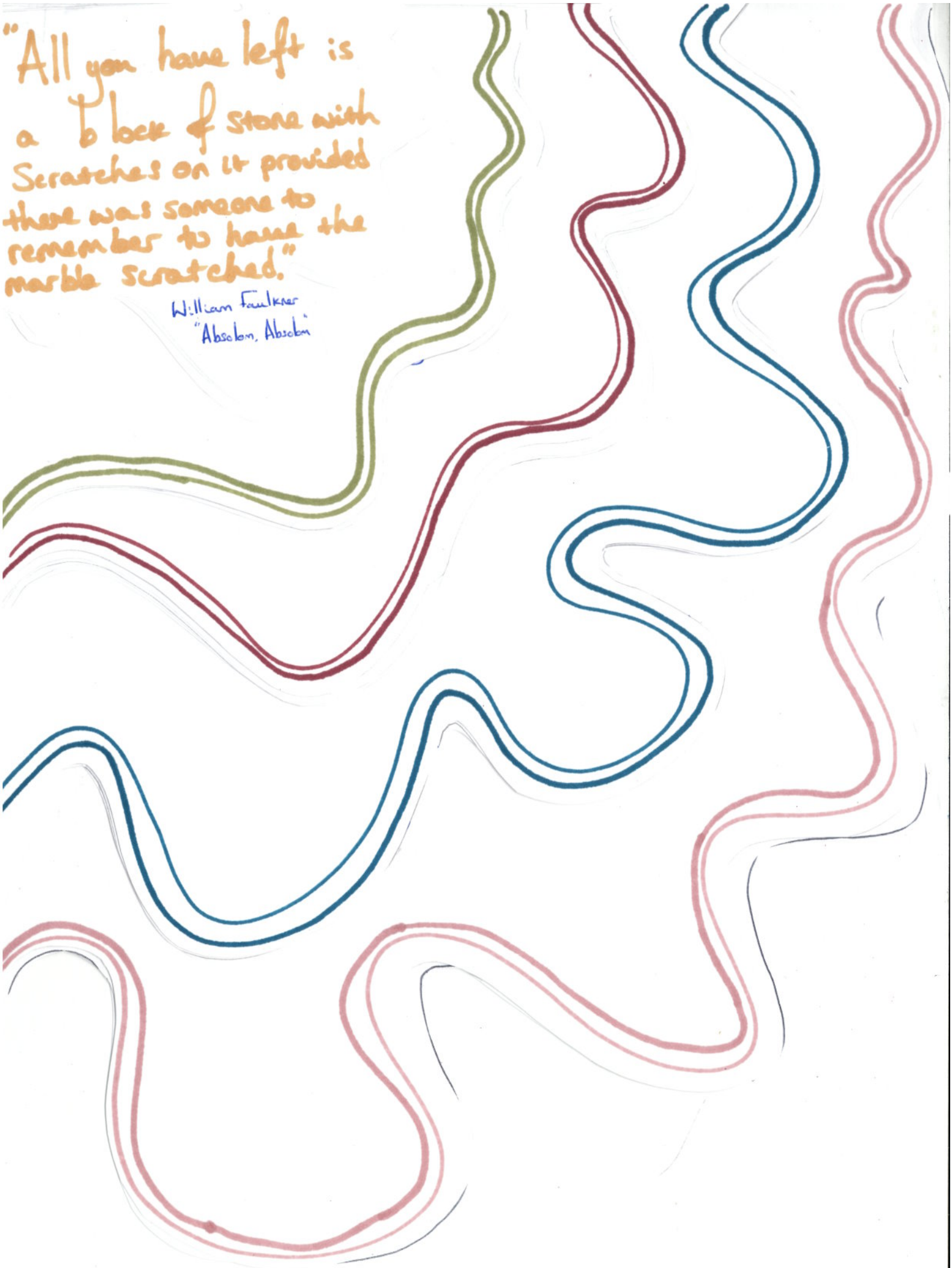
WHY HAVE WE DONE WHAT WE'VE DONE?:

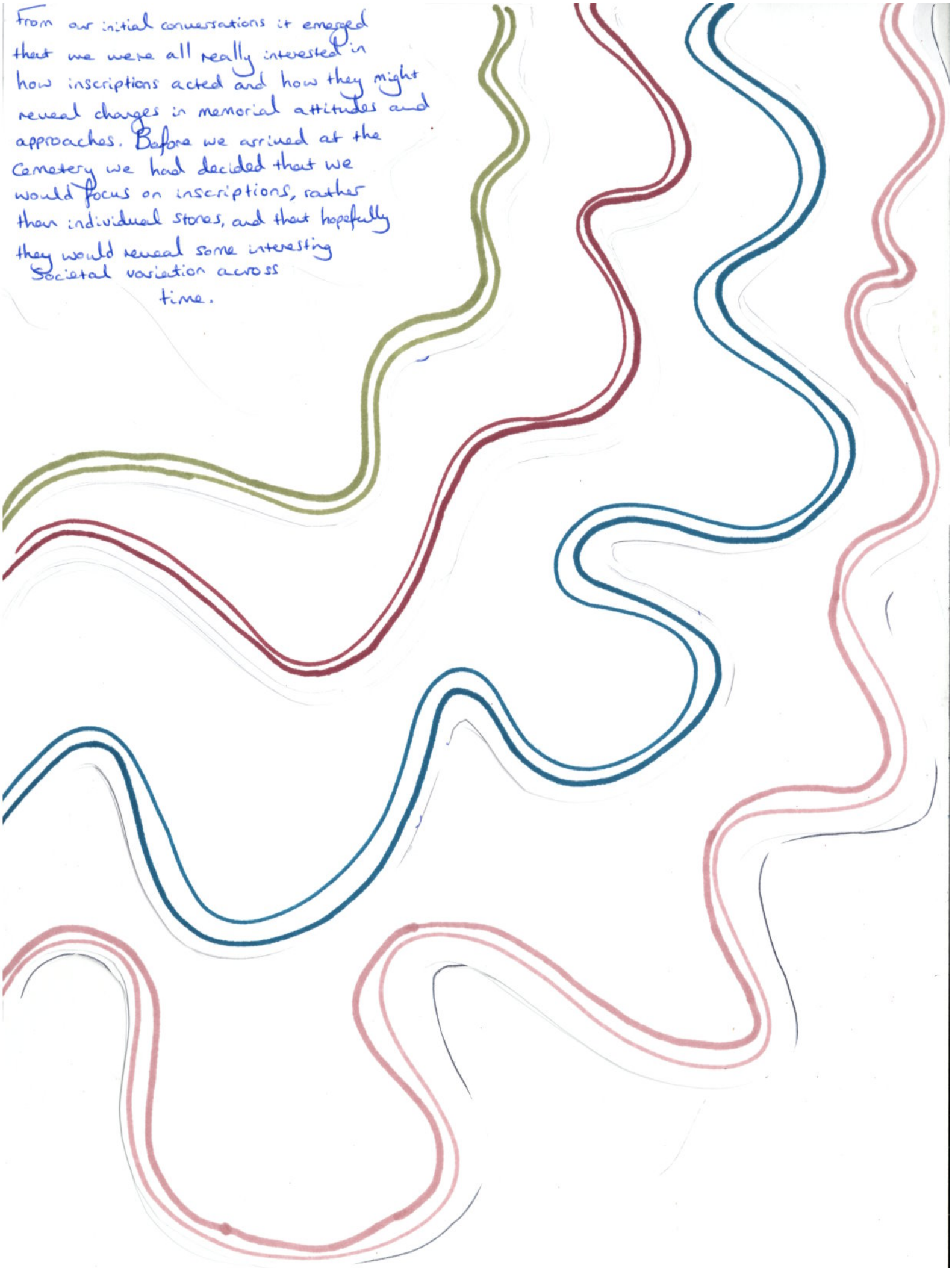
THE PARADATA

"All you have left is a block of stone with scratches on it provided there was someone to remember to have the marble scratched."

William Faulkner
"Absalom, Absalom"



From our initial conversations it emerged that we were all really interested in how inscriptions acted and how they might reveal changes in memorial attitudes and approaches. Before we arrived at the Cemetery we had decided that we would focus on inscriptions, rather than individual stones, and that hopefully they would reveal some interesting societal variation across time.



We thought that such a study would be feasible as there were already sections of the cemetery that had had their inscriptions digitalised; one was in consecrated ground and one was in unconsecrated ground so we hoped we would be able to collate this data with a sample we would collect in the cemetery itself.

Once in the cemetery we rapidly realised that a) we had no way of collecting data from a range of sites in such a short time and b) the spatial layout of words on the stones was fairly codified. In particular, there was a marked prevalence of the words "In Loving Memory" filling the dome of the stones. This phrase was modified to "In Affectionate Memory" in later headstones that were nearby. We decided to concentrate on this particular area, photographing as many stones as we could in the time available and then hopefully comparing our images with the digitalised data.

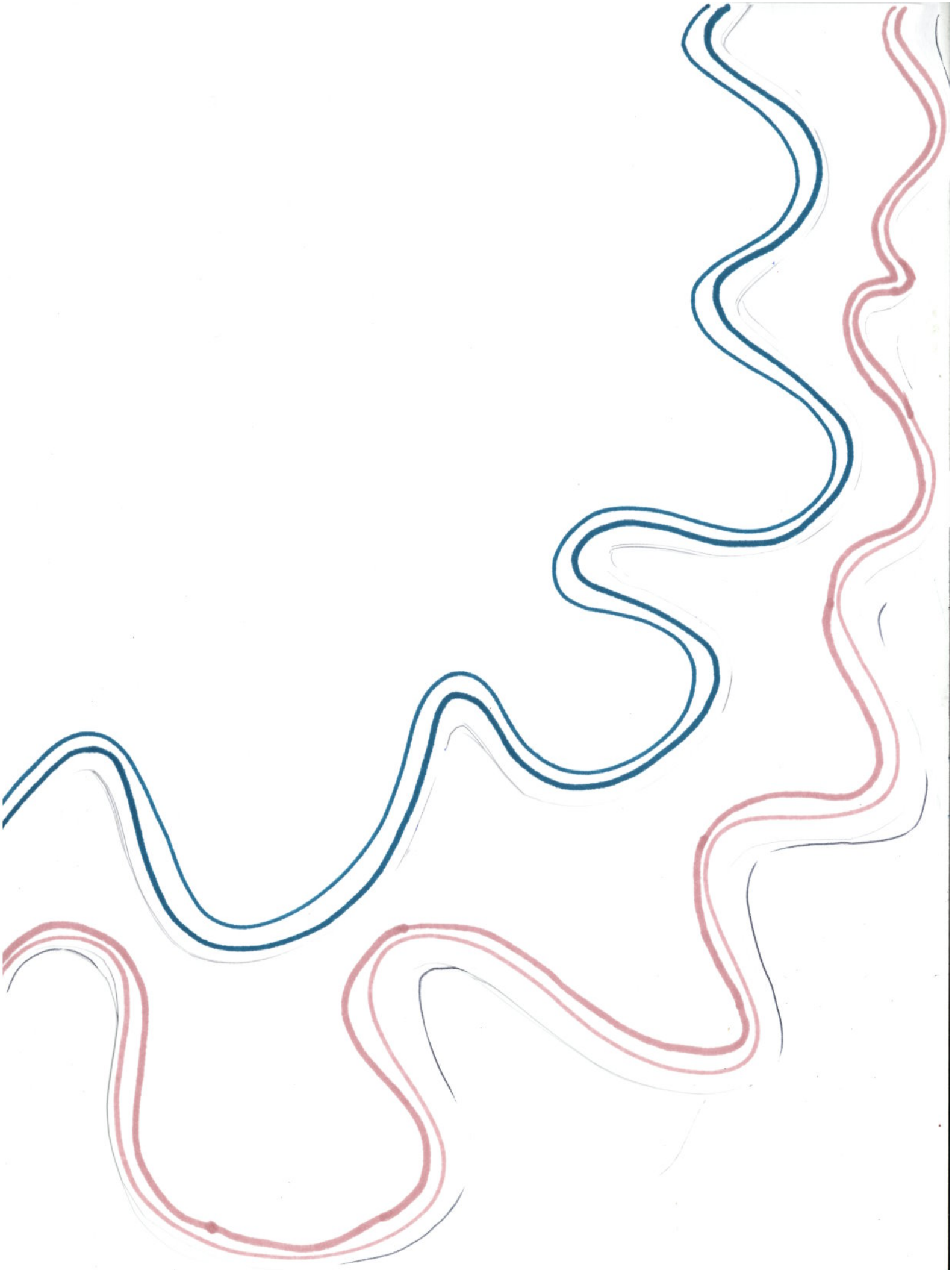
Since we were dealing with the semantic field of memorialisation we decided to start by creating a wordcloud of the various terms and phrases to demonstrate the vocabulary of the time. We hoped that we would be able to use word clouds to really highlight how the ways in which people were commemorated shifted over time.

Having got this far we hit a snag. There was no way of scanning or manipulating the digitalised images from the Friends of York Cemetery material. However, a recent project at the Mount St Lawrence Cemetery had compiled a data set that was fully searchable, had mapping technology included, and seemed to be able to be manipulated into wordclouds, but with important caveats.

1. York Cemetery comes from a very different construction context to Mount St Lawrence. The two towns have differing economic backgrounds, differing social demographics, and even different ages.

2. The two cemeteries come from different religious contexts. Mount St Lawrence is of predominantly Catholic inhabitants, being in Limerick, whereas York's religious background is much more varied. The town had a large Quaker and Dissenter population, as well as the Anglican population. The cemetery itself is even split into consecrated and unconsecrated areas.

However, despite the many discrepancies between the two cemeteries they are both Christian-constructed sites of memorial, loss, and mourning. They negotiate the boundary between those who have left and those who are left. Are the graves within them, and the stones that mark them, commemorating the loss of the dead or the pain of the living? Without knowledge of the individual can an observer ever access that loss and the memory of that individual? What is the effect of a stone without words, or a stone damaged beyond legibility?



Method.

By returning to the photographs taken of graves in York cemetery it was possible to identify individual words and phrases that were/are used on commemorative grave stones. These keywords were then used in searching the Mount Saint Lawrence database where the inscriptions had been summarized and keywords made searchable. The occurrences of these keywords were noted and together input into the open source software Wordall - the keywords were then uploaded at different scales according to frequency in the form of a word cloud. The word cloud was then superimposed upon an image of a gravestone, thereby recontextualising the terms of ornamental funeral

When the final totals for each chosen word were put into the Tag Cloud app (Wordles + Tagxedo), it was clear that 3 words dominated the image which obscured the remaining 60+ words, some of which only appeared a handful of times. Firstly, we removed all words with less than 10 instances which vastly improved the image, however it was still unclear which others were important. We then decided that these words (Memory, Died, Loving) were a given, + so when we removed these also, we could then see a very clear picture of the remainder. Peace, Love + Rest dominated over Christ, Jesus, Pray etc. The next step was to experiment with shapes, so we masked the shape of one of the gravestones + mapped the words onto this in Photoshop, then blended the colours with the original image so the new words appeared more dominant over the original inscription.

Our final sequence of images shows the different methods of interpreting this data:

- Map
- Word cloud
- Words super-imposed onto gravestone

As ever, this has led to more questions:

- To what extent have the bereaved had their inscription choices prescribed - culturally, conventionally and commercially?
- Are grave markers a tool for ~~remberance~~ remembrance or a tool for expressing grief? - How does their use change their choice of words?
- How has the intimacy of the description changed over time and what factors have influenced this?

These questions merit a more indepth study of individual stories and could lead to an industrial history perspective study of local conventions of monumental masons.

With a full data set of the Limerick cemetery we could plot the following -

- Phrase occurrence against time
- Phrase contagion - across areas of the cemetery or among communities - (contagion or convention?)

A fascinating socio-linguistic study could investigate the emotional response of contemporary observers to historical inscriptions: what moves us and why? What detail do we require to pique our interest and to what extent do people project their own experiences on the inscription of a strangers grave?

Taking this project out of more academic questions and into the public / impact realm could lead in some interesting directions. A game or app for children on building a gravestone could incorporate the historical data: when provided with a word stock that they place on a digital blank stone you could provide information about their choice eg. if they placed "In Loving Memory" at the top of the stone then they would be following 80% of the stones in a given cemetery; if they used the phrase "Sacred to the memory of..." they might be told that it hadn't been used in York Cemetery since 1922 or whatever. You could introduce economic factors and "price" each component – eg. having "In Loving Memory" not in an arch across the top of a stone could cost more and so be beyond a hypothetical budget. Once the data has been assembled, it has numerous further potential applications.

Our pandata has been compiled because, although the digital humanities are an exciting dimension to research, a gravestone is a physical object representing a physical presence on earth. Each step we took (represented physically) led us in wider directions and it was not an equal and uniform process, hence the shape of each step. At any point it could have been extended in any direction, hence its form can always be added to, or expanded upon.....