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Finding communitas: Encounter, unfolding, and creative writing

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Finding communitas: Encounter, unfolding, and creative writing

Abstract:

Anthropologist and poet Edith Turner (2012) sets out a narration of *communitas* to demonstrate its endless variations through fieldwork, how it appears often unexpectedly, and how it is a felt sense; “a collective *satori*” or sudden enlightenment. She calls *communitas* “togetherness itself”. This paper outlines the discovery and experience of *communitas* as it applies to creative writing in several different creative writing and research settings: 1) the genesis and makings of an interdisciplinary creative practice research group within a university setting 2) a durational creative exploration of writing and walking (not-walking), and 3) a performative “un-panel” exploring nonfiction as queer encounter. It borrows the concept of *communitas* as a loanword from the field of anthropology and ritual studies (Victor Turner, 1969; Edith Turner, 2012) and identifies generative characteristics of *communitas* for creative writing purposes. It investigates the development of the idea of *togetherness itself* through a feminist and queer sensibility in relation to Hélène Cixous’s non-acquisitional space and *jouissance*, and the *communitastica* of joy. This paper offers a way of thinking about the gift of *communitas*, including the elements needed to allow it to happen within creative writing, hand in hand with a sense of joy, *jouissance* and possibility.

Biographical note:

Francesca Rendle-Short is Professor of Creative Writing, Associate Dean Writing and Publishing in the School of Media and Communication at RMIT University. She is co-founder of non/fictionLab and WrICE (Writers Immersion and Cultural Exchange). She has initiated and continues to lead numbers of industry and community focused research projects including the WrICE ARC Discovery Project Connecting Asia-Pacific Literary Cultures: Grounds, Encounter and Exchange (2021–2024) and The Jakarta Post B/DNL Studio X-CoLab. Her five books include *The near and the far* (Vol I and II) and *Bite your tongue*. She is interested in a research practice focused on ethical enquiry, transnational literatures and literary practices, queer thinking, the value of collectivity and community building.

Key words: Liminality, queer, prepositional thinking, ritual, non-acquisitional space, *jouissance*

“[W]e and all things are all mixed up and bound to each other” – Edith Turner (Mentore, 2009, p. xi).

In an interview conducted in 2016 just before she died, Edith Turner, an anthropologist and poet, insisted that *communitas* often appears unexpectedly. It is “a sense felt by a group of people when their life together takes on full meaning” (Salamone, 2018, p. 4). Turner’s *communitas*, as described in her seminal book *Communitas: The Anthropology of Collective Joy* (2012), is this felt sense, “a collective *satori*” or sudden enlightenment (p. 1). Through her study of ritual and symbolism and what she considers to be the anthropology of experience, Turner identifies numerous characteristics that help us understand what the ineffable experience of *communitas* could be. She suggests *communitas* is a loss of ego (p. 3), that it does not take sides (p. 5), how it knows no boundaries (p. 3), and that it is itself a condition of creativity (p. 3), “a kind of flowerbed ready, waiting for it” (p. 4). Turner insists that it is the experience of *togetherness*, of being more than individuals and separate beings, that summons *communitas* into play, and allows it to “fountain up” (p. 1).

Communitas is a term adopted as a loanword from the fields of cultural anthropology and social sciences (Victor Turner, 1969; Edith Turner, 2012), it is a concept and/or idea “almost beyond strict definition” with endless variations (2012, p. 1). Edith Turner, Victor’s wife who took up the study in earnest after her husband died, publishing her own writings (Mentore, 2009, p. xi), looks at the concept with an open mind, lays out the parameters of *communitas* according to her thinking, and admits that it is hard to describe in words (p. xiv). Her argument is that *communitas* is a gift from liminality – liminality-as-communion – the state of being betwixt and between (Turner, 2012, p. 4). She says it occurs through the readiness of fellow travellers to “see people as they are” (p. 2); it allows for distinctiveness (p. 3). Evoking a set of principles or values, *communitas* arises because of a group’s pleasure; it is made visible through secular ritual (p. 2). She argues it is best conveyed through stories: “[b]ecause it is the sense felt by a plurality of people without boundaries” (p. 1).

What interested me when puzzling over this concept – reading Edith Turner, thinking it through and researching the idea and how it presents, and beginning to understand how Turner’s *communitas of collective joy* worked in a social anthropological context (by definition and through the many examples laid out by the Turners, particularly Edith) – was how this loanword could be transposed into the field of creative writing and literary cultures. If it could, I wondered, how might it manifest? What is it that we are doing that could be termed *communitas*? What could we learn from thinking of *togetherness* in this way? Could we echo Edith Turner and say: “there was very much *communitas*” (Mentore, 2009, p. vii)? Would she be enthused, pleased?

What follows by way of exploration of this “collective *satori*” is a set of reflections on three settings, or “showing through stories” as Edith Turner would describe it (2012, p. 9), situated within the field of creative writing and creative research. I do this by bringing to “*Communitas Studies*” my research interests in feminist and queer sensibilities in relation to Hélène Cixous’s non-acquisitional space and *jouissance*, Quinn Eades (2017) “*inside the between*” and what I call prepositional thinking (Rendle-Short, 2021). For my reading and through experience, *communitas* has a strong connection to feminist and queer communities in terms of values, relationships, approaches, and positionalities. *Communitas* is a relational practice, which is at the heart of prepositional thinking: “where the relations *between* are key, the *within*s, the *of*s, and *about*s; how the different parts of the process or ‘tissue of making’ connect with, interrelate, link, belong, resist” (Rendle-Short, 2020, p. 2). Questions I am

asking are: how do we carve out and create mutually generative spaces of exchange within structures that expect and insist on us conforming to acquisitive neo-liberal thinking? How do we create a world of practice in which we want to live and work, from the ground up? One that is non-hierarchical, inclusive, that allows for transgressive thinking and the bending of genre? Where does desire fit? What about love?

The *communitas* “story-settings” for reflection in this paper are as follows: 1) the co-founding and co-directing of a rich and dynamic interdisciplinary creative practice research group within a university setting, 2) contribution to a durational creative exploration of writing and walking (not-walking), and 3) as a member of a performative “un-panel” as *communitas* exploring nonfiction as queer encounter.

Setting 1: non/fictionLab research group

“*Communitas* is togetherness itself” (Turner, 2012, p. 4).

When my colleague David Carlin and I established non/fictionLab in the School of Media and Communication at RMIT in 2011, our desire was to create an open and creative space in which we and others could play and experiment with how to do creative research in a university setting. This new research group grew organically, quickly attracting interest from around twenty researchers and creative practitioners who were enthused by the potential of pursuing exciting intersections between differing discipline-located practices. We thought of nonfiction and the space between the non and fiction symbolised through the slash as a playful vessel for the imagination, a way of “thinking through making” that could speak back to us about who we are and how we are implicated in the lives of others.

It quickly became a group where the “sense felt” took on “full meaning”: *communitas* (Salamone, 2018, p. 4).

non/fictionLab is a research ecology of practitioners focused on experimental methods and socially engaged practice. It is internationally recognised for its innovation in creative writing research and its collaborative ethos and methods, particularly in the Asia-Pacific region. So much more could be said about this research group – its evolution and multiplicity of practices. Suffice to say, for the purposes of this paper, we continue to be interested in methodological creative approaches that explore the necessary space of knowing and not-knowing, think through/into/across/beyond practice, and give the inquiry or “the problem” that we are investigating whatever it is *to the work*. In this way, we let the process of finding – a kind of slow processual unfolding – become visible (or at least more visible) through the process of making work. Also, there is an emphasis on thinking methodologically about the process of making work, which is more often than not a collaborative effort. The ongoing growth and development of non/fictionLab and its collaborative culture continues to be based on non-hierarchical thinking, collective endeavour, giving value to the art of co-mentorship – with its concerted focus on process rather than product – and the internal logic of setting up projects with which to test propositions. One of its governing principles, for example, is a shared leadership model where the directorship is always co-shared and members (including research students and early career researchers) proactively inform decision making, research themes, and activities (non/fictionLab has approximately thirty-five higher degree research students, of which half are highly active in lab activities). I was co-director first with David Carlin for five years and then with the late Adrian Miles for two years.

If I am honest, in speaking about non/fictionLab there is an immediate tension between talking about it as a member from an individual point of view and in claiming some ownership over it *as against* recognising wholeheartedly that at its heart it is a collective project. It is communal. In other words, because of its collectivity and strong sense of community and belonging, it feels strange to be singling myself out and to be talking about it as something I did or helped to initiate. In fact, in drafting this paper, initial versions left me out of the discussion altogether. My desire was (and is) to make myself invisible, to do any stitching from behind – from the margins – to enable others to lead, to suggest and initiate collaborations. Still: rather than thinking of this as possible neurosis or insecurity, I am keen to acknowledge the feminist and queer thinking that informs and grounds all my work, my practice, my research, and my leadership, including the labour of co-creating this experimental creative research laboratory, and to acknowledge more broadly my epistemology as a researcher being central to the ways and hows of work. In this case, the approach of *thinking into*, of holding space within a university setting.

Hence this interest in *communitas* and Turner's *togetherness itself*.

Because what engages me theoretically, and also in practice when exploring the idea of *togetherness* through a feminist and queer sensibility and/or lens, is the question of difference, the self, yes, but also the non-self or other-self. When Hélène Cixous speaks of desire, for example, she speaks in and through her notion of *écriture féminine* (which is the space to desire), arguing it is possible to create what she calls a

non-acquisitional space – a space where the self can explore and experience the non-self (the other) in mutual respect and harmony that avoids the ‘masculine’ impulse to appropriate and annihilate the other’s difference (Blyth, 2004, p. 15).

This is a space in which people can acknowledge, be open with one another and enjoy differences instead of ignoring, ridiculing, annihilating, and/or shaming or abusing them; where the space or interchange is not acquisitive, indeed it is *un-acquisitive*. A space in which we are not there to want something or make demands from the other in order to feel better about ourselves, or to strut prowess, or as a way to prove something, or because we are needy. Rather, it is a space in which what is created is a relational *ethical* opening. Full of allowance and give. One tuned into the grammar of collaboration: “[w]e gather to disclose the *in between*” (Carlin & Rendle-Short, 2016, p. 7).

In writing this paper and in making these connections of the relationship between creative practice and theory, I realise I have always linked this idea of acquisition in my mind to buying and purchase, but it is also related etymologically to learning or developing skill, habit, or quality. Could there be capacity in this non-acquisitional space for non-*learning* à la Cixous – if so, what would that look like? In other words, not being there or occupying space in order to learn or acquire knowledge, not pushing oneself forwards, not pushing backwards, not wanting to find takeaways or to map a set of observations necessarily, but focusing on being and presence, that sentient awareness that comes with *being there*, attending, showing up, with existence, continuance. Where you sit and *be with* the non/other self, where you *practice* being with. Which will most likely result in a shift of power, a new dynamic and set of possibilities. Which relates to Turner’s view of *communitas* being itself a condition of creativity, “a kind of flowerbed ready, waiting for it” (2012, p. 4).

In *The Newly Born Woman* Cixous says she is looking for a type of exchange where

there would have to be a recognition of each other ... each would take the risk of *other*, of difference, without feeling threatened by the existence of an otherness, rather, delighting to increase through the unknown that is there to discover, to respect, to favor, to cherish (Cixous, 1986, p. 78; emphasis in original).

Cixous calls this desire an invention of Love with a capital-L. Where we each “take the risk of other” and don’t feel threatened or menaced or exposed but do feel delight and recognition – and delighting to increase – and, when we get this right, we can think of having or possessing collective joy or pleasure and *jouissance*. (As an aside, Emile Durkheim’s theory of religion and collective effervescence is a forerunner to *communitas*: “This effervescence often reaches such a point that it causes unheard-of actions. The passions released are of such an impetuosity that they can be restrained by nothing” [2012 (1915), p. 216]. Edith Turner didn’t think much of this, saying Durkheim’s “effervescence” “looks like soda pop with artificial sugar in it” [Mentore, 2009, p. xiv].)

Along similar lines to Cixous, Quinn Eades in his queer exposition of Gertrude Stein’s *Tender Buttons* and difference and love in his book of poetry titled *Rallying* holds onto the space between, the where-we-meet, which could be a hole or crossroads:

LOVE

When we find each the other there is an understanding that *inside the between that is turning* there are the both of us. There is recognition supposing that any heart can recognise an other there is known and knowing (Eades, 2017, p. 147; emphasis in original).

In this queer space of love and heart the body is ever present (known and knowing), it is the liminal space betwixt and between – around, inside, under and over, near – and in the Turners’ terms *communitas*. The *inside the between* is where we show up, where we find each other, where we dwell, and yes, where we un-learn also. Victor Turner’s view is that *communitas* develops in the liminal phase of ritual, in the transitional space of movement from one state to another, where people have a great sense of belonging and togetherness; attachment. In the fields of anthropological and cultural studies the term liminality (or *limen*, threshold) is to do with a transitory space, an interstitial state characterised by indeterminacy where there is the potential for subversion and change; transformation (Turner, 1969). Turner’s focus was not on the static or given, the pre-arranged or staged, but on the process itself, the unfolding, untangling, the working out, the process. Also, as Edith Turner has noted: what emerges out of that unfolding not in terms of preconceived outcome, but what surprises, what appears unexpectedly, the ineffable (2012, p. 1).

In terms of relations and proximity – *[w]hen we find each the other there [...] there are the both of us* (Eades, 2017, p. 147) – there is always inherent movement with prepositions (and *communitas*), the directional magnetism of association and correspondence, a towards, before, following.

Edith Turner, like her husband Victor Turner, was a field anthropologist. So, in the spirit of Turner and her idea of “actual finds in the field” (Mentore, 2009, p. ii), and to bring us closer to finding *communitas* and *togetherness* in creative writing, to identifying it, I want to

exercise etymological fieldwork on the word and idea of *togetherness*. I want to language *togetherness*; *together* being an Old English word based on the preposition *to* and the West Germanic word related to *gather*.

Breaking it down in notes, note 1: the word *to* is such a simple, common word on face value (it is one of the top five words used in the English language according to a Collins Dictionary blog) but is nonetheless a complicated multifaceted preposition. It is related to the Dutch word *toe* which suggests foot forward, the front body moving towards, walking, or running or dancing as movement, leg out, a step closer. *To* expresses a directional motion towards a particular location or point to be reached at the end of something or after a period of time. *To* approaches or reaches, it identifies a particular relationship between one person or another, or between non-human elements. It suggests attachment or linking. Note 2: the *gather* in *together* is a verb to come together, collect, assemble, to pull someone into one's arm, into close proximity, draw or pull together. Note 3: and the suffix *-ness* in *togetherness* forms a noun out of the adverb *together*, meaning with or in proximity, close association, and companionship, without interruption, continuously. There we have it: *togetherness* itself. *To(e)-gather-ness*.

Being attuned to the possibilities of this *togetherness*, this *communitas* – that is, the pleasure that arises from creating a space of encounter, the generative flowerbed of transitional experiences, incremental unfoldings, and movement and what might emerge – I can see, as Edith Turner has rightly observed, *communitases* everywhere: “the great feeling of all being together, and having extraordinary or terrible times together, a feeling that doesn't necessarily last very long” (Mentore, 2009, p. xiv). Take one such non/fictionLab public project called *Writing in the Expanded Field*, a partnership with the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (ACCA), where writers, poets, artists, curators, and critics come together to enquire collectively about experimental writing methodologies, playful ways of knowing and embodiment, feeling, and intuition as they encounter art.

overlapping writing
overlapping uncertainties
overlapping vulnerabilities, bodies, histories, day jobs, night terrors [...]
how will we make fools of ourselves together, in the not-knowing, in the negation of
certain paths, the well-worn trails of critical propriety that art with a capital A seems to
find most comfortable? if not *this* then *what*?
these are questions of power and voice and authority and listening and making space,
making spaces (inside and outside and together).
(Carlin, 2021, pp. 3–4)

At the launch of the 2021 publication arising from this project, at the end of a long process of making and doing and being with each other and the artworks in situ, the participants performed a marvellous expression of that processual unfolding collectively with a conductor who conducted their overlapping writing with a lighted up baton. A performance called Overlapping Reading: “I could conduct everyone to read all at once!” (1; emphasis in original). The work rose and fell, built up texture and thematic lines like a small symphony, all rhythm, modulation, pattern, expressive gesture, vibrato, and cadence. The result was a *Sonic Communitas*, a rhapsody, mirroring the embodied *communitas* of the durational *to(e)-gather-ness* project itself. The conductor told me later it was improvised from start to finish, she did not know what would happen next – in this sense, it was very *communitas*, it being unexpected, “like the wind” (Turner, 2012, p. 3). Unexpected, like the redacted catalogue

essay that appears at the beginning of the Overlapping Writing publication. An insider poetic expression, “Amerliorative grasp ping”::

a state of
 settling and unsettling
 that choreographs monumental rise and fall
 suspended
 according to variable air currents
 and simplicity of form
 and the logic of its
 sorrow and release
 over time
 (Murray, 2021, p. 3)

In another non/fictionLab project, the Symphony of Awkward, a collective of researchers focus on myriad expressions of #diarology through live and audio works. Together they examine (interrogate, revisit, reclaim, reinvigorate) juvenile diaries, constructions of subjectivity, discursive reportage, archives, memoir, performance, music, “found footage” to make sense of and release selves, former selves and still forming selves. Their practice is a series of *communitasia* – with each other, with audience and participatory others, with the broader public. In fact, during COVID lockdown in 2020 the Symphony of Awkward praised the keeping of diaries in The Conversation in a piece titled “Note to self: a pandemic is a great time to keep a diary, plus 4 tips for success” (Murray et al., 2020). The writing of diaries and journals you could argue is an act of creating *communitas*, at least the germination of such collectivity, the sacred/profane ritual of writing and note-taking betwixt and between space in/on the page, a place of heart, that “inside the between that is turning” (Eades, 2017, p. 147; emphasis in original). Also: great joy and solace. A shared Diaristic *Communitas*.

The final example of non/fictionLab *communitas* is the Live Research Lab, a monthly presentation by academics and researchers in the Lab each of whom brings the writing and/or research they are in the middle of “to the table”. Here *communitas* happens in the coming together, the collective gathering and talk where a presenter reads and shares for about 15–20 minutes followed by open discussion from the group. There is no preparation for the group, no pre-reading, and that is the point. This format is based on the WrICE (Writers Immersion and Cultural Exchange) residency model, one of immersion and deep sharing, a latitude without hierarchy where the focus is on creative sustenance, the offering and gift of sustained listening, reciprocity, “a space in the round where it is possible to discover an immensity within ourselves” (Carlin & Rendle-Short, 2019, p. 276). As described elsewhere, the WrICE encounter is a structured experiment, a gift, a being “in the company of”, a creative convergence (Carlin & Rendle-Short, 2016). Like WrICE, the Live Research Lab is a generous form of discussion where the group responds to the particular needs of the writer/researcher who is the middle of their work. The group brings their ears, their hearts, and minds to the task of deep engagement, attentiveness. Another “plurality of people without boundaries” (2012, p. 1). Aural *Communitas*.

But we can share. We can listen. It’s a you-you space. A prepositional, second-person space with its rituals and choreography. (Carlin & Rendle-Short, 2019, p. 279)

Setting 2: Walking in the configuration of infinity

Communitas doesn't "necessarily need ritual" (Mentore, 2009, p. xiv; emphasis in original).

During lockdown in Melbourne, Australia, several of us in Writing and Publishing at RMIT worried that we wouldn't be able to write/make again. In 2020 for more than 100 days we were in strict lockdown in Melbourne unable to move more than five kilometres from our homes. Many of us saved ourselves by walking each day for the one allowable hour; but some of us couldn't walk because of incapacities of one sort and another, broken bones, broken hearts. We joined forces to keep each other alive creatively. In keeping with non/fictionLab methodologies of holding space and *thinking into*, along with "being in the moment", acknowledging and being open to difference, non-acquisitionally, we gave the problem of what to do with the work/experience of not-doing/not-making in a pandemic *to the work*. We asked: how do we write/walk together? How do we open up to our difference/s (lockdown highlighted different needs and sensibilities)? What can we do together that is impossible to do alone? We devised a formal experiment. Our Walking/Writing Walkshop became a durational project, "a local Camino", a slow unfolding and extensive (as opposed to an intensive) spread over weeks and months. We offered prompts to each other to get us going, such as using George Perec's *An attempt at exhausting place* (Hill, 2017) and favourite shoes. For my prompt, I wanted to give the problem (the query as to what *communitas* is) to the work, so I offered *communitas* and collective joy as a prompt to everybody, to motivate us to think of writing/walking as a group's pleasure in "shared common experience" (a perfect provocation for a pandemic) (Turner, 2012, p. 2), to allow it to fountain up (p. 1) despite constraints and resistances.

Over weeks and months and now for more than a year, nearly two, our sense of *togetherness* and joy has been expressed in multiple ways. Writing and form coming together: walking and not-walking, un-walking, slow walking, curtailment, constraint, the communal. We extended the project through Bus Projects in Collingwood, Melbourne and mounted a series of participatory public "walkshops" as part of *Walking in the Configuration of Infinity* that included RMIT writers and researchers as well as interested participants from the community. We walked and we wrote, including a very, very slow walking/writing exercise: "At some point / after watching / the light switch / (about 5 steps) / I began / my heart slowed down and I smiled / because i [sic] felt / free and / began to move / like a bird" [Buck et al., 2021]. We experimented with crossover writing together in google docs (writing together at the same time in the same document: "We need the other's cursor" [Buck et al., 2021].). We did overlapping reading in the round a la Symphony of Awkward and diarologists as a set of choral-as-single-as-multiple-voice enactments. There were slippages and overlaps galore. Borrowings and givings. Sadness and hilarity. We typed into the keyboard and scribbled on pages, we walked metaphorically over the google doc page, we made words go together into each other's writing, call and response, we read each other's work and our own in a singsong.

Greetings are bumpings-into-one-anothers. And acknowledging that encounter.
 I'm interested in these multiple ways, but I don't want to intrude into your space or require explanation. Yes! acknowledgement of otherness.
 And being present with the encounter. And perhaps identifying that our singularity, isolation or aloneness is just a perception and not necessarily true?
 [...]
 I am thinking about the communal, and the joy of being here all together.

Of listening. Of showing up. I have been thinking about how there is no community without showing up. And wondering how I can show up more, or better, or something. [...]

I read somewhere that we are what we pay most attention to – or that’s what makes up our subjectivity – and shapes who we can become. It’s a parallel universe that exists next to our day to day, that is always available should we choose to enter it. [...]

If you take a breath does that mean you have to return it? (Buck et al., 2021)

We did *communitas*, we were *communitas*; we **are** *communitas*. We wrote ourselves together and apart, singly and as a collective, we landed in the garden bed of *communitas* as the place of encounter. We sang, we swam; we treaded, we waded. Together we put writing/righting into material practice. We created a language bank – wend, saunter, trapse, shuffle, shimmy, skitter, prance, skip, hop, hope, trammel, stroll, smokeyalater, lost and losing.

This is what we want. What we need.

What could be called Being-Present *Communitas*: “It does not merge identities; the gifts of each and every person are alive to the fullest. It remains a spring of pure possibility, and it finds oneness, in surprise” (Turner, 2012, p. 3).

Setting 3: NonfictionNow conference: The peripatetic panel

My first encounter with the idea of *communitas* was in a nonfiction setting at a conference ‘un-panel’ where a group of us were presenting The Peripatetic Panel: Nonfiction as (Queer) Encounter as a collective. We were in the middle of this staged performance in Arizona, a peripatetic essay around the ballroom of the hotel in which the conference we were attending was being held. Moving the audience with us as we travelled from station to station, plinth to diorama, when one of the audience members, an anthropologist and writer, suggested it was very *communitas*. Staged *Communitas*. Our ‘un-panel’ was in fact the third in an evolving oeuvre of un-panels queering the essay, asking the question (this time): what happens when five writer-lesbians/lesbian-writers with different nonfiction practices untether the essay from the confines of the conference room and release (usher/herd) it into the wild? Each writer offered a devotional object/icon at a Station of the (Very) Cross and what followed in the promenade around the room frayed the edges of distinction between panellist and ‘public’, as everyone in the room became one, moving amongst the objects, listening to what was being spoken, contributing as chorus from time to time, the audience becoming panellists themselves in the unfolding performance. The unpanelled panel that emerged proposed a new form within the poetics of nonfiction: creative collaboration by promenade, by communal choral singing of gathered nonfiction texts. A queer promenade-as-nonfiction. Stations of the (Very) Cross. We wanted to know could this peripatetic panel (this walking-up-and-down-and-beneath-and-against panel) inscribe a generative and embodied process of collective collaboration *across* the non-binary space that is nonfiction. Could it become a new form of colloquy (Cappello, 2017a)?

Notes towards *communitas*:

Our ritual as promenade and encounter begins loosely, messily, with a focus on wanting to do something. I have been reading Maggie Nelson writing about her friend Eve

Kosofsky Sedgwick saying writing doesn't save us from what we fear, rather it unites us with the fearsomeness of what we desire (did I dream this?). Nelson argues writing allows the desire we feel to be encountered and experienced as thought and form in what we have written.

I have also just visited Noah's Ark in Kentucky, or 'knowers arc' as my Dictaphone calls it, a full-size replica of the biblical boat that saved Noah and his family and a whole lot of animals as described in general terms in Genesis (Genesis is a science book, right?). I can't get those animals out of my head, how they fitted, how they were chosen, what that meant for all the animals that didn't fit, that weren't chosen, how they must have drowned. I found out the Kentucky Ark had a rainbow ringing its colours of purple and blue and green and yellow and orange and red projected every night along the hull of the giant boat, the size of two football ovals: creationist rainbow as an act of reclamation. The creationists say they are reclaiming what they say homosexuals and queers, like me, took away.

Homosexuals aren't science, right?

I talk to my queer co-creator of these wrighting (w/righting w/riting) experiments we've both been involved in under the banner of queering the essay (Peta Murray – I have learned so much from her – 'This is a work of recovery, most notably of recovery of *voca*, of voice [...] say goodbye to *writing* and embrace *wrighting*' [Murray 2017, p. 370]) so much so that I want to find a way to reclaim this arc of queer through a performance of some kind. Re-claim the rainbow being re-claimed by Answers in Genesis. Queer this 'knowers arc'. Allow what is disallowed. Stitch the unstitch. Knit the unknitted unknotted. Reinstate the unstated. Proud the shames.

This dear queer friend PM writes: I've got an idea I want to pursue with you. A speculative something, a collection of wonder and wonderful. How authors attempt to cruise their own queerness: marginalia, fragmentary essays, the un-whole dis-whole, the happenstance, the unfinished.

Also, this she writes: I need a deadline breathing down my throat menacingly, erotically. It's the best way to get me moving.

What emerged out of these initial thoughts and conversations and claimings was beautiful, wondrous, a peripatetic colloquy in shadowplay in making. It led us into *un-acquisitive* places of otherness, *inside the between*. It gave us *communitas* before we delivered the un-panel in Arizona, before we had a name for what it was, we were doing. We knew what it meant to be together, but now we were invited to *communitasiums*, *communitasia*. This was Cruising-Queering *Communitas*.

What we wanted to do was to create an unpanel space, give our audience a liminal space, a space of luminescence, where the experiment and "what it is about" or what it produces was not the concern, rather, the focus was an enactment of processual thinking-out-loud, writing (and embodying this writing through performance) as an experience of waiting and wanting: waiting to see what emerges, desire for what might be, a ritual of Murray's w/righting (2017). It was a prepositional performance space for the unfolding (Rendle-Short, 2021) – where the betwixtes and between, the because, the amongs, the durings, the includings, the underneath, were the thing, the whatness, the quiddity. A place to transform. Metamorphose.

Find the other. Not just in thinking (re-thinking) writing but in re-imagining (re-vision-ing) panels.

What happened in that room at the NonfictionNow conference in Arizona in 2018 and simultaneously in the unfolding that occurred online as an expression of the in-person performance (launched as part of the Digital Writers Festival 2018) was, as Edith Turner might phrase it, “very much *communitas*, because everybody was talking” (Mentore, 2009, p. vii). In a semi-ritualised exchange of text, material, image, and voice we offered up objects, offered up imagined and truth-telling experiences, shared writing. We were transported by a chorus-audience-led choral singing (a sort of choral reading as singing as joy). We shuffled down/behind/along different spaces of the room depending on what was happening or not happening, corresponded, and ‘communed’ with different Stations of the Very Cross. We listened to voice recordings ‘offstage’, out of and inside plastic bags. We ate and swallowed coloured lolly snakes and imagined we were part of a queer Noah’s/Knower’s Ark? Transfigured *Communitas*.

How this journey around (through) the ‘Stations of (Very) Cross’ might be a series of interventions. Also, how you can’t have intervention (making deliberate choices: *inter-*between, *venire* come: ‘come in as an extraneous factor of thing’) without invention (the making up, making over bit) – Francesca Rendle-Short

It also makes me wonder if the ‘Stations’ element that Francesca and Peta have given us might be interestingly ‘intervened’ in via the idea of the labyrinth (looking back on this essay [‘How we escape it: an essay’ (Cappello, 2017b)] – it’s short if you have a chance to read, according to the site it takes ‘15 minutes’ to read, lol’): the multi-cursal vs. the unicursal labyrinth, nonfiction as the former, the stations of the cross, a type of latter – Mary Cappello

I am interested in re-defining and overturning the notion of the rite, de-coupling it from organised religion of any kind, and pushing it towards the more secular, and beyond, into the profane – Peta Murray

(Rendle-Short et al., 2018a)

Here was an unfolding of new formal modes of creation. An unmaking and reworking of the poetics of nonfiction offering unexpected pleasure and expectation: “[l]ight dawns on what the real thing is, and we feel lucky that it exists. Then we can make discoveries” (Turner, 2012, p. 11).

The precursor to this Peripatetic Panel was another essayed entanglement across international lines titled “Nonfiction as Queer Aesthetic” performed in Iceland at the 2017 NonfictionNow Conference, published the following year as a score for five speakers in two acts in *Fourth Genre* (Rendle-Short et al., 2018b). Both unpanels were acts of queer resistance. Subversion of genre. Processual (prepositional) thinking. An expression and joy of togetherness – even to the idea and decision at the last minute in Reykjavík of pulling names out of a cup ceremoniously to determine the order of speaking/utterance; even to the inclusion of Lawrence Lacambra Ypil (Larry) as interpolation inserted from afar as a kind of “queer awayness” because he couldn’t be there in person (Rendle-Short, 2018b, p. 201). What you can’t do alone. Collaborative serendipities. Chance *Communitas*.

Conclusion

This paper offers a way of thinking about the gift of *communitas* in all its fullness, starting from a recognition of its presence, an ability to locate felt sense, and the “full meaning” offered when people come together. The paper traces a line of investigation by thinking through what feminist and queer communities of thinking and praxis offer in terms of values, relationships, approaches, and positionalities, to which is added the relational practice of prepositional thinking. In different creative writing settings, “*communitas* thinking” offers a world of practice and thinking about practice that is non-hierarchical, inclusive, “togetherness itself”, that allows for transgressive thinking and the bending of genre, form, and conventions. This paper argues it is possible to create spaces and progressive structures and ‘stories’ of exchange and engagement that are non-acquisitional, ethical, mutually generative, and productive. As shown through these examples of *communitas*-in-practice – the sonic, diaristic, aural, being-present, staged, cruising-queering, transfigured and chance – not only is the *very spirit* of community present and visible, but there is also shared joy, luminescence, “something magical” (Turner, 2012, p. 3). There is a sense of *jouissance* and possibility. *Communitas* as disruptive creative encounter. *Communitas* as generative dance and choreography. *Communitas* as interstitial space. *Communitas* as transformative agent.

How to finish but with coda with Quinn Eades and his “[w]here we meet” (2017, p. 147), and Gertrude Stein herself:

Around the size that is small, inside the stern that is the middle, besides the remains that are praying, inside the between that is turning, all the region is measuring and melting is exaggerating. (1914 [2005], p. 2)

Notes

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