to show below, the partnership might profitably extend beyond just these: mindful, bodyful, matterful, placeful. Creativecritical garden writing is a practice rather than a genre, akin to a three-dimensional essay that is performed or acted out, in exploratory entanglement with something material and physical.

Garden life writing

Being connected to live materials and growth, gardening is generally beneficial: gardens are both good to think and to feel with. Gardens have material physical and sensory aspects. Whether we enter a garden as mere visitors or whether we get down and dirty among the weeds and critters, gardens have an impact on our state of mind, and unless we touch poison plants or step on a rake, for the most part, this is experienced as a healthy and desirable one.

I see creativecritical garden writings as capable of filling an affective gap, similarly to how Maximilian Muhr describes arts-based methods:

> many studies inquire exclusively into cognitive connections to nature, often following quantitative approaches. In this paper, I examine the potential of arts-based methods to

> overcome the reliance on language and unveil nuances of human-nature connectedness that lie beyond words. Arts-based research is capable of tapping into emotions and embodied experiences, which are often neglected in science. (Muhr, 2020, p. 249) [6]

Gardening focuses attention on the present and on the conditions which make something emerge into the present. To garden is to embrace that which is elusive and emerging, not yet fully present. It is to sense one's way into and around ambiguity. It is a forward looking way of embracing volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (VUCA) [7] but one that does not dismiss or preclude certainties and facts. It resituates what is important by decentring the direct human push for action, data and control.

Etymologically, gardens signal an awareness of boundaries, ownership and control. The garden problematises how property is assigned and how belonging is conceived. The very word conjures up notions of land, ownership and possessive relation between humans and their environment. Acts of gardening highlight care and the need to repeat actions to reaffirm relations and to re-enact processes of subjugating nature. The iterative nature of gardening also highlights that it is possible to change and to stop. To stop and change course. Gardening is something performed by people and the ideas which it expresses are subject to change. The plants and other growing materials also indicate the importance of change for gardening, both in the form of growth and in the form of decomposition, what Solnit poetically describes as "a peaceful disintegration familiar to gardeners, the transmutation of the no-longer living into food for new life" (Solnit, 2021, p. 208).

Any attempt at improvements or perfection in the garden must confront the fact that gardens are living spaces that change continuously. Gardeners and garden writers learn to let go of ideas of stability, solidity and impermeability, as any finished task leads to a myriad of unfinished ones. In this sense, writing and gardening combine complementary temporalities as writing supplies a permanence, a lasting record or documentation of what happens or happened in the garden, what it looked like and what messages it conveyed. Creativecritical garden writing practices contest that which is impermanent, changeable and non-repeatable in a world that tries to document everything from selfies to pictures of meals. As shown below, creativecritical knowledge practices in the garden look beyond such portable experiences in a way that helps fathom a new kind of individuality, one that is in dialogue with its surroundings, embedded and situated, yet able to transfer to other experiential realms.

Orwell's Roses

In approaching garden writing as sympoietic creativecritical knowledge practices, my first source of inspiration is Rebecca Solnit's *Orwell's roses* (2021). Donna Haraway suggests that "these are the times of urgencies that need stories" (Haraway, 2016, p. 53), and Solnit's book is that kind of story. *Orwell's roses* models a form of creativecritical slow writing that meanders towards an understanding of George Orwell via some apple trees and roses the writer planted in 1936. Solnit's biography of Orwell has multiple identities, being intertwined with a cultural history of roses, how they are grown, what they mean to different agents around the world, how they connect to human life worlds, ranging from art to commerce. And it turns out that roses

are good to think with and are connected to nearly everything. The narrative starts in England and meanders across the world, touching on rose plantations in Columbia, as well as forests lost to the fires in Australia.

Already in *Wanderlust* (2001) Solnit devotes a subchapter to the history of walking "the garden path" (p. 84), and on this walk, she mentions gardening as an aesthetic pastime that goes together with other forms of appreciating a cultured/cultivated nature. Overall, her attention here follows a horizontal trajectory. In *Orwell's roses* she enters a more intimate dialogue with a gardener, Orwell, and digs into the shared politics and poetics of destruction and exploitation that link humans and plants. The global rose trade and Orwell's political writings become impulses to trace parallels between these two: "the problem with floriculture is not only social and labor related, it's also environmental" (Solnit, 2021, p. 218).

Solnit uses the eponymous roses to establish a connection to the writer, but in the process, she exposes a rhizome of existing symbolic and practical entanglements between humans and roses. Solnit traces the invisible roots of a system in which current emergencies can best be illustrated as a failure to understand connectivity. Her biography of Orwell shows how plant lives establish or offer a different temporality to human ones: while the apple trees have been felled or rotted away, the rose bushes Orwell planted outlive him and become a living legacy of a less known aspect of the writer. Gardening acts as an alternative form of writing, of leaving a trace which is alive and vibrant and acts as a more-than-human legacy. What is striking is the deafening contrast between Solnit's calm narrative (especially in the audiobook version) and the utter devastation she conveys. Without a single recourse to the adjective "urgent", the book mediates between the dehumanising conditions of the current dithering and the silent screams of the abject dead, both floral and human, in a portrait of how Orwellian our present globalised and ecologically depleted capitalist world has become.

Creativecritical writings as exemplified by *Orwell's roses* cultivate a new appreciation of the local and whatever aspects of the present we are able to grasp. At the risk of overselling this as a panacea, Solnit's book suggests there may be a moral dimension to the creativecritical practices of gardening: *Orwell's roses* dismantles the "lies we live by", in Eduardo Giannetti's evocative phrase (Giannetti, 2000). Getting in touch with plant growth cycles is getting back to a form of interaction where lies are not part of the practice, because language is not part of the practice.

Digging Deep

Both life writing and success education literature are concerned with personal development, but we rarely encounter them in close proximity, even though their contents may overlap: many self-help books use personal anecdotes for illustration and motivation. Being a hands-on guide, *Digging deep* by Fran Sorin does not need major exegesis and the book's vocabulary makes references to spirituality in ways at which academia would baulk. But for the purpose of this investigation, the book builds a bridge between two creativecritical approaches to reflecting on one's personal growth and embracing transformation: both personal and environmental.

Whereas most gardening life writings follow a retrospective perspective in identifying stages in personal growth, often mapped onto the annual growth cycles, success education deals with the potentialities of the present moment in a bid to improve the future. Gardening teaches attention, one of four pillars of learning identified in neuroscientist Stanislaus Dehaene's *How we learn* (Dehaene, 2020, p. 147), and the first assignment Sorin sets for readers seeking to reawaken their creativity is to pay attention by observing:

> In the fast-paced world we inhabit in the twenty-first century, so many of us move through the days as it blindfolded … Though we may not know it, we are slowly becoming alienated from a primary source of our creativity: our senses. Observing is the polar opposite of that. (Sorin, 2016, p. 55)

Sorin's book proposes exercises for enhancing one's creativity by way of gardening. The garden is both the medium and the product of these processes: as Larry Dossey points out in a foreword endorsing Sorin's work from a medical perspective, due to many psycho-physical benefits, "gardening is one of the most potent ways of opening the unconscious, allowing thoughts we usually keep suppressed to surface in our awareness" (Dossey, 2016, p. 16). *Digging deep* is no retrotopian "retreat into nature" nostalgia, but a didactic path towards creativity, which Sorin understands as a holistic practice: "Creativity is not something we do; it is something we embody. I believe the ultimate goal is not to be more creative, but to learn how to live creatively" (Sorin, 2016, p. 33). Like other self-help books aimed at creative self-actualisation, Sorin proceeds in stages to help readers find their personal vision and overcome internal and external obstacles in realising that vision.

In this process, at first glance, criticism and creativity seem at odds with one another, as the creativity lessons involve unlearning negative judgment. "You may find that the critical voices in your head are quick to sabotage" (Sorin, 2016, p. 90) and similar observations characterise the critical mode as a harmful habit. But as readers go through the process set forth by Sorin, it becomes clear that the work of *Digging deep* is far from uncritical. In pursuit of creativity, the faculties of judgment need to be disciplined in a different manner, in dialogue with the outside world. From exercises to help with finding a gardener's imagined vision and the actual planting of it, Sorin's readers go through a multi-layered hermeneutic retraining: observing, distinguishing their own preferences from the expectations of others, waiting, confronting ambiguity and choices, re-examining the vision and what powers it, planning and many other steps. In this process, readers develop a habit of thinking that involves balancing moving forward with reflection and considering what material realities they face, for instance in terms of the lie of the land, light, temperature, growth requirements of plants etc. While this is not a radical departure from how learning processes generally work, the dialogue with the garden as a physical space defamiliarises it by injecting non-human temporalities: "rushing" to conclusion or into action (Sorin, 2016, pp. 152, 157, 184, 190) is something of a dirty concept. Throughout the book, through learning to perform acts of observing and listening to the live surroundings, human and non-human growth gradually become productively entwined. Rather than adding an external factor to a To Do list, readers become accustomed to co-creatively

checking in with living matter. Personal development generally invests in the idea of the individual, but Sorin shows how this individuality can be developed without expense to others:

> nature is the great equaliser. No part about the system is ultimately more important and more valuable than another, including us. You may struggle with being the master or mistress of your domain, but when you're in the garden, you're no more esteemed than the ladybug! There is an interconnectedness all around us that, if we are willing to tune into it, can continually remind us to keep things in perspective. (Sorin, 2016, p. 59)

This relational perspective is rooted in abundance and symbiosis rather than scarcity or competition for resources. Since Amitav Ghosh has framed the climate crisis in terms of a "crisis of imagination" (Ghosh, 2016), Sorin's retraining of the imagination in contact with living matter seems to go a long way toward suggesting concrete steps to take, not only to address sustainability hands-on in a concrete locality, but also in developing a mindset that departs from compulsory anthropocentrism. Even without such systematic instruction, however, encountering the gardens can have a learning effect, as the following example demonstrates.

Why Women Grow

Connecting women and gardens is a staple in Western cultural history. Gendered nature discourse has aligned female bodies with the land and treatments of it with conquest (Kolodny, 1975). Histories of women as metaphorically and practically "incarcerated" (Perényi, 2002, p. 261) in (domestic) gardens have been deconstructed by (eco)feminists, and partly overwritten with narratives of sustainable female empowerment (Alaimo, 2019; Boyd, 2013; Irigaray, 1985; Jordanova, 1989; Merchant, 1980). Yet, such characterisations continue to resurface, for instance in the image of gardening mothers during the COVID-19 pandemic (Corley et al., 2021; Fallon, 2021; Ketcham, 2020). On the face of it, Alice Vincent's book places her in a fraught field. But these academic concerns, partly addressed in Vincent's earlier *Rootbound* (2020) are only part of the story, and nowhere near the heart of it: while acknowledging the inequities that reign in gardens around the world, women proactively turn to gardens for a variety of reasons. This book starts at a moment where many discursive battles, along with most of normal life, have become suspended – the year is 2020, and this book documents Vincent's lockdown project:

> In the middle of this stuck year, I opened a green notebook and wrote down a list of names … I approached women I encountered through social media or researching online, asking if they would meet with me in a green space of their choice – pandemic restrictions willing, us living between lockdowns at the time. But I was increasingly conscious that there were many narratives and many women that lay beyond my reach, so I made a simple online form. Along with a few basic questions – age range, location – was the one I would come to find most crucial and addictive: 'What drew you to gardening?' I shared the link online and by the next morning there were more than 500 responses. (Vincent, 2023, Introduction, n.p.)

The answers that flowed in painted a varied picture of motivations:

> All corners of life were here, in short, no-nonsense sentences. Postnatal depression, loss, grief, migration, recovery, identity, motherhood. These women gardened to carve space out of the situations their lives had placed them in. I saw patterns emerge: lockdown was a persistent motivator; moving to a home with a garden, perhaps unsurprisingly, was another. Some women, often older, had simply taken on gardening along with other domestic duties that their male partners quietly ignored. The word 'mum' or 'mother' came up most frequently. There had been botanist grandfathers and farming fathers who had helped to usher these women towards the earth, but it was mostly other women I was reading about here. (Vincent, 2023, Introduction, n.p.)

Vincent eventually structures her quest into 13 chapters named after different garden locations all over the UK and Denmark. In all of these, the garden emerges as a tool that helps women embrace and understand their place in life, especially in circumstances that do not go to plan. For the writer herself, on the brink of marriage and pondering the possible prospect of having a baby, the enquiry turns out to be twofold, as the ambiguity of the title underlines: understanding the motivations for gardening blends with an enquiry into what it means to grow into womanhood: "when I met with these women, I was seeking guidance. That I set out not knowing how to be or to live … I was uncomfortable with growing into a new stage of life" (Vincent, 2023, p. 279). In this manner, her own life story becomes part of an inductive quest, both subject and object, and she embraces the uncertainty of allowing the answers to affect the questions:

> I work hard to resist a desire to try and stitch the conversations I am hearing together. I want to understand why I garden; I'd gone out on an elaborate quest for answers, and yet part of me is still looking for neat, clean answers when I put the question to other people. Often, we say goodbye and I am left with more questions than I arrived with. I interrogate, then doubt, the process; dismiss the point of it entirely, tell myself that gardens are just gardens; I am looking for depth where there is only soil. All these hours, all these miles. Perhaps I am racking up both in the pursuit of nothing much at all. But then there are the stories. Ribbons of words and wisdom and memory, tangled up and weaving together into something I am still learning to comprehend. At times I feel almost overwhelmed by the weight of them, of being given them – often so casually and with such honesty – of holding them, of the trust placed in me that they will be handled carefully. Soon, my search for garden stories has become a crash course in womanhood. (Vincent, 2023, p. 31–32)

In a conventional graduate research paper, this methodology section would be a trainwreck. In a creativecritical study, on the other hand, Vincent's inductive method suggests a way of letting vibrant live material tell its own story, assume a storytelling presence.

As far as the surface research goes, the method is effective. The company of other gardeners, of other women, both the real interviewees and the ones in book format she also consults, helps Vincent get clarity on many issues, especially variations on the theme of nurture (Vincent, 2023, p. 23). The encounters go a long way toward overcoming the direct, material crisis of connection imposed by COVID-19. But it turns out there is another layer to the project, which

is perhaps more remarkable for the way it deals with uncertainty than the certainties of qualitative data. Vincent acknowledges this in describing the indirect way in which the different gardens and gardening stories transform her questions and horizon of expectation: “gardening is vital, something beating and alive, and more deeply resonant than mere hobby” (Vincent, 2023, pp. 22–23). Gardening is reciprocal in ways even the women interviewed cannot quite fathom, and which the author herself struggles to put into words as the cycles of womanhood and garden growth occasionally eclipse and then again foreground the unique nature of each garden story. She ultimately succeeds at communicating a kind of learning, indirect, over time, through many questions, often unformed and arrived at through many trials of failing to achieve depth and any kind of glittering epiphany. The kind of learning the garden enables cannot be framed in simple established terms of listed data or facts; like the “unfurling space” (Vincent, 2023, p. 192) of the garden itself, it is, if anything, a gerund, part verb and noun. It is in part artistic, part subjective and significant in ways that do not easily wrap themselves in human terms. It turns out to be a method that accounts for the imponderables of life, which embraces a dynamic of finding and letting go of meaning and words and which continues to reiterate questions about the self that asks the questions:

> With every action, I was coming to shape the garden as a place of my own. Often, it felt like speaking aloud into empty air. I was retreating into the garden. Every act I committed out there felt laden with a shapeless intention to try and make it something, to carve it into a space I might recognise myself in. (Vincent, 2023, p. 72)

Like Solnit and Sorin, Vincent’s creativecritical quest is not content with retreats. Her garden connections take her into politics, decolonisation, a questioning of the institutional violence of gendered language, of the much more overt consequences of sexual violence, guerilla gardening, other forms of social activism past and present, the most dysfunctional aspects of institutions of health management and even to prison (as a visitor). Linking all these social and public spheres, the garden remains private and only temporarily knowable, but it transmits advice on how to proceed. Direct and indirect impulses abound, for instance in the passage that heralds the end of the quest is in sight: “A shift happens. The conversations begin to still, or maybe they just change” (Vincent, 2023, p. 265). The creativities of writing and growth weave in and out of one another, presencing the slowly unfurling lesson that rooted plants convey to people whose horizontal movements are hampered by lockdown, to grow in depth and height and transform the present which ultimately is no less certain than whatever current societal trends declare as normal. In keeping with these insights, the composition ends in an act of composting.

Conclusions

Both gardens and creativecritical knowledge practices are training grounds for times of VUCA. Like any crisis, the crisis of connection can be perceived as an unstable period, but also a turning point where newness comes into being. At a time where both environmental and AI developments demand that we reframe how we think about the human self as a contact zone, gardens can serve as accessible, familiar and more-or-less safe locations to foster more connective thinking habits. This connective thinking can involve exploring and developing new

contact zones between and across disciplines and beyond a cerebral notion of knowledge production. Embodied and local knowledge practices of the kind explored above show that creativity is a necessary critical tool. It is a creative challenge to insert these embodied local knowledge practices into an educational landscape in the grips of disembodied quantifiability. In the process of engaging with gardens and acts of gardening, the writings examined above also indicate ways in which we might rethink traditional notions of individuality. Garden life writings are not just about a human self, but about the myriad direct and indirect ways in which that self is shaped and transformed in dialogue with its environment. It might be easier to enter a transformative relationship with non-human significant others than with humans, because these relations bypass our direct defences, or other fences: we do not expect to be transformed, to have the garden argue with us and because of this, we are more open to discoveries beyond our plans.

A welcome byproduct of this is a necessary re-evaluation of nature not just as a collection of resources but as a living organism that effectively models balance and equilibrium of multitudes of beings. As Silvia Federici stresses in a recent BBC podcast, this has repercussions for how the human self is conceptualised:

> There is an emphasis that capitalism places on self-discipline. Nature has to be dominated. So, in order to work continuously for hours, you have to repress your instinct. Our instinctual life has to be made something that is the evil in us, the animal in us. And nature is important only as a commodity. (Racusen, 2023)

The garden itself is a single noun referring to a collective of symbiotic creatures. Gardening shows how individual and collective identities coexist symbiotically, opening a creativecritical perspective on symbiotic rather than competitive forms of knowing and being that emphasis groundedness and local properties. Garden life writers convey a sense of embeddedness and tentative new ways of belonging that are experienced as restorative, but with a dynamic aspect that encompasses ongoing change, a form of re-balancing. Rootedness and diasporic mobility are not in conflict, rather, they co-create a balance of different trajectories of attention. Gardens demonstrate ways to co-situate different but entangled life-worlds. Personal growth inspired and processed in and through garden relations replaces the growth dimensions familiar to the Capitalocene: flat concentric horizontal expansion and superficial vertical building on top. Instead, garden relations explore acts of observation and listening to the here, to depth and to the dynamics of what is emerging from below, mapping a human temporality of calendars onto cyclical and seasonal processes of growth. The gardening life writings examined here cultivate a form of relationality that reaches beyond the human social sphere: place and plants and the myriads of critters at work below the surface of the garden are represented as dynamic co-workers. The vibrancy of plants and other “garden beings” collectively generates an emplaced and embodied message about the symbiotic relationship between creativity and change: change is less of an external threat and more of a slow, indirect process at work at levels that bypass the verbally attuned part of the human mind. Garden relations dissolve dichotomies between subject and object in ways that are experienced as exploratory and constructive, counteracting the overwhelming fast violence that is carried in news and social media. Life writings about

this symbiotic and vibrant exploration re-connect this experience to the verbal domain, transforming vocabularies in ways that blend creative and critical knowledge dimensions into the collective entity that they ultimately always were.

Notes

[1] See Cacioppo & Patrick, 2009; Drichel, 2019a; Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010; Muhr, 2020; Way, Ali, Gilligan, Noguera, & Kirkland, 2018.

[2] See Johana Bhuiyan's May 2023 article in *The Guardian:* "AI CEO calls for laws to mitigate 'risks of increasingly powerful' AI" https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2023/may/16/ceo-openai-chatgpt-ai-tech-regulations.

[3] Contrasted with autopoiesis, sympoiesis or "making with" captures the relational powers of "theorists and storytellers" to effect unexpected paradigm shifts by changing minds and circumstances. Haraway credits M. Beth Dempster for having first coined the term (Haraway, 2016, p. 33).

[4] Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson have produced a list of subgenres that fit under this umbrella (Smith & Watson, 2010); however, these authors distinguish life writings as first person narratives from biographical writings about another person, and their superordinate term is "life narratives" (Smith & Watson, 2010). Like Craig Howes, I treat these labels as synonymous (Howes, 2020). Whereas his decision is due to life writing's capacity to challenge life representation beyond the traditional literary and historical focus on verbal texts (Howes, 2020, p. 1), my reasons have more to do with evolving perspectives on individuality and relationality in life writing.

[5] See *The Tattooed Professor* blog for relevant sources: https://thetattooedprof.com/2022/01/04/some-thoughts-on-moving-into-labor-based-grading-contracts/

[6] Some artists have begun to interact with plants not as mere materials to be manipulated by the human artists, but as co-creative participants in artistic projects, with contributions and needs that demand the human partner adjust their behaviour and expectations, for example, Frankjaer, 2019.

[7] VUCA is defined by Nate Bennett and G. James Lemoine at the *Harvard Business Review:* https://hbr.org/2014/01/what-vuca-really-means-for-you.

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