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Digital together: Creative writing, collaborative residencies and cultural exchange in a COVID-constrained world

Abstract:
Since 2014, the Writers Immersion and Cultural Exchange (WrICE) program has sought to invite genuine trans-cultural encounters and dialogue among peer creative writers from different nations, cultural backgrounds, interests and life experiences across Asia and Australia. These have been enacted through in-person collaborative residencies, designed and staged based on a set of five compositional principles. In 2020, these principles were challenged, tested and elaborated in new ways through a new WrICE residency conducted entirely online: a move made necessary by the COVID-19 pandemic and its conditions of physical separation. Our findings from this digital residency experience offer insights into future directions for approaching transnational collaboration and dialogue among writers, artists, scholars, activists and others in a more constrained world, during and after the pandemic.

Biographical note:
Sreedhevi Iyer is a Lecturer in Creative Writing at RMIT University. She is the author of two books, *Jungle Without Water (2017)* and *The Tiniest House of Time (2020)*. Her forthcoming monograph focuses on how authors perform authenticity across multiple communicative contexts. Her creative works have been published in several countries.

Alvin Pang is Adjunct Professor at RMIT University. A poet, writer, editor, scholar and translator, his creative practice spans over two decades of literary activity in Singapore and elsewhere. With his writing translated into more than twenty languages worldwide, his latest titles include *What Happened: Poems 1997-2017* (Math Paper Press, 2017) and *Uninterrupted Time* (Recent Work Press, 2019).

David Carlin is Professor of Creative Writing and co-founder of both WrICE and the non/fictionLab at RMIT University. His work includes four books of essayist nonfiction, including *The After-Normal: Brief, Alphabetical Essays on a Changing Planet* (2019, with Nicole Walker), 1*00 Atmospheres: Studies in Scale and Wonder* (2019, with MECO Network), and three co-edited anthologies. David is Co-President of NonfictioNOW.

Keywords: Writer's residency; collaboration; workshopping; cultural exchange; experimentation; digital

Introduction

How do you create the dynamics and atmospherics needed to invite a genuinely trans-cultural encounter and dialogue among creative writers – peers – from different nations, cultural backgrounds, interests and life experiences? How can the practice itself – the process of creative writing seen from *in-the-middle of it*, rather than from the resolved state of *having written* – form the basis of conversation through which intercultural exchange is nourished and developed? What ethical and political considerations ensue? And what effects might be produced through such events? Where might such effects become noticeable – within the writing practices of those involved; within the literary cultures they form a part of; within new connections and networks formed laterally across and between the literary cultures the writers influence? These questions animate a creative practice research program underway since 2014: Writers Immersion and Cultural Exchange (WrICE).

The WrICE model of intensive collaborative residencies for writers, as a method for intercultural encounter and exchange, was first devised by writers and RMIT University academics David Carlin (this paper's co-author) and Francesca Rendle-Short (2016a; 2016b). Between 2014 and 2018, WrICE staged collaborative residencies and associated events in Malaysia, Singapore, Vietnam, China, the Philippines, Indonesia and Australia.

According to Carlin and Rendle-Short, WrICE was conceived from the proposition that

> there is value in creating opportunities for writers (and writing students) to step outside their solitary writing studios and familiar cultural environs to connect and share ideas with other writers, from different cultures and across generations. The value lies in how the perspectives and networks of the writers are enlarged and transformed, how this permeates and animates their consequent work and projects, and how this in turn acts, however subtly, to stir and shift the national and transnational cultures of which they are a part. (Carlin & Rendle-Short, 2016a, p. 2)

As an approach to writerly exchange and learning, WrICE can be set against established paradigms for both writers' workshops and international residencies, epitomised by programs that emerged in the mid-20th century in the United States, such as the Iowa City-based Iowa Writers Workshop (IWW) and Iowa International Writing Program (IWP) residency. Such programs have been widely successful and influential in promulgating norms around the professional development of creative writing and translation practices (McGurl, 2009). For instance, Cruz describes how the powerful IWW-inspired Silliman Workshop in the Philippines has shaped Filipino literary culture for decades. Moreover, she argues that its IWW-informed pedagogy "perpetuates colonialist and classist ideas about language and literary production" (2017, p. 7). As Bennett (2015), László (2020) and others

have pointed out, such influential writing programs were not ideologically innocent, but were part of a deliberate Cold War strategy of *cultural diplomacy* devised by US agencies including the State Department and the CIA. Liu (2017; 2019) and László (2020) show how the IWP, perhaps the most widely known international writing residency, sought from its onset to frame literary production as naturally aligned to American values and the American way of life, as exemplified by the geographical setting and programming of the residency itself.

How is the WrICE model different? What protocols and practices does it claim to enact that might differentiate it from the neo-colonialist genealogy of the Iowa models for creative writing workshopping and cultural exchange?

Of course, the WrICE program did not grow out of an ideological vacuum. It was developed in the first instance by academics and administrators from an Australia-based university with a strategic intent to increase its impact in Asia, and South-East Asia in particular. The initial funder, Australia's Copyright Agency Cultural Fund, did not have an explicit brief for cultural diplomacy, unlike the State Department of Australia's own Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), which has declined to fund WrICE to date. As well as supporting and creating opportunities for Australian writers and visual artists, the Copyright Agency was at that time (c. 2013) interested in programs to promote the professionalism of writers and writing in the region and strengthen regional support for enforcing copyright regimes. This funding source prioritised support for Australian writers, over their Asian counterparts, for WrICE participation.

Hence, for the inaugural series of WrICE residencies, five invited Australian writers, including two high profile writers, were awarded generous fellowships, alongside five other writers from across the region, awarded honoraria. Here, the term *Australian writers* includes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander First Nations writers; *Asian writers* refers to writers hailing from and living in multiple countries and regions within the continent of Asia.

Notwithstanding these realpolitik constraints, WrICE was posited as developing not out of an a priori theoretical model or desired ideological outcome, but "through a process of embodied intuition and improvised decision-making" (Carlin & Rendle-Short, 2016a, p. 2):

> We drew upon our experience as writers, educators and arts directors, and collaborated with our WrICE project colleagues and with the writers themselves who had accepted the invitation to join the programme and who helped shape it through their presence and contributions. (Carlin & Rendle-Short, 2016a, p. 2)

To tease out the tacit underpinnings of the WrICE project, Carlin and Rendle-Short articulated "five compositional principles" (2016, p. 2) that together might define its ethics and affordances. These are: (i) *the invitation*; (ii) *the gift;* (iii) *the table*; (iv) *acrossness*;

and (v) *afterwards*. In devising these five principles, theorised with reference to a plural range of concepts drawn from Paul Carter (2004), Donna Haraway (1997), Lewis Hyde (1983), Deborah Bird Rose (2013) and others, they explained:

> The aim is to make explicit the specific and nuanced compositional moves that underpin the model. We are not attempting to lay out a definitive theoretical framework: the principles in themselves are provisional, offered as analytic tools and prompts for further enquiry. (Carlin & Rendle-Short, 2016a, p. 3)

In this article, we return to these five principles as a framework for discussing a new all-digital iteration of WrICE, conducted in 2020 under circumstances markedly different from past iterations. We describe the adaptations made in the collaborative residency model for its new mode of delivery, and illuminate some findings pertaining to the adaptability and continuing relevance of the WrICE model in a more constrained world.

This paper's three co-authors formed, with Malaysian writer and WrICE alum Bernice Chauly, the facilitation team for WrICE 2020. Taking on different roles (discussed below), each of us built on our prior engagement with WrICE as an evolving set of practices for ethical and authentic cultural exchange. Hence, we cannot claim the benefit of critical distance from our object of study. By contrast, we offer instead observations and insights gleaned from reflecting on the digital residency experience from our various *insider* positions.

Pivoting WrICE in 2020

Following the end of its first five-year funding cycle (2014–2018), WrICE commenced a new phase in 2020 through a partnership between RMIT University and Singapore-based literary development organisation, Sing Lit Station (which is funded by Singapore's National Arts Council). A new three-year cycle of WrICE residencies was planned, which would decentre Australia, complicating and dislodging the instrumentalist binary of its earlier funding-driven constraints demarcating Australian writers from Asian writers. The new funding mix, now reflecting both Singaporean and Australian interests, required that the slate of invited writers shift to include two from Singapore, two from Australia, and six from elsewhere across South, South-East and East Asia. As can be seen from these numbers, the decentring is only partial, and the new shared prominence of Singapore and Australia still reflects the uneven distribution of literary resources in the region. Nonetheless, given the prior history of the program, it is significant.

Then came the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic prompted writers' residencies across the world, such as MacDowell in the US, to pivot digitally (Prieto, 2020). Restrictions on travel and physical interaction meant that the first WrICE/Sing Lit Residency, scheduled to coincide with the Singapore Writers Festival in October/November 2020, would take place as a *digital residency* (using Zoom and other online conferencing tools), or not at all.

Invitation 2.0 or Invitation, Revisited

Carlin and Rendle-Short's original paper (2016a, p. 452) emphasised the WrICE invitation as temptation: a juicy and rare opportunity to engage in a particular way with creative practice and fellow practitioners. Invitation-as-temptation also implies a degree of risk, ambiguity, and uncertainty: the offered possibilities are seductive, but it is unclear what will transpire or how it will all turn out. In this sense, WrICE embraces the idea of a shared, open-ended play-space that affirms "uncertainty as possibility" (Pink et al, 2018, p.3). WrICE 2020 offered different kinds of new enticements and forms of play at different scales: it became an invitation extended not only to the writers but also to the new facilitation team.

The invitation to WrICE represents an offer of a temporary *escape* from everyday life, much like a work retreat: "We wanted to see what would happen if we invited a group of writers to go away together to write in the company of others:" (Carlin & Rendle-Short 2016a, p. 3). Ten writers are invited, who along with two facilitator-participants make a group of twelve. This group size is large enough to support a multiplicity of differences, while being small enough to be managed in a single facilitated conversation. The facilitation team agrees on a list of writers to be invited, drawing on suggestions from the wider network of WrICE alumni. This curatorial process seeks to reflect a balance of nationalities from across the region (and to prioritise First Nations writers where possible) – and likewise a balance of gender, age, professional experience, background and so on. A benefit of writers being selected in this way is that the invitation arrives as a surprise gesture: a "gift" (Carlin & Rendle-Short, 2016a, p. 5; also see below).

Before 2020, WrICE residencies were all designed to be residential, in a different city each year. They were held in carefully chosen accommodations with space for individual writing, formal and informal conversation, as well as scope – as far as feasible and ethical – for local cultural immersion. Every writer, even those for whom the chosen venue was in their home country, came to live for the residency duration in an away-from-home situation. But following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and its attendant restrictions on travel and physical gatherings, this physical residency model was no longer viable. WrICE 2020 could only realistically be held as a virtual residency.

The prospect of a fully digital writers' residency was both an experimental opportunity and a risk. Could it even be done? Might that sense of a *going away together*, the original grounds for the WrICE invitation, be lost? What new means and approaches would need to be found to make it work? Could we make up for the loss of key trappings of a physical residency: proximity, shared spaces and meals, spontaneous conversations and outings, time spent together outside the formal program?

Then again, might the digital experience bring its own unexpected opportunities and benefits? For instance, while conventional writing residencies may reify or fetishise physical places as creative wellsprings – be it an exotic tourist town, a famous author's house, or a pastoral landscape presented as the epitome of an idealised way of life (László, 2020) – a digital residency could mitigate or subvert such assumptions, reinstating the community of practice in a different format, the writerly group and its exchanges, as the space in common.

Making a virtue of pandemic necessity, digital WrICE invited us to rethink and experiment with key elements of a creative writing residency: including format, workshop approaches, infrastructure, scheduling and even social mingling (see Table 2.0 below). The lead organising institution, Sing Lit Station (SLS), was well placed for this challenge, having been a pioneer of digitally mediated literary events and activities in Singapore. Several of these activities, such as the thousands-strong Facebook-based SingPoWriMo movement, also involved WrICE alumni such as Joshua Ip (SLS Founding Director and 2017 WrICE fellow) and this paper's co-author Alvin Pang (2014 WrICE fellow and 2020 facilitator). While prompted by the pandemic, the "invitation" to run WrICE digitally thus dovetailed with the organisers' broader interest, experience and confidence in exploring digital platforms for literary engagement.

WrICE 2020 was also an invitation to several past participants to continue their involvement in a different capacity, bringing their experience with the residency, as well as their own practice and interests, to bear. It saw WrICE alumni Bernice Chauly and this paper's co-author Sreedhevi Iyer (a newcomer to WrICE) acting as facilitator/participants in the same way Francesca and David had done previously. Alvin rounded off the facilitation team as the Singapore-based *host–facilitator*, a new, versatile role to help smooth over hiccups in the novel online video-conferencing setting. David took on a support and advisory role, helping with the planning of the transition into an online format, including the initial welcome and orientation of the invited group. There was a sense of a passing of the torch, from an Australian-centric residency to one run by former participants based in Asia, working alongside their Australian counterparts.

Throughout the preparation for, lead up to and execution of the WrICE Digital Residency 2020, the co-authors each kept a personal record of observations, insights, and field notes. Here and later in this paper, the co-authors provide reflections on their personal experiences as WrICE 2020 facilitators, through an informal method of conversational auto-ethnographic practice designed to tease out our variously situated perspectives as researcher/participants:

Alvin: Since attending the very first WrICE in 2014, I had been excited by the program as a platform to connect writers across the disparate communities in Asia and South-East Asia. The invitation to co-facilitate WrICE 2020 was a chance to advance this aspiration by trying out an actual digital residency – something innovative and cost-effective, that

could work across geographical barriers and be useful even after the pandemic – at a time when everyone had accepted digital engagement as a pandemic norm.

Sree: The invitation to be facilitator and participant at this digital WrICE felt both old and new. I had heard about WrICE previously, but this was newness with permutations: I'd just joined RMIT as a lecturer. We had just gone into lockdown. We had just begun to consider digital forms. I was excited, honoured, nervous, concerned, curious – everything.

David: WrICE always aimed to become a model robust enough to be adopted and led by others in differing local and global contexts. For me, WrICE 2020 was about trying to strike a balance between being too controlling or fixed about 'how things should be done', while continuing to advocate for what I considered to be some of the more radical, non-normative elements of the program design that could perhaps become lost 'in translation'.

Gift 2.0

The concept of the gift (Hyde, 1983), as originally articulated in relation to WrICE, follows the notion of invitation. "The two key components of the collaborative residency – the 'morning writing' and 'shared table' – are each structured around the logic of the gift exchange" (Carlin & Rendle-Short, 2016a, p. 5). The physical residencies included time each day for individual writing unencumbered by the expectation of a particular outcome. The *shared table* workshops are likewise conceived as a gift exchange: in the sense of writers taking turns to share something valuable of their current work and receiving in return the attention and 'care-full' (Williams 2020, p.2) responsiveness of their peers.

The digital environment for WrICE 2020 meant that it was up to the individual writers to hold space for their writing, as best they could, over the course of the residency. The organisers sought to address this even before the residency began. At Sing Lit Station's suggestion, funds initially set aside in the budget to cover the writers' travel costs were redeployed to pay them more substantial – and equal – honoraria. This underscored the value of their participation and presence, and provided tangible support to lighten the writers' everyday commitments for the two weeks of the program, so that they could be more present – not just in attendance – throughout the residency. WrICE 2020 was positioned as not just another Zoom event each afternoon, but a committed time and space across two weeks for the resident fellows to be with each other, respecting each other's energies and voices. The capacity for such commitment has been identified as contributing to success in other writerly group contexts (Fajt et al., 2013).

Ahead of the residency, the organisers made sure every writer across the eight different countries had broadband internet access, even paying for it in some cases. They purchased and posted to every participant a set of physical books authored by their fellows (one per writer), establishing a material connection between them. Even though they could not travel to meet one another in person, their books could do so in their place: as gifts.

A challenge for digital WrICE 2020 was whether the writers would be able to form the "sense of common purpose" that had characterised past programs:

> Through the foundation of the initial offer to the writers, through correspondence and (wherever possible) social gatherings in advance, and through ritual events such as the opening dinner of the residency, there is ground against which the figure of writerly solitude stands: a sense of common purpose. To begin with, this purpose is tentative, ambiguous and speculative. Gradually, it takes form through the participation of the developing ensemble of writers, presented, in itself, as gift. (Carlin & Rendle-Short, 2016a, p. 5)

Without being in the same physical room, sharing meals and in-person opportunities to bond, would WrICE participants still develop this consensus: to be present and open to one another's creative assays, context, interests and energies; to listen and respond with curiosity, generosity and insight, in ways that might nudge each other's thinking?

The affordance of time spent connecting with creative peers, with competing responsibilities and constraints reduced, is itself a significant gift to many writers – just as their committed presence is in turn a gift to their fellows. However, physical residencies can reproduce and reinforce inequalities of access and inclusion by virtue not just of who gets invited or who can apply, but also who can afford to accept the invitation (Tucker, 2020). Girardi (2015) has pointed to the constraints posed by formal, location-based developmental activities – including cost, resources, accessibility, and competing work or family obligations that preclude travel – for writers seeking professional development and connections. Such constraints, Girardi observes, have driven the significant growth of online workshops and other distance learning platforms for creative writers in the US, now that technological advancements have made them viable to operate. Distance-based (and online) events address a significant and long under-served need among creative writers for interaction, connection, and mutual support and learning, given that the writing vocation can often give rise to feelings of isolation (Fajt et al, 2013). Writers need to connect with other writers from time to time to renew and grow their creative practice, although circumstances may not allow them to partake of available in-person opportunities.

The digital-only WrICE 2020 residency therefore represented the gift of a chance to enjoy peer interactions, despite COVID-19 restrictions and other impediments, without leaving home. It enabled access for some writers who would not otherwise have been able to attend a ten-day physical residency due to personal circumstances – including childcare and other obligations. This was particularly the case for writers with primary caregiving responsibilities.

By transforming the grounds for acceptance and involvement, the digitally convened WrICE 2020 enlarged the pool of participants able and willing to be involved in a

nourishing residency, to the benefit of all at the table. Pandemic or otherwise, this suggests that collaborative residencies (whether physical, virtual or hybrid) can do more to include voices that have been previously left out due to unacknowledged but surmountable barriers to participation.

Sree: A gift of the COVID-inflected and digitally mediated WrICE 2020 experience was the role-modelling of communal norms of intercultural engagement and literary practice. I witnessed how it established a respectful, welcoming environment. It allowed for family and other life needs to take place. A participant could get up mid-session and tend to a child or place them on their lap while speaking. As much as we had to be digitally present on the platform, we could also, paradoxically, move away from the gathering more abruptly, without seeming impolite. This method, overall, was adjacent to what I was told is the regular WrICE practice, which usually included private time off for one's own writing. Perhaps there might have been a way to designate quiet writing time online – it seems digital platforms facilitate connection, but not necessarily quietness. That still had to come from us ourselves.

Alvin: With household members working or studying from home during the pandemic, we did have to negotiate for quiet space, which a hotel room abroad would have afforded us. Some of us did appreciate the more personalised home environment (with our preferred lighting or ergonomic seating), instead of having to make do with standard furniture in a shared venue. Being at home meant we did not have to maintain the veneer of our solo, professional writerly selves, but could be more fully present from within our deeply personal spaces and places. We could instead offer, across borders, a glimpse of our individual milieu, our creative terroir. The collective gasp when Aditi Rao showed us her window view of the Himalayas illustrates how the digital environment afforded new ways to share; new intimacies; new gifts. This is how we travel now.

Many of the group discussions during the residency were lubricated by shared cultural contexts and concerns – for example, folk traditions, religion, magic, multilingualism, colonialism and its implications on language and social norms, sense of time – mitigating the exoticisation often experienced under a primarily white stewardship. For writers in Asia to be able to interact with one another directly on this scale, in this systematic and immersive way, is still a rare opportunity not to be taken for granted. As previously discussed, influential writerly residencies and programs have been and still are coloured by the geopolitical agendas of their host countries (Liu, 2019; László, 2020). The common ground (of identifying with a shared non-US/European context) afforded by a more Asian-centred WrICE offers a different basis for developing networks of understanding, support and trust (Fajt et al, 2013), on the writers' own terms.

Sree: I think even being able to relax into our own accents is a telling difference. I was definitely becoming less self-conscious about how I speak and act, and there was less emotional labour in choosing my words and conveying ideas and just sharing things in

general. I specifically found humour an ongoing balm – -somehow, we had the same sense of the funny. Some participants spoke in puns, which I found delightful. Our instances of communication did seem to become performative over time, as if the digital platform determined how we communicated. Mute. Unmute. Video on. Video off. Chat room. Breakout room. Take turns. Seeing self on camera, interacting. I couldn't see a pupil dilate. I couldn't smell a perfume. I couldn't quietly check what book someone was reading – I had to gather the courage to ask them. Everything was more pre-meditated.

Alvin: I was struck by the generosity of spirit on display. Whenever some of the writers had difficulty conveying a concept in English (not their native tongue), others who knew their preferred language stepped in spontaneously to help interpret and translate. This ready, mutual support for intercultural communication – and the comfort with difference it implies – is seldom centred to this degree in many other (predominantly anglophone) settings. It bodes well for this model as a way to promote outreach, engagement and collaboration with writers from very different communities and contexts, although language differences will remain a concern. We may not always be so fortunate.

Table 2.0

The *shared table* conversations form the core of the WrICE residency model: each writer is allotted one unstructured hour to orally share some of their work and frame it for whatever discussion they would like to invite around it. The facilitators do not lead or direct the discussion. Their role is to model an openness to uncertainty and active listening. In a physical WrICE residency, the table, embodies this coming together to share conversation, alongside drinks and food (Carlin & Rendle-Short, 2016a). A single, common table, around which the twelve writers sit without set places, establishes the non-hierarchical scenography of the occasion. In the digital sphere, the *table* takes on a different meaning, becoming metaphorical. It is not going to be the same. But could it be good enough, or even better in other ways?

For WrICE 2020, the organising team sought to embrace and *work with*, rather than around, the digital nature of the residency and its interactions. While online activities have a palpable social dimension, it has been observed (Castells, 2000; Jones, 2009; Jewitt, 2013) that people construct their identities, and relate to one another, differently online than in physical situations. Herring and Androutsopoulos (2018) point to a playfulness with which participants within virtual shared spaces express and interact, in performing membership of a particular community within a virtual space. Would a digital WrICE "table" also enable interactions that, while different from those that happen when writers are physically together, are nevertheless meaningful to the participants? Could this digital gathering even encourage playful participation?

Now-common video conferencing apps such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams were not as well known or used before pandemic-imposed restrictions made them widely necessary.

Serendipitously, by the time the first digital WrICE residency took place in October/November of 2020, people across the world had become literate with such digital platforms: with the new screen-mediated zone of proximity represented by the gallery of small video headshots on screen, interchanged with the more singularly focused speaker view.

This familiarity meant that the WrICE facilitating team could begin to anticipate the likely challenges and limitations of gathering virtually, and adapt the residency format and schedule to suit. The virtual *shared table* (such as scheduled Zoom video conferences) took place at the same time each day during the residency, in a timeslot that was reasonable across the participants' different time zones: late morning for South Asia, mid-afternoon for South-East Asia, and late afternoon/evening for Australia).

As with earlier WrICE residencies, this digital iteration hoped to offer a sense of a *break* from everyday work practices, rather than become an extension or heightening of them. Abdelrahman (2021, p.1) has argued the now familiar "Zoom fatigue" emerges in the context of the ongoing capitalist push for the "indefatigable worker". To mitigate digital fatigue, WrICE 2020 organisers spread the residency's program of activities over two weeks (instead of five days as with past physical residencies), with more downtime in between. This is a strategy other residency programs have also tried (Bourne, 2021).

On Zoom, participants interact as if seated at a figurative round table together, seeing and being seen at an equal distance from one another, at about the same size. With care, it is still possible to focus on a single conversation, in which people take turns to speak. However, the spontaneous one-on-one conversations that often take place at physical meetings before, during and after structured sessions are no longer possible (except in *chat* boxes – see below). To facilitate such incidental conversations in a virtual environment, WrICE 2020 was scheduled with a series of separate one-on-one breakout rooms each day, bringing together different pairs of writers. Breakout rooms were set up for the beginning of each day's residency session, and also open afterwards for participants to use if they wished to *hang out* and continue socialising, turning Zoom from conference table into post-conference lounge.

Sree: When we are taken into breakout rooms to chat with individual writers, it is as if we are placed magically around a smaller table – the kind that seats two at a café, for example – and it is just us, an unexpected intimacy with a writer stranger. A funny, forced camaraderie, which prompts perhaps funny conversations as well. And this in its own way is also a form of bonding.

Alvin: We were conscious that digital platforms risked losing the intimacy and spontaneity of in-person meet-ups, but still felt it was possible to allow for it: after all, a regular phone call, digitally transmitted or otherwise, can be deeply intimate. One effective strategy was to reduce the group sizes: to pairs, or to small, voluntary gatherings. In a sense, we turned

the WrICE 'table' from a noun to a verb: it was no longer about the physical gathering, but the tabling of ideas and discussions; the proposition to be together and talk shop or chat life as writers – and then working with the digital tools to facilitate these meaningful conversations in various ways.

A further affordance of the *Zoom-table* is its built-in chat function, used throughout the residency by organisers, facilitators and participants alike to support, supplement and complement the main spoken conversation. The chat window, as a text-based medium, served as a space for parallel streams of thought: asides, annotations, side discussions, supplementary reflections, responses (including encouragement and praise), and as a place for questions or comments that in a physical gathering might have been missed in passing or could have interrupted someone else speaking. Mentions of books and authors prompted the posting of links to relevant online resources. Tricky translations and further references to background information could be shared. The rich use of chat thus turned WrICE 2020's digital table into a multimodal ensemble (Jewitt, 2013), in this way offering advantages over a purely physical conference.

Acrossness 2.0

The fourth compositional principle of WrICE is *acrossness*:

> a prepositional space, where the relations-between is the key ... We gather to disclose the in between. It strings us, and our writing together in composition and pattern. It is in the round, where the made is still being made, when anything and everything is possible. (Carlin & Rendle-Short, 2016a, p. 8)

This is, theoretically, the *you-you* second-person space enabled and epitomised by the around-the-table experience. But how do you replicate this in a digital environment? How do you reach across, without the non-verbal engagement present in physical encounters, such as hugs and walks, or going to the pub or for a coffee or of serendipitously getting lost? Without the generative possibility of wayfaring, of becoming foreign (to) yourself?

In the tunnel of the pandemic, everyone became subject to forms of lockdown and quarantine: grounding words suggesting confinement, separation, staying put. In 2020, with the stimulus of being displaced from one's comfort zone to a foreign city no longer an option, digital spaces became portal and bridge, facilitating different kinds of relations as a counterpoint to pandemic-induced alienation. The movements and engagements implied in *acrossness* became inward ones; implosive.

A digital residency amplifies "context collapse" (Boyd & Marwich, 2010, p. 10), in which we are no longer able to vary our self-presentation. In WrICE 2020, with everyone the same-sized square on a screen looking at other squares, speaking and being spoken to only from the waist up, new social graces and norms emerged. Our pauses became more

measured and deliberate: we were self-conscious about taking turns and unmuting ourselves to speak.

In addition, some shared contexts within which we usually interact were no longer in play. In a physical residency, we would experience the same weather or time of day. Together in another country, informal chat would tend towards the novel but shared experience of the place and culture around us: languages, foods, new sights. In 2020, interacting as video-squares on a screen, we could no longer depend on these shared physical experiences for common ground.

But if this was *acrossness* within context collapse, nevertheless context was intact *around* us. While the "normal" social context of a physical residency was missing, a different kind of individual, private context emerged like a bubble or halo around each of us. Sree's reality of Melbourne's Stage 4 lockdown in a one-bedroom apartment – an intimate, housebound, private existence – met Bernice's private existence in Kuala Lumpur, or Ameena's in Sri Lanka, or Aditi's near the Himalayas. Online, we communicated across these new private contexts, whereas a non-digital residency would by design pull people out of their different contexts into a shared one. In the process, we might have revealed more than we meant to, as private lives intruded into our selective self-presentations: family members interrupting; the local power station exploding; the doorbell ringing. We experienced each other in ways that were alternatives to physical wayfaring.

In a Zoom meeting our mutual presences were front and centre, every time the screen was on. There was no side angle, no walking behind or beside; body language, intentional and otherwise, was confined to facial expressions. It was *in-your-face* newscaster format, as if we were all perpetually broadcasting; ten or twelve newscasters on screen at once, and you were one of them. The space then was not second person, but *squares of plural*.

The result of these squares of plural was an intensity we as facilitators had not expected or planned for. Turning off one's webcam felt like disengagement. Not speaking felt like rude radio silence, the way a pregnant pause in a phone call raises suspense or anxiety. So, we all kept communicating, kept a front stage persona, kept the conversation going. We were left with having to present a singular self, *across* the digital space. This interactional shift in itself created a new context between the participants: we were communicating synchronously across time and space, from private space to private space, and private self to private self. From our pre-session *randomly* assigned breakout meetings, to our *part*" on video chat platform Online Town (see Matsakis, 2020), there was a sense of hyper-knowledge.

Sree: I remember a video conversation with Balli Kaur Jaswal in Singapore; we realised she had lived in my area in Melbourne before. It was a surprise. She knew the restaurants and grocery stores I frequented. We then spoke as if we were old friends – she was someone who knew my neighbourhood. Balli was so far, yet so near. She could've been my neighbour

in real life, and she was also the person I was getting to know from across an ocean, on a screen. The connection had doubled, even though we hadn't hugged, not even shaken hands. A hyperreal connection occurs when in the digital environment, across space and time. It is an untraditional process of bonding, even as the outcome might be the same – of becoming members of the same tribe.

Alvin: There is safety in the digital; a certain equality of presence. Some conversations that might be awkward to have in person become easier online. The distance is reassuring: we are distanced from those who could use the intimacies we share to hurt us (Fajt et al, 2013). Under these conditions for digital WriCE, what came across was a tide of knowledge, about one another, that felt different – in some senses more intimate and in others more performative or formal – than what might have been the case with a physical residency away from home. We reached across pandemic-induced chasms to one another, and gave and took of each other's deep selves, despite inconvenient circumstances and imperfect technology. We kept each other going at a time of global drought. We found inspiration in each other's writing, struggles, insights and the personal contexts these arose from. Starved of contact, we steeped ourselves in the 'the interest created when things are exchanged' (Carter, 2018, p. 1).

Afterwards, 2.0

What results from a residency such as WrICE? How might these outcomes be affected by the pivot to an all-digital program? WrICE, in theory, is characterised by its open-endedness:

> Whatever opens up through the WrICE process, for its participants, is the start of a series of relationships. The intensity of the initial immersed experience of the residency, which emerges from the vulnerability inherent in the risky sharing of work in progress, provides a foundation of trust that underpins future interactions. This confidence and assurance contrasts with more codified social relationships. (Carlin & Rendle-Short, 2016a, p. 458)

For at least some of the WrICE 2020 participants (see full list in Acknowledgments), the experience seemed transformative. One writer (Hafiz Hamzah from Malaysia) had never been to a writers' residency before and was apprehensive about whether any such group-based literary activities would be worthwhile for a reserved practitioner, let alone in a digital format. During the residency, he found that his work, ideas and concerns resonated with his fellow writers. It was Hafiz whose presentation led to the coining of the "Forest Room", the 2020 residency's most popular Zoom breakout social lounge room. Hafiz was also the first to step forward and help translate between English and Malay for other writers, becoming a much more active participant as the residency went on. By the end of WrICE he seemed invigorated and passionate about doing more to connect with his fellow writers in the region. He submitted some of the work he had discussed during WrICE 2020 to

PR&TA (www.pratajournal.com), a new regionally-centred peer reviewed journal of creative practice research, where it was published in their first issue [1].

The WrICE 2020 residency program included invitations for some writers to take part in the Singapore Writers Festival's (all-digital) program. The writers involved took time to plan their festival sessions together during the free breakout periods, as their predecessors had done in past physical WrICE iterations. Observing the ease and camaraderie of their festival panel sessions, it was clear that these writers had managed to form real bonds despite never having met in person.

There has been interest in an in-person *afterwards* – some forms of material collaboration or gathering to deepen the new relationships forged. The WrICE 2020 cohort explored the idea of an anthology based on the theme of forests or trees (a recurrent motif that had emerged organically across different presentations and conversations). Writer Ameena Hussein invited the cohort to a reunion at her home in Sri Lanka, once travel became possible: a gesture demonstrating great generosity and intimacy – we were strangers no longer. Kyoko Yoshida (Japan) followed on from WrICE 2020 to develop a Kyoto-based writers' residency with a literary collective, set to be the first international literary residency in Japan. As part of this initiative, she invited WrICE participants to submit creative work on the theme "Infection/Distance", which would be translated and published by the Kyoto Writers Residency collective.

The afterwards of WrICE 2020 extended to the 2021 iteration of the residency program, which was once again entirely digital, due to ongoing pandemic-related constraints. Having noticed, as discussed above, that digital residencies can include writers unable to travel easily for physical residencies, we were more conscious about the ethics of who we invited for WrICE 2021. For instance, we made it a point in 2021 to identify and prioritise inviting writers who could benefit from and contribute to the residency experience but were unable to attend one in person. An example of this was Pandora, a Burmese writer who was unable to leave home due to parenting responsibilities, pandemic restrictions, and – vitally – Myanmar's military coup and political crisis in 2021. The digital residency afforded a way for her to share her voice abroad, and to relieve her enforced isolation, at a time when informed and grounded perspectives such as hers were hard to hear from outside the country.

We had also learnt from programming choices (such as the use of breakout rooms) how to make the digital program more conducive to building connections among participants, and planned to explore other features that could enable different conversations to take place, letting the group surface its collective interests and concerns.

David: The WrICE 2020 residency was always going to be a departure from the initial series of WrICE residencies, in that for the first time it was a partnership between Australian-based and Asian-based producers, curators and facilitators. The contingencies

of the pandemic threw us into the digital communication environment, and in hindsight this helped accelerate a shift in thinking, at the same time as it prompted more reflection on what makes WrICE distinctive as a model and an ethos. WrICE has always been conceived – with unabashed idealism – as a collaborative, experimental space, a counter-space operating against pedagogical and institutional norms and power relations. It was exciting to see how we (the facilitators and Sing Lit Station administrators) could conjure this space with the WrICE 2020 writers, in an intimate in-between across vast distances and time zones.

Conclusion

As a pivotal, pandemic-informed residency, WrICE 2020 was a chance to assess and iterate upon the value proposition, design and methods underlying the WrICE project, and the writers' residency as a format for literary reflection and community building, in a COVID-constrained world. The five compositional principles offered by the WrICE co-founders have served as a helpful frame for this review, leading us to note highlights and shifts in key elements of the residency: in terms of opportunity (*Invitation 2.0*), spirit (*Gift 2.0*), platforms and methods (*Table 2.0*), quality of engagement (*Acrossness 2.0)*, and outcomes (*Afterwards 2.0).*

The transition to an all-digital format can be disorienting, and requires thoughtful, adaptive program design that goes beyond a simple mirroring of physical activities in a digital space. However, the experience of WrICE 2020 suggests that, taken in the right spirit, this could also broaden access and enable different kinds of generative stimulus and engagement, while allowing genuine human relations to form between participants: the residency might have been virtual, but the conversations and connections are real. This poses new questions for WrICE and other writers' residency and transcultural exchange programs, as well as possibilities for further learning, developmental and collaborative activities for writers. When travel restrictions are lifted in the post-COVID but increasingly carbon-constrained era of the 2020s, what combinations of digital and in-person activities will become best practice?

A growing comfort with digital platforms and how best to use them in creative contexts should also mean new, practical ways of building up relations among writers across different communities of practice in Asia and South-East Asia – who have long been kept apart by geography, language, politics, markets, resources and other significant factors as inhibitive as a pandemic. WrICE, as a residency program and approach, can contribute to nourishing individual creativity and new modes of intercultural and inter-writer relations in a supportive group setting: WrICE 2020 tables new and necessary nuances and approaches towards this aspiration, as the conversation and learning continue in a COVID-inflected world.

Notes

[1] Co-author Alvin Pang is a co-editor of PR&TA.

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