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"Very* communitas": Testing a hypothesis in creative writing, methodologically*

Abstract:

This paper examines the concept of *communitas* in practice (as a loanword from cultural anthropology and social sciences), what it is and what it can offer creative writing, to test whether it might apply to different creative practice settings. Specifically for this essay, the setting is WrICE (Writers Immersion and Cultural Exchange program) and the research project examining WrICE as the object of its enquiry (Australian Research Council Discovery Project entitled "Connecting Asia-Pacific Literary Cultures: Grounds, Encounter and Exchange"). If we think of *communitas* in the way anthropologist and poet Edith "Edie" Turner likes to describe it as (un)structured ritual, a condition for creativity, a space where the intensity of feeling or joy can arise (2012), how might a *communitas* unfolding look and feel as we practice creative writing? How might we think about *communitas* and what would it mean to *do communitas* as creative writing method, as drawing-as-method? Also, how might *communitas* be performed on the page in an academic context such as this: can we *as researchers* enact or embody *communitas*?

Biographical notes:

Francesca Rendle-Short's writing and research focuses on getting in/under the skin, prepositionally speaking. She is Professor of Creative Writing at RMIT University, Melbourne, co-founder of non/fictionLab and WrICE (Writers Immersion and Cultural Exchange). Her five books include *The Near and the Far* (*Vol I* and *II*) and *Bite Your Tongue*.

Michelle Aung Thin is a senior lecturer in the School of Media & Communication at RMIT University. Her research interests range across cross-cultural creativity, contemporary creative practice in Burma and Southeast Asia as well as freedom of expression. A multi-award-winning novelist, Michelle's creative outputs address hidden histories, mixed-race identity and the cosmopolitanism in the colonial.

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David Carlin is a writer and creative artist interested in collective practice, playful methods, and how stories are desired and resisted, made and unmade through language, bodies, materials and encounters. David is co-President of the NonfictioNOW Conference and Professor at RMIT University, where he co-founded the non/fictionLab and WrICE.

Melody Ellis's writing and research is interested in the politics of value, collectivity, movement and art, and writing as a tool for critical, ethical and creative inquiry. She is a lecturer in creative writing at RMIT University where she is also a member of the non/fictionLab.

Lily Rose Tope is Professor at the Department of English and Comparative Literature, University of the Philippines, Diliman. She is author of *(Un)Framing Southeast Asia* and various articles on Southeast Asian literature in English, Asian literature in translation, Philippine Chinese literature and Philippine literature in English.

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Preamble: Background

The setting for this paper is an experimental site of cultural exchange and collaboration for writers and writing (Carlin & Rendle-Short, 2016b, 2019; Iyer et al., 2022; Ellis et al., 2023). Founded in 2014 by Francesca Rendle-Short and David Carlin (who are among the authors of this paper), the Writers Immersion and Cultural Exchange program (WrICE), is an artist-led international residency program that situates creative writing as a way of thinking, being and learning collectively (Ellis et al., 2023). At the heart of the program is a simple idea: to give writers of different backgrounds and levels of experience the chance to step outside their familiar writing practices and contexts, and connect deeply with writers from different cultures and across generations (Connecting Asia-Pacific Literary Cultures, https://connectingliterarycultures.squarespace.com/). Since 2014, WrICE has helped develop a diverse multinodal network of writers, translators and scholars made up of more than eighty writing practitioners from the Asia-Pacific region: South Korea, Japan, China, Hong Kong, the Philippines, Indonesia, Myanmar, India, Sri Lanka, Singapore, Vietnam, Papua New Guinea, West Timor and Australia.

The authors of this paper form a research collective which, with funding from the Australian Research Council, is investigating the WrICE residency program, reflecting on its assumptions and results, testing its principles in new iterations, and theorising on grounds for ethical encounter and exchange among creative writers. Our positions in relation to our "object of study" vary in productive ways: Rendle-Short and Carlin are co-founders of WrICE and have participated in multiple residencies as writers and facilitators, while Aung Thin, Ellis and Tope have come in as "outsiders" to the program. The research seeks, among other things, to probe and test creative writing methods and the sharing and embodied interaction that takes place at a person-to-person level. The WrICE model asserts that for creative writers our culture is expressed directly or indirectly through the creative work that we make and how we make it. As authors of this paper (and as a community of creative researchers), we extend that thinking to include the culture and the creative work and processes of researchers, where, directly or indirectly, the culture of creative research is expressed through the creative-critical work we make and how we make it.

***Communitas* and creative practice**

In *Communitas: The Anthropology of Collective Joy*, Edith "Edie" Turner challenges us to think of *communitas* as a space of agency, a liminal space "betwixt and between" (2012, p. 4), where *communitas* "does not merge identities" (p. 3), where there are "innumerable threads of crisscrossing lines of meaning, *flows* of meaning" (p. 3, emphasis in original), and where "the gifts of each and every person are alive the fullest" (p. 3). Turner's practice of *communitas* is bold, generative and full of surprises.

This paper, which takes up Turner's thinking, follows on from previous work on *communitas* in and around creative writing. Peta Murray, for example, is a great influence with her art-based activism and the generation of new secular rituals for navigating crises in times of change

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(see Murray, 2014, 2017, 2021). Murray advocates for the method of "w/rites", a neologism denoting a practice of writing infused with "different essences of play (or not), and towards different degrees of completeness" (2017, p. 17), which is something this *communitas* text is w/riting towards. In "Finding *communitas*: Encounter, unfolding, and creative writing", Rendle-Short sets out her thinking in relation to the experience of *communitas* in creative writing by examining the genesis and makings of an interdisciplinary creative practice research group within a university setting, a durational creative exploration of writing and walking (not-walking), and a performative "un-panel" exploring non-fiction as queer encounter (2021). She suggests that "*communitas* thinking" offers creative practitioners a mode of practice that is "non-hierarchical, inclusive" (2021, p. 13). She argues it is possible, by embracing this mode, "to create spaces and progressive structures and 'stories' of exchange and engagement that are non-acquisitional, ethical, mutually generative, and productive" (p. 13). In "Kin-as-Ethics", Murray and Rendle-Short (2021) play together with what they call collaborative "*communitasing*", a dialogic daisy-chain creative method with/in queer writing, to meditate on how to think of kinship, on and off the page.

More recently, a group of creative practitioners interested in collective making and writing perform a "choral text" to enact "the joyous embodied knowledge of the *communitastic*" (Taylor et al., 2023). Then, in an essay-in-response to this choral text, Jack Madin and Ed Service, of the electronic music duo SHOUSE, discuss how to develop *communitas* by "musicking" (2023). This duo proposes that in the work of SHOUSE, the "anti-structure" of *communitas* is generated through rituals – festivals, group singing, raving and dancing. They write:

> [At a rave or party, we] find ourselves in a liminal space – one that exists outside the structures, conventions, even laws of everyday society, yet not quite somewhere explicitly new – somewhere ambiguous, undefined, ripe for interpretation. A sort of existential holding space where we [musicians and audience] regard each other wholly. (Madin & Service, 2023)

This most recent pairing of creative texts ("Collaborative effervescence through communitas" and "Musicking communitas") explores what kind of radical joy/effervescence can be generated in the liminal space of communitas.

Practising *communitas*

The WrICE residency – typically of seven to ten days duration – is a liminal space, a temporary coming-together of strangers in a more-or-less foreign place. Victor Turner, as parsed by Edith Turner, contended that "liminality releases communitas" (Turner, 2012, p. 34). Both Turners were heavily influenced by the writing of Mikhail Bakhtin. Bakhtin wrote about carnival as a ritual time in which there is a "temporary suspension, both ideal and real, of hierarchical rank" (as cited in Turner, 2012, p. 33). Edith Turner finds evidence in Bakhtin's writing of the way communitas suffuses festive times such as carnival. The WrICE model of cultural exchange

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involves such a temporary suspension of hierarchies. It is structured around a daily series of gatherings around a shared table in which all participants (including facilitators) take it in turn to be the centre of focus, sharing something of their creative work to engender unstructured, open-ended discussion on whatever intersecting ideas, affects and questions arise in the moment from the sharing. This is a non-hierarchical process that mobilises listening, gentleness (see Dufourmantelle, 2018) and the vulnerability of uncertainty as possibility (see Pink et al., 2018). It is by way of this unusual, shared experience – which might be characterised as "gently carnivalesque" – that we have observed communitas emerge.

In practising this structured, unstructured coming together in a threshold space, WrICE tests the parameters of Quinn Eades idea of "collaboration-as-love" (Eades, 2023, p.41). Eades's proposition is that writing and the practice of writing with others is an act of love. Because if we say yes to doing it or if we make the invitation ourselves, "we are saying yes to the im/possibility of love" (2023, p. 40). This is a love that shows up our vulnerabilities and insecurities; we lay ourselves bare, we ignite desire. It is in this thickness of collaboration – "pleasures and terrors" Eades calls it (p. 41) – that writer and work open. Thinking formally and politically, this queer space "inside the between" (p. 47, emphasis in original) seeks out alternate opportunities for making and being, stylistic openings within which to explore, spaces of possibilities (Nakata, 2007) – some of which can prove to be unconventional, like this paper.

*Paper-as-*communitas

This paper attempts to articulate the possibilities of doing community by practising communitas, not simply through explication of content but also by formal stylistic intervention. It endeavours to perform communitas on the page. Testing the conceit of the paper methodologically, it takes up Turner's concept of communitas as an (un)structured ritual, a condition for creativity, a space where the intensity of feeling or joy can arise or, to quote Turner, "fountain up" (2012, p. 1). In this way, it enacts communitas as creative writing method. It experiments with "acrossness" (Carlin & Rendle-Short, 2016a), creates an I-I-you-you space, lets go of preconceived ideas, engages in prepositional thinking, repeats, slows down, expands, invites (Rendle-Short, 2023a, p. 48). This paper is writing in and as process, writing that itself functions as a material site of encounter: writing-as-communitas.

To do this, we take you to two "scenes", one following on from the other. The first introduces the reader to what it can mean for writers to share work, a reliving of a WrICE writers' residency and its methodology as communitas. The second scene enacts a staged encounter. It is provocative, disrupts any comfort and raises the stakes. For this scene, the writer-researchers are challenged to take up drawing as non-drawers to test out a different kind of communitas togetherness. It is a collaborative exercise that confounds normal practice and puts the writer-researchers in a different relationship to each other. In Eades's words, it challenges the "im/possibility of love" (2023, p. 40).

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This approach reflects a commitment to a feminist and anti-colonial queering of research methods, a refusal of normative research styles (Tuck & Yang, 2014) that stage the (quasi-objective) extraction of "findings" from "data". In line with strategies of prepositional thinking (Rendle-Short, 2020a; Cappello, 2013), we want to think and play with and through communitas, rather than write about it. We have sought to embody this in our collective research methods (including this writing-in-collaboration). In practice this has meant a multi-layered, iterative process of composition, annotation, dialogue, collage and reflection. The initiating scene of an embodied experience of communitas, in WrICE, as reported and reflected upon by our lead author, is framed within the scene of the research collective (the authors as a whole) who have assembled to call and respond to that author's offers and provocations. If spatio-temporal encounters between writers, such as a WrICE residency, can be seen as a way to stage communitas, as we suggest here, this paper also asks how communitas might be performed on the page of critical-creative writing in an academic context such as this. This paper-as-communitas seeks to offer other writers and researchers purchase on "this slippery thing", proposing a way of enacting or embodying communitas by getting, as Turner (2012) describes, "right inside of it" (p. 8).

In this paper, we have made specific critical and creative stylistic decisions. The different elements of voice and counter-voice, main and marginal voice, pull together in what looks like dialogue on the page, where any found meaning rustles in the middle somewhere or on the margins like any good conversation – betwixt and between the push and pull of preposition muscle – in and around and across and behind. The sharing of work in this way across the page mimics the sharing of creative work around the WrICE table, where those who are present bring with them the gift of "being there, of listening: of being alongside" (Carlin & Rendle-Short, 2016a, p. 6). They/I/we imagine the reader notating and underlining along with us as she/they/he reads to become part of an extended "imagined community". Together, the collaborative felt experience cascades down and across and beyond the page communitastically.

*

The minute – no, *second* – I heard the word *communitas* I wanted to know more. It was delicious on my tongue. It hung there, wanted, waiting to be picked up, chewed over, inspected. An offer of a word given by a fellow writer and academic, a sociologist. She said: "This is very *communitas*." What! How? Say that again. We were in the middle of an experience together at a conference – less traditional panel more (un)performance – where the audience became participant, became immersed in song and incantation, roamed the room like being at a funfair, ate lollies while listening to soliloquies. "Very *communitas*," she

So: an outside observer. An ethnographic identification of a species of event. But given in recognition of something. Opening a puzzle.

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said. What *exactly*? Immediately, I wanted to know what she was talking about: what did this word *communitas* mean, why did she think *communitas* applied to the thing that we were doing, in what way; what was it that we were doing that precipitated her thinking: *communitas*? I wanted to know everything.

Don't you think we should probably say something about the form of it first, right? Because that's the thing [1].

A type of call and response – the way you bring us into it [2].

How we can do things together *together* that we can't do on our own.

I read about the origins of *communitas*, its etymology, in a philosophy book borrowed from the university library, written by an Italian philosopher last century and translated into English more than ten years ago (Roberto Esposito's *Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community*, 1998/2010). The Latin *communitas* is the root word for community. Interesting.

[1] By putting it into form, what you're doing is you're enabling yourself to kind of occupy different registers. And that's really important, because you know, we write in an academic register, but it's not the only way in which we do research and certainly not the way that we come to research.

[2] A testing of that idea of what *communitas* is, and by inviting you all to contribute, it's a form of scholarly *communitas*, a scholarly interleaving (between among).

I found myself saying this hitherto unknown word *communitas*, over and over – *come-moon-it-as* – feeling the distinct syllables in my mouth, on my tongue, down the glottis. Like a new sweet. I had to learn it to remember it, get to know it. I ate it for breakfast. Rocked myself to sleep with it. I wanted to understand. Look things up. Associate words. Digest etymologies. Get a grip. I remember the excitement, the intake of air, astonishment – that feeling of being rooted to the spot with joy, in this case, the short hair carpet of the hotel ballroom, the same colour as the Arizona desert it sat in – the beauty of the word itself, mixed with saliva, in the air as it was said, and its affiliation with community, commons, collectivity. The puzzle of *communitas*.

Giving voice here to tacit knowledge with glottis and saliva, syntax and vocabulary.

Just seen puzzle here, that would repeat the "puzzle" in the margins suggested earlier. But I actually like that repetition and transfer from margin to "centre".

Since hearing the word for the first time, I've been enmeshed in the meaning and practice, thinking it through in different contexts. What, for instance, does it contribute in relation to research practices? How do you do *communitas* in the field of creative writing? What happens when a collective riffs on *communitas* as "a daisy chain of gifts: digital voice, live

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chorus, satellite offerings, testimony, wit(h)nessing, oversharing, listening, and secular ritual" (Taylor et al., 2023)? The overriding question becomes: what can you do as a group that you can't do on your won [*sic*]?

*What can you do as a group that you can't do on **your won**? You meant own, right, a little kind of slip of the tongue?* [3]

[3] Ha, I like the slip of tongue because I like the idea of *won* instead of *one*. I also like wan/wun/hun – associating and homonyms close to beside and nearby. The overriding question becomes what can you do as a group that you cannot do on your one? When you're working across cultures, you become very aware that associative meanings require a cultural perspective. That awareness is exacerbated in WrICE as we work in English as a lingua franca. You have to trust that people understand you.

What does it *feel like* "to do" *communitas*? How would I know? How can I get back to that sensation of the short hair pile? That feeling of being deep within. Engrossed. Enmeshed. Unaware of anything but this. Now. The *it-is-working-on-you*. With others. Inside that space of being where we find each other (Eades, 2017).

We respond to you out loud as you read to us. You stitch them into the margin, the edge of things. To feel the presence of obligation in a relationship.

Can I/we rewrite them? Who will know? Can we play with each other's words? Who owns these words?

We are holding out our hands and our thinking to each other.

I'm madly reading Edith Turner again, writing within the field of cultural anthropology and social sciences but also her being a creative writer (she did an MA in Creative Writing at the age of sixty), trying to get beneath the skin of *communitas*. Edie who, with her husband Victor Turner, established the term for what happens when people come together during the liminal moments of a ritual (Oxford Reference, n.d.). She said Victor liked to observe, he was a good anthropologist and ethnographer: "very serious, incontrovertible anthropology" (Mentore, 2009, p. xii). In contrast, she admits to writing ethnographically "with a sense of being", not so much touching as "being touched": "so that it actually works *on* one. It's not you working to record that. *It* is working on you!" (p. xiii, emphasis in original).

We all want to play Edie. Poor Victor! He is boring.

Getting this close to notice skin, touch finger, hear breath. Feeling the magnetism, an equal and opposite force drawing me in but pushing me away also.

You wrote this somewhere at some point about the thing of touch (the desire the dynamic the force) (Rendle-Short 2020b). Did you know then of this connection with *communitas*? Did you think of that?
What does it mean to get *inside* breath, to feel it around you, brush *against*?
And if so –?

Tessellation is a great metaphor for the process of knowledge as it evolves amongst a group (it would make a good separate paper). I like how the collection of such things makes an overall pattern [4].

This discussion of *communitas* in different creative writing settings seeks to teach me, educate us, tessellate knowledge. It offers new lexicons of understanding, and pushes and pulls us around again, presents a view from the other side, from underneath, from inside, amid, considering. How I think I might know what it is, but do I? In any case, it's impossible to do this without prepositions. "Prepositions reveal what we do not know. They are an invitation" (Rendle-Short, 2023b, p. 277). Take WrICE, for example. What would it be to preposition WrICE, preposition *communitas*, harness "preposition muscle" to *move with*? Loop in and out, generate fresh thinking.

Go then! Loop! Leap!

[4] The idea of tessellation as a metaphor *for knowledge* is super interesting, because a tessellation, like a mosaic, is a discrete object in and of itself, added to other objects with which then if you change the scale, it makes another kind of pattern. So, it's a kind of epistemological way of thinking about what is created through something like an encounter, especially when it's cross-cultural.

I start with a big intake of air then release. Phew. This is it. High expectation. My heart is in my mouth, it always is. Because even though as a writer-facilitator of a writers' residency you come fully prepared and you are as ready as you can be, in that moment of diving in, you are exposed, vulnerable, dependant on your own resources and your in-built psycho-emotional radar, also a sense of responsibility.

The way you use a metaphoric approach and the physical nature of encounters. You're doing that in the physical, you know, *presence* of the paper that is being broken into columns and is divided [5].

[5] It's not just breaking up the idea of solo authorship. It's also this idea of, you know, how do you actually read? How can you represent what's actually happening? Is this a metaphor of what's happening on the page itself. So, two metaphors here: the metaphor of physical presentation, what's on the page, and the idea of this embedded, tessellated metaphor for knowledge.

Haha is it your religious upbringing emerging?

How it looks on the page, and the patterning of it.

We hear us breathing together (I didn't know how to write this until I started writing this).

Such desire! Utopian? Contrarian? Naïve? Proudly!

I want this conversation on *communitas* to perform *communitas*: a flower bed waiting…. Content and form cascade into a hymn of togetherness, the whatness and how for this piece prepositioning each other around and across and near and beyond and betwixt. So close. Nearly touching and sometimes actually *in contact with*. Not that I'm saying this text, the thing on the page, is *communitas* (although maybe it is, there's a splendid thought, changing my mind mid-stride, mid-syntax even, as I/we/us write through shape and column, aside and footnote, I/we/us are creating a *communitas* form of unfurling and surge). More through *the process of making* this writing, this text we are making collectively wants to enact or embody *communitas* on/for/near the page so the reader in this piece of writing exhorting *communitas* can feel the shift and glow and surprise of *communitas in action*.

Suddenly I've got Martina Copley's chorality on my tongue, how movement doesn't have to be thought. She prefers talking of curiosities, attractions, hesitations and what she calls "inklings" (2023, p. 34) [6]. Singing together is such fun, generative.

[6] What Copley actually says (I've since looked it up) is "[t]his movement is a configurative poetics that engages different modes of attention. Attention to inklings, hesitations, curiosities, attractions that allow for beginnings which in turn stimulate thinking about possible structures and ways to proceed" (2023, p. 34). Flow. Movement. How one thing leads to another.

Am I in the right place on Zoom, do I have basil stuck between my teeth from lunch, am I looking too flushed? I can hear some of the writers breathing.

Did you have to remember how to breathe, also?

The WrICE residency (of which I/we speak) as a creative writing experiment forms a central part of WrICE, the Writers Immersion and Cultural Exchange program. At the heart (*cor*, *cord*) of WrICE is that simple idea of creating a space for writers from different backgrounds and with varying levels of experience to connect with other writers in an immersive collaborative experience. And here we are, as a team, studying that program as creative research.

What if I say the wrong thing? What if I'm not good enough for the task? You can never prepare for this moment of crossing over, going into, because you don't know what's coming next, what will happen, you don't know who or what is in the room. What I do have is a list of writers and where they live – Singapore, Myanmar, Japan, Vietnam, Sri Lanka and Australia. I've read their bios. But *how* each of the writers bring their selves and their writing into that room to play with me and with each other, time will tell. How will this residency of togetherness work out?

Meaning begins from place; this idea of how you are rooted to one specific place. And, you know, the idea of citizenship and belonging to a nation is very much about blood, or, you know, a genetic background, and soil (there could be a good few papers written on this).

The more I think about and study the idea of *communitas* and its application to the arts, to creative writing, the more enthused I am for its usefulness, its relevance, its generative possibilities. What I'm thinking here is not just by way of

Tessellation can be a metaphor for knowledge, and also a metaphor for how things happen.

observation and/or categorisation, after the fact if you like, but how we might apply or enact *communitas* thinking to our creativity, let it be a future-thinking, speculative *communitas*. A "beacon of possibility", as suggested by SHOUSE and their musicking *communitas*, "the longing beats within us all", a "collective love", something we crave, particularly in a world where we are becoming more and more atomised and commodified, within neoliberal logics: "In a moment of musicking, we can imagine new social relations" (Madin & Service, 2023).

In the room, with the other writers, I tell myself: I have to do this. I must open my arms. Listen hard. Be present. I have to put aside my own preoccupations, I remind myself – preoccupations set out in notes of conversations from my notebook from the week before: questions of what it means to be living as a settler in a colonised place, the idea of enacting a sounding and sites of "not quietness", the erotics of belonging. I must resist my own beating anxieties, my fears of not knowing what I am doing, giving wrong directions, not listening enough, being insensitive, reacting badly, not showing enough interest, being glib and offhand, pretending I'm interested when I'm not. Not wanting to be vulnerable myself. I tell myself I must open to others, to these writers and *their* experience, their needs, their stories, their wishful thinkings, questions and desires. I'm hoping all of this comes naturally – will it? Doing *communitas* is hard work.

There is always risk in uncertainty.

(This is us listening.)

The WrICE writers' residency I am referring to here is one that took place online in 2021, during the COVID pandemic, as a virtual residency over the course of two weeks. Ten writers and two facilitators as well as two others to help manage the online platform across eight time zones for three hours each day. Each writer was allocated one hour to share their work and generate conversation how they wanted, with spaces either side to get a cup of tea or walk in the garden for fresh air, or sleep on a day bed. Sometimes the talk extended into the afterwards with chat and

conversation and sharing of tea and cake. This was the seventh WrICE residency we'd conducted: five face to face, this the second virtual experience.

Perhaps it is *the process* of connection. The uncertainty of the before and the fellowship of the after. Maybe one becomes a community after people share the experiences? A temporary community of strangers moving (tiny steps) towards kinship?

Ahead of time, all the preparation is done, everything is in place. There is nothing more to do except *to do it* – like the preparing of a meal and a table, now waiting for the guests to arrive, to appear, to converse, to eat. But I don't know these writers (am I repeating myself because I'm nervous?). I met some of them casually online a couple of weeks earlier for a welcome brunch, and I've read some of their work, and I am aware of what they have done, and how they have been invited to this residency through recommendation. But that's all. Is that enough?

I cannot help it, but it reminds me so much of Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1983). That's history of course and nothing to do with creative writing. But maybe there is an imagined community created out of *communitas*, maybe, a creative community of writers from different cultures, bound by the residency and enlightened by what they hear about each other [7].

[7] One of the Southeast Asian writers said, "I thought I and my country were the only ones experiencing something".

Maybe this is the first *communitas* to remark on, a *communitas* of surrender.

I am curious to hear the writers work, to find out how they make work, how they talk about their work and how they navigate a life of creativity: this thing we call writing, this practice of a writer. I want to jump forward to when we are more comfortable with each other. To when we know something. When we can ask for more. To get there, to this writer's communion with all the differently gathered writer selves (there are 12 writers in the room), I must cross over, empty myself and give over the experience. I must let go and let what will be, be. It is a transformative moment where the self is in transit, *trans*, going across, where it forms in a new and different way to what has come before.

In the opening session, before we begin to share our writing, each of us takes time to introduce ourselves to the other writers by introducing out writing spaces. I set it up with my fellow writer-facilitator as a round robin, where one writer

begins and at the end of their introduction they invite another writer to contribute. Story and place and imagination become shared endeavour. We learn about butterflies and hot summers and water and cold foggy mornings from a writer who joins us from Edinburgh. We are taken on little tours of each other's houses. We are told about children and partners and housekeepers and students; the arrangements people make to create spaces of quiet and meditation. I step out of being a facilitator and become the writer and show the other writers my bookcases and plants and the light streaming in through an open window. I tell them I don't always write here, I'm more at home writing in bed. The ordinariness of the writer's room, prosaic even, but the sense that out of these spaces and these details rises the imagination on a swell. In fact, water becomes an enduring theme; swimming together embeds trust between us. In this structured unstructured space, we are floating together in the same water, able to see each other close-up, and from afar. The sharing of our writing spaces as writers becomes another little *communitas*, a swimming-together-*communitas*.

Just the idea of dwelling, *dwelling* with *communitas*, dwelling **as communitas**.

These *making connections* is a not turning away, it is an active deactivation, a thrumming stillness. It is wild.

In notes from my notebook of that residency, "the thinking of thoughts" or "construct a reading of" (my attempt at Ryle/Geertz's "thick description" [Geertz, 2008, p. 312, 314]), I read scraps of sentences in my wonky handwriting: *frazzled morning / brought up with different languages in our heads / they don't read my work and I don't let them read my work / want to know everything / so happy to be here / wouldn't miss this / we don't know much about Asia / don't know about each other / mostly ashamed about what we know / write out of curiosity / how to navigate this exchange with others outside our language and culture.*

There is an intimacy about notes.

Stillness – not going forwards, not going backwards, hovering, suspended, hanging. Sitting still, not moving or making a sound. A deep silence. *Becoming the stillness*. A generative space, non-acquisitive, open, generous, queer, feminist, of love and heart, where in Helene Cixous's words we "each would take the risk of *other*" (Cixous & Clément, 1975/1986, p. 78, emphasis in original). A process, a working through, a working out. It is an untangling. A showing up. An opening for possibility.

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There is lot of waiting too.

Facilitating in the way I want to facilitate doesn't happen automatically, I find I must muster, yield to stillness, balance weight differently – feel the nuance of different weightings (hold my breath to hold me up). I must observe, be watchful, listen, pay attention, find a centre of calmness, put aside any anxiety or pre-thinking, or anticipation for expectation of what will happen, or what others will bring or not bring to the table. What's left off the table, outside the room. What creeps in unasked, also. It takes a lot out of me, it always does. It's an expanse of vista and kindness. Emotional work. It reminds me of something Ali Cobby Eckermann said (one of our many WrICE writers), her talk of kindness related to kin, learning from her.

In the beginning I had no sense of the exchange, what it costs. It creates. A lot.

Ali says, "if you peer you will see / if you are deaf you will hear" (Cobby Eckermann, 2023, p. 82).

*

Okay, so what if we actually *do something*? Not writing. But drawing. Do an exercise.

This is the step change, the next scene where we enact a staged encounter: *what if **we** actually do something?* Disrupt this feeling of comfort – ah-ha, I get it. What if we draw? Raise the stakes: we thought we knew what we were doing. "We" being the writer-researchers. This will be a test. We are writers not drawers.

What if we draw each other? What if we make ourselves vulnerable to each other in a way we've never done before? What if we create something together that is itself – in the act of doing it – a condition of creativity? That becomes a metaphor or method for creativity. Can we find each other differently in the room of possibilities that is the

This is different.

Demonstrate *communitas* by enacting *communitas* through a structured unstructured ritual of *communitas*-drawing.

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researcher's space? Person to person. Face to face. [8].

[8] Reminds me at least, or maybe I could be bold enough to say reminds *us*, that the types of things we might write about this experience might be different to what we expected. Like that's how you make a change right, which is the point.

Can we do this?

Make connection through drawing what you see, not what you think and imagine drawing should be or look like. Drawing as thinking. Wild.

The English word *draw* is related to the English *draft*, meaning rough copy. Drawing is a form of writing, then. As a verb, *draw* comes from Old English *dragan*, "to drag", and from German *tragen*, "to carry, bear" – what might the exercise of writers and researchers drawing carry or bear, what might drawing together offer?

I like the groping – the line you remember, but the sources not – because it is like a process of recall, which is what you are doing here. Interview, question mark, question mark x x x. I mean everyone does that, right? [9]
By getting "right inside of it".

I read again Edith Turner's work on *communitas*, the idea of people talking in a way they have never talked before, not being afraid of being in-between, how Edie took this further and developed Victor's "anthropology of experience" (interview???? I can't remember). It's a mystery how it works. There is something magical going on. She also makes a persuasive argument for the need for *researchers* to enact or embody *communitas* to find purchase on "this slippery thing" (Turner, 2012, p. 8).

[9] I like that process of recall. Unfinished pieces. Process of preparing.

I wager if we can't get into the skin of ourselves as researchers, how can we get into the skin of our research? I'm not talking about content here but the doing of it, getting across, around, inside, beyond etc. The nuts and veins and capillaries and lesions and warts and all. Get into the fact. Into the wobbly line or gesture on paper.

There are multiple thoughts somersaulting together, cascading. Wanting (present tense continuous) to take my fellow researchers into my confidence, tread a path we've not gone along before, show a different side to each other – can we do this? Will it work out? What's going to happen? I want to tumble together the idea of breathing, breathing alongside. I know! *Communitas*. And drawing.

Without preconceived ideas. Be alive to the

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fullest. This is either very dumb or inspired.

We could do this for any creative project, right? Face to face, see what happens betwixt and between. What happens in the liminal.

This exercise or experiment of drawing and *communitas* is along similar lines to other identified kinds of *communitases*-in-practice: as disruptive encounter, generative dance, interstitial space, transformative agent (Rendle-Short, 2021). It explores whether another variation of *communitas* might emerge – a drawing-breathing *communitas* – layering together *communitas* and drawing in a different creative practice setting to see what it might offer by way of process. Or to put it another way, to see if drawing (by non-drawers) can be utilised to bring about a new togetherness not experienced previously among these researchers.

In pairs we sit opposite each other, face to face, and put pencil to paper to draw each other without looking at the page, without lifting the pencil off the page, a continuous line. Put simply, we draw what we see, with the other hand, eyes shut [10].

What is the derivation of encounter anyway? Latin *in-* "in" + *contra* "against".

[10] I can't help myself, I've got to say it, I am dumbfounded; this is the last thing I was expecting to do. I'm no drawer!

To draw is to yearn. John Berger says (and he knew how to draw): "Drawing is a form of probing … There is a symbiotic desire to get closer and closer, to enter the self of what is being drawn, and, simultaneously, there is a foreknowledge of immanent distance" (2011, p. 150, 156).

Draw what you see, not what you think and/or imagine a drawing should be, let drawing be a form of breathing. Take your time. Keep looking. Don't overthink it. [11]

[11] There is a big difference between doing something like drawing, and writing/reading about the doing of it.

Didn't someone say, like John Ruskin, that the only way to get to know something is to draw it? It forces you to see. Then there is the other John, Berger: "You search touch by touch" (2011, p. 22). [12]

[12] Yes, and it should be noted that these two Johns really knew how to draw, they were trained artists. Not us. We're not here to draw – although look at us go! – so much as to think through the doing of drawing. We're using drawing here as a means of process.

It is a slow leading, the ground needed to be prepared carefully for this face-to-face encounter of an intimate kind – take your time, sink into it, don't worry if you can't draw – especially in this time of COVID and not having experienced the face-to-face connection much at all. It is a different kind of beat. Immersive. An intensive. We're all in this together, right?

Nervousness and laughter, the need to trust.

As you draw, draw and think about the person you are drawing as if you are writing an essay with the drawing pencil, drawing non-fiction. There are no props or conventions to help ameliorate the awkwardness of the encounter; drawing throws you out of your depth; each time it is as difficult as it is amazing. [13]

[13] Have a look at different examples of experimental drawing in different creative writing settings. See "The Drawing, Breathing, Writing Body" (Rendle-Short, 2010); "On Drawing (Essaying) Nonfiction: A Set of Seven Instructions" (Rendle-Short, 2014); "Parsing an Ethics of Seeing: Interrogating the Grammar of a Creative/Critical Practice" (Rendle-Short, 2016).

What are we doing?

The exercise recalls Edith Turner's remark that *communitas* surfaces a kind of celebration in the "unexpected increment that happens from mere change" (2012, p. 3). In this instance, these are researchers who are researching "the space of encounter" and who have known each other in different research settings and who are committed to this project (a project examining, amongst other things, the creative uncertainties of cultural exchange), who here, immerse themselves in an altogether alternative activity, inside the experience of encounter, of doubt, uncertainty and not knowing.

– *I didn't know I had drawing skills; first time I've drawn somebody.*

– *Delightful, thanks for leading us through that, such a joy.*

This is us talking, right?

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They talked. Lots to say. Field notes and jottings from the dialogue afterwards after the facing and the drawing noted in my notebook.

– Always been told I can't draw, feels fun, feels like I don't know what I'm doing but that doesn't matter very much because it's fun to see what happens.

In some ways, the obvious.

– Disrupting what "good drawing" is – exercise helps to subvert a certain value to talent and creativity – puts everybody in the position of being amateur or fool – closed eyes and wrong hand was my favourite parts – I think my best one was when I was facing her back.

There are lots of surprises.

Perhaps this is what Edith Turner means when she says that to experience *communitas* takes us to "the edge of the precipice of knowledge" (2012, p. 11), that it is only there when we are doing it that we can make discoveries.

– Drawing the portrait and person – person is much more risqué – found it hard not to giggle through it – uncomfortable eroticism to it, not very often that you gaze opposite one another, erotic charge, electricity of paying close attention to someone in close proximity and having it returned – not just you looking at them but them looking closely at you.

Note and jot. Examining drawing-as-*communitas* by telling-it-slant.

– It's really confronting.

It can be quite confronting.

– Culturally bound – you would be so wary to stare like that in different cultures

– I felt like I knew you but when we sat down it was really awkward – not looking directly how we looked at each other both of us trying to not look – respectfully not starting and looking at each other is like a challenge – avoiding eye contact is a show of respect.

The awkwardness, sensitivities. Lessons learnt.

– Common experience of drawing can bind us together as a community because we are suffering together as a community, scared that we might offend the other person if we drew a monster.

– Eye contact a thing of trust.

I said this: ha ha!
Knowledge is stealing [14].
It's very Western.
Just thinking about knowledge should be for everybody without access. Without recognising that, you know, just *the tools of access in themselves* are a way of not making that possible.

– [In some cultures it could be seen as] an invasion of soul – invade the other person body or home – knowing is stealing – changes the ethical – the approach of putting yourself in is an important starting point of the gift – start with the beginning point of nobody knows anything – difference is if you participate freely and offer yourself to the other. In other words, I have a lot of power and language that I bring into the encounter – but I am gifting the knowledge of me first.

[14] If you play with the idea that knowing is stealing then are we stealing willingly or not? I don't know what to do with that. It changes everything that you've read before. Yes?

– I think it was a shared anxiety.

We then chose one drawing and wrote a little postcard to our new-found friend; we gave our portrait to the other as a gift in an exhibition of works. Showed up.

This coming together in *communitas* through drawing was a kind of unstructured, structured ritual or practice, or in *communitas* terminology, an unfolding, "a happening" of connection, belonging and attachment (Turner, 2012, p. 8). It abandoned the throttle of "status and acquisition" (p. 9). It put hope in the idea of *communitas* being the process itself and the slow working out of that process, nothing more, nothing less (like this conversation unfurling down the page in different registers).

– Shared funny experience I guess that's good.

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Love it that in surprise there is attack and seizure from mediaeval Latin superprehendere. It's excessive. Over the top. Emotional. [15]

Cascade. Tessellation. An offer of surprise where the unexpected and ineffable is/becomes possible [16] [17] [18].

[15] A demonstration of Quinn Eades's collaboration-as-love, saying yes to the offer, saying yes to "im/possibility of being in love" (2023, p. 40). Test it out for yourself.
[16] Thank you for taking a chance on it.
[17] I've not thought that a scholarly paper can be written in such a such a lyrical way. What appears to me is a paper that is both scholarly and creative. At times, it sounds like poetry, you know, and I think for me, who hasn't seen this kind of writing before, for me, that's very astonishing.
[18] I read it like an ice cream.

I rock myself to sleep afterwards, after packing up our pencils and papers, after saying goodbye, after a hot chocolate in the cafe at the CERES Environmental Park where we had our workshop, the chickens finishing their day and heading for the roost, and wonder, what was that? That idea that I had. That I wanted to play out with the others so badly. My head is whirling. Did it work? Did we have an experience? I feel I had one, I am experienced out. Exhausted. But is that enough? What did someone say in passing (probably more than in passing) – I want you to want my thing as much as I want yours. Yearning. At this point, it feels always beyond (there is always a never-getting-there with yearning) – beyond imagination, beyond wanting, beyond possibility. Still, the desire for something remains. I breathe again. I sleep.

Breathe again. And sleep.

*

As we come the end of this "very communitas" experiment, there enters a certain imperative to conclude in such a way that would make it clear – again, or finally – just what all of this might mean. How it might be used or taken up. What the point of all of this might be. Conclusions, whatever else they are, being so intimately connected to satisfaction and desire: the desire to satisfy the promise of the text. One of the risks (perhaps always – but certainly in a paper about communitas and by association about collectivity, love and joy) is that there is a foreclosure of meaning and possibility in concluding. We would like to linger for a moment in the promise of this text and to see if we might purposefully resist ending or concluding in such a way that would pin communitas down and put a halt to its largesse.

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Think again, for instance, through and into and around Eades's idea of "love-collaboration". Ask the question, did the writing and the practising of writing with others through the making of this paper enact love? It definitely showed us up, laid bare something; it was both easy and very difficult. What does it do for/to/beside the reader?

How about this? If we have failed here to demonstrate sufficient objectivity in looking at our topic of enquiry – the experience of communitas in and through and across creative writing practice(s) – we happily embrace this failure, in the spirit of following the arguments of queer theorist, Jack Halberstam (2020). The liminal, ephemeral state of communitas, Edith Turner argues (I/we think?), can take us to the "precipice of knowledge" (2012, p. 11). Following the lead of Donna Haraway (2016) and many others, we have chosen to eschew the residual Cartesian dualism that is still implied in the act of "looking at" and instead tilt towards an experiment in dwelling with the concept of communitas, refracted through embodied memory, listening, dialogue and play.

Think about finding points of purchase across what is slippery, where any purchase is the voices commenting and putting into "place" the work you/we are reading to them. Let's turn again to Turner and her concluding remarks to her studies on finding communitas: "Like music you have to be in it, hear it, to join in: then you know. You cannot get it from 'program notes'. Ordinary communitas is natural, as natural as breathing" (2012, p.11).

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