

Connecting literary cultures: towards a methodology for ethical encounter and exchange

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Abstract

What are the assumptions (institutional, individual, cultural, structural, artistic) of encounter and exchange? How can they be measured and tested? And how do they play out in creative writing and literary communities in the region broadly defined as the Asia-Pacific? This paper argues that methodologies enabling an examination of the ethics and power relations inherent to intercultural encounters must be predicated on creative uncertainty; be collaborative; and be testable in the sense that they allow artists and researchers to 'meet' structures of power and ethical knots through evolving, creative-led, iterative, practices. This paper is interested in what might be understood as a pedagogy of encounter. The emergent methodology holds a number of overlapping principles including ethics as a process, holding (prepositional) space, and uncertainty and the not-yet-made.

Keywords

pedagogy of encounter, intercultural exchange, uncertainty, vulnerability, emergent methodology

Introduction

Since 2014, the artist-led Writers Immersion and Cultural Exchange (WrICE) residency program has situated creative writing as a way of thinking, being, and learning collectively. In this time WrICE has brought together more than seventy writers from around the Asia-Pacific region – from Singapore, Vietnam, Japan, Sri Lanka, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines, Indonesia, China, South Korea, Hong Kong, Myanmar, West Timor, India, Malaysia, and Australia. WrICE was cofounded by David Carlin and Francesca Rendle-Short (who are among the authors of this paper) with a specific focus and interest in connecting Australian writers with those from the Asia-Pacific region (though the common lexical and geo-political convention to exclude Australia from the Asia Pacific region is precisely what WrICE has sought to undo). A region often less visibly represented in the Australian literary context than Europe and the United States.

In late 2020, we (the co-authors of this paper) were awarded an Australian Research Council (ARC) Discovery Project entitled ‘Connecting Asia-Pacific Literary Cultures: Grounds, Encounter and Exchange’, which takes as one object of its enquiry the work of these WrICE residencies, and some initial findings about WrICE previously published (Carlin & Rendle-Short 2016; Aung et al 2020; Iyer et al 2022). For the ARC research (funded from 2021–2024), which is the focus of this paper, we are interested in how we might test or measure this thing that WrICE is and does – tacitly and subjectively we have a sense of what WrICE is and how it works but how can this knowledge be made more explicit? As such, methodological and epistemological enquiries are central to the research and to what we hope will be its main contribution to knowledge. At the time of writing, we are one and half years into the project (at the midway point given it is a three year project) and so far, we have employed a mix of traditional and playful methods, ranging from interviews and focus groups to open discussions, curated conversations, essaying workshops, and collaborative writing.

As a project grounded in practice-led approaches we have sought to eschew the formal binary of critical and creative knowledges, encouraging new pedagogies of artistic exchange predicated on the understanding that all arts practices begin from uncertainty – uncertainty here defined as a ‘change-making practice’, a practice that ‘opens up pathways of what might be next and enables us to creatively and imaginatively inhabit such worlds with possibilities’ (Akama et al., 2018, p. 3). In doing so, we have drawn on some of our previous interdisciplinary experiments and research on, for example: essaying (Carlin, 2018), prepositional thinking (Rendle-Short, 2020), cosmopolitanism (Aung Thin, 2020), (un)framing nationalism (Rose Tope, 1998), and holding space (Ellis et al., 2021). These concepts distill our commitment and interest in ethical, nonhierarchical encounters, language and grammar, play and collaboration, where ‘the “not-yet made” [is] at the centre of the inquiry’ (Carlin et al., 2015, n.p.). And where the futurity of this ‘not-yet’ is held *in company*. Togetherness, or what Gert Biesta calls ‘human togetherness’ (2012), is crucial to this project. It is in this interest in being together and holding space collectively that our research intersects most directly with public pedagogies scholarship and debates. With the various sites of learning that occur beyond the classroom (Sandlin, 2011), and related concepts of reciprocal empathy (Gablik, 1995), the undercommons and multiple ‘we’s’ (Harney & Moten, 2013; Halberstam, 2013; Chan et al., 2021), the space of inclusion enacted by counterpublics or the notion of ‘*a* public, as distinct from both *the* public’ (Warner, 2002), and ‘the conservation of a degree of strangeness, rather than an insistence on commonality and common identity’ (Biesta, 2012, p. 683).

In what follows we present examples from our initial ARC research findings which demonstrate what we call a pedagogy of encounter. We advance three emergent principles of methodology (what

we are imagining as an ‘impossibility methodology’): ethics as a process, holding (prepositional) space, and uncertainty and the not-yet-made.

What is our pedagogy?

The WrICE model for intercultural exchange is founded on what we have called ‘collaborative residencies’ (Carlin & Rendle-Short, 2016, p. 1). These fall somewhere between a typical writers’ residency and a writers’ workshop. The writer’s residency is often premised on offering writers the quiet ‘undisturbed’ space that is less possible in their everyday lives, to give them time out from everyday routines and pressures of work and family responsibilities. Often, as for instance, with Varuna Writers House in Australia or the writers’ residency program based at Hawthornden Castle in Scotland, rules apply to the sacrosanct hours of writing – e.g. silence in the house between 9am and 6pm. After hours there is often an unstructured social component wherein the writers are expected to all eat together at a communal table. The classic ‘writers’ workshop’ emerged out of the creative writing discipline as it has become established in the US, beginning with the Iowa Writers Workshop. Typically, these are classes within a Masters (MFA) or summer intensive program. This workshop model, although by now appearing in a multitude of guises, is invariably focused on a teacher and their mastery as a creative writer. The model is inherently hierarchical, with a sharp delineation between teacher and pupils. The WrICE collaborative residency model offers a paradigm shift, an ‘epistemic disruption’ (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009) in the conduct of a residency. Where the pedagogy in action is one of the crowd, rather than the teacher, and that is outside the classroom. Each WrICE residency brings together twelve writers (including two writer/facilitators) for a week to ten days. The group is carefully curated to be intersectional and diverse in at least three ways: in cultural background and geographical location, in age and experience, and in preferred writing form(s) and genre(s). The writers are invited on the understanding that they will be at least as curious learning about each other’s work as they are curious about the reception to their own. A writer is not expected to work on a given project, or produce a given number of words. The structured part of the residency is the daily afternoon sharing sessions. These are akin to those of an Iowa-style workshop, in that each member of the group in turn has their work in focus. However, rather than teachers or experts, the writer facilitators position themselves as co-participants, whose job is to model and invite the co-creation of a democratic, non-hierarchical space of peers (see Elbow, 1998). Participants are encouraged to share work-in-progress; something they are in the middle of, not knowing how, or indeed if, it will resolve (it is this shared vulnerability in ‘not-knowingness’ that the heterogeneous writers have in common). The sharing sessions, because they are conducted within a space of unknowing (Carlin et al., 2020, p. 122) are, by definition inchoate and emergent. The responses that form the conversation, following each ‘sharing’, are impressionistic rather than considered, informed or expert views. They are the surfacing of what ‘struck’ each individual as they were listening – the questions, images, ideas, other references, and so on, which came to mind. This applies equally to the facilitators who as we have already described are also writer/participants in the process.

To return to the initial question then: what is being taught here? And who is teaching? WrICE argues that nothing is being taught, and that is the point. *Nothing is being taught*. What happens then – when ‘nothing’ is being taught – is an encounter with a group of curious strangers/peers – people who are alike in being writers, and alike and unlike in a kaleidoscopic constellation of other ways. The proposition is that what is being practiced in such a ‘non’ space is the radical and often

joyful experience of collectivity. This might sound ordinary enough, however, we have found that the experience of such a space often comes as a relief and sanctuary existing despite, against, within, and alongside the typically hierarchical and transactional spaces of the capitalist reality regime. Art (literature, as much as any other) is typically corralled within market conditions, so when togetherness is enacted in this way, when ‘nothing’ happens, nothing is extracted, or demanded, a kind of pedagogic activism takes place. Where the space of the residency might come to represent (at least for the duration of the residency) a broader civic space.

Our publics

The WrICE residency program has various overlapping publics. The first of these publics are the writers who come together from different countries in the Asia Pacific region. A second public is the plurality of readers in the region. A third public is what we will propose here as a “counterpublic” (Warner, 2022, p. 81).

One important finding from the experience of running WrICE is the degree to which both writers and readers in the region often have limited opportunities to read or to access transnational literatures (Aung Thin et al., 2020), since each country’s literary ecology has its own established hierarchies and institutions (including publishers, translators, funding bodies, and writer organisations). Put differently, often writers will not have read much or any literature of countries that are their near neighbours (Indonesian writers, in the Australian context, for example). National and transnational encounters of a literary kind are often dominated by Euro- and US centric narratives and agendas. Even for writers from the same country there can often be a disinclination to share and read each other’s work, because of the hierarchies of value.

WrICE engages readers through participation in multi-lingual workshops, readings, in conversations, and performances featuring the invited writers. These events have included a National Library of Vietnam in-conversation event that was simultaneously translated and televised, student workshops at University of the Philippines, Diliman, public workshops and readings at Jakarta Writers Series, and multiple events at writers’ festivals in Singapore and Australia. Engagement with these broader publics is inevitably mediated through the requirements of the various institutional partners and governing regimes. Writers’ festivals are interested in supporting and promoting big-name writers who are widely marketable. In countries such as Vietnam, the national government asserts tight control over public events and venues. RMIT University itself, as base for WrICE, has institutional priorities including promoting its cultural impact in Asia, particularly in countries such as Vietnam and Singapore where it has invested heavily in learning and teaching programs. All of these considerations, as well as geo-political factors force corresponding constraints and compromises on the delivery and integrity of the program. As an Indigenous West Timorese writer commented:

Talking about pressure, it actually comes from outside, not from the culture I represent. As a new and emerging writer in Indonesia, the situation in Indonesia is very, I can say, like, very centered just in Jakarta. When we talk about inequalities. How different in Jakarta, and outside of Jakarta. [...] [Y]ou are a writer or not based on where you come from, from the powerful community or not, who is close to you, or you have published in a national newspaper or publisher or not. (WrICE Pilot focus group, 20 May 2022)

What is being shared in these public engagements with different literary communities are not only the art and craft of creative writing and the stories that emerge in various forms and registers

(along with cultural knowledges from different cultures, communities and traditions across the Asia-Pacific region), but the enactment of values and knowledges embedded in story telling of all kinds.

Over and above these categories of publics, that presuppose cultural/industrial positions of ‘writers’ and ‘readers’, WrICE creates a space of inclusion, a literary version of human togetherness, that deliberately proposes a provisional, plural counterpublic. This form of collectivity is akin to what Suzi Gablik called connective aesthetics or our ‘radical relatedness’ (1992, p. 2). This counterpublic allows for an imagined or ideal space, which though imagined or dreamed up is no less real. It is a space of solidarity. An activist space, where writers are more united by what they have in common as artists in the world than by any other identity descriptors that may apply to them. There is some relief in coming together as writers, writing and thinking.

A pedagogy of encounter

If a WrICE pedagogy is based on negotiating unknowingness and the change-making practice of vulnerability, forging *what-might-be-next* pathways, and if the WrICE publics are the writers themselves and the communities and literary cultures they are associated and connected with, then the question becomes how do we research into what is actually happening in and through and because of WrICE? How do we do it in a way that best fits our concerns to develop and theorise grounds for ethical encounter and exchange? How do we test uncertainty and possibilities?

Foundational in this research is study of the WrICE ‘pilot’ program: five face-to-face residencies conducted from 2014–2018 bringing together sixty writers from thirteen countries in the Asia-Pacific. In addition to the pilot, there have been, to date, two digital WrICE residencies (undertaken during the COVID-19 pandemic) bringing together a further twenty writers (2020–2021). Two of the researchers, Francesca Rendle-Short and David Carlin, as we have said above, have been part of WrICE from the beginning as co-founders of WrICE and as writer-facilitators of the residencies. The other three researchers, Lily Rose Tope, Melody Ellis and Michelle Aung Thin have never participated in WrICE, hence they have no prior WrICE experience from which to draw on. Rose Tope is a literary scholar, Ellis and Aung Thin are both writers. This five-way team composition presents the research with an opportunity where alongside deep insider knowledge full of the experience of ‘doing WrICE’, there is also critical distance, the embrace of *not* knowing and/or *unknowing*. Hence, rather than approaching the unknowing and not-knowing space as an impediment – rather than relying on importance of ‘experienced knowledge’ as requisite – this very feature becomes central to the unfolding methodology, a necessary and alternative perspective, where the intersection and interaction of team members coming from a variety of perspectives becomes the ‘juice’ of the project. This strategic and purposeful, multi-way positionality feeds into the ethical-activist values of the project, where knowing and *not-knowing* (the curiosity about what is and isn’t known) come together to generate ‘new knowledge’.

How it works out in practice is that for different research activities across the project (in respect of this paper: interviews, focus groups and essaying workshops) different members of the team assume different roles according to where the tacit/implicit and non-tacit knowledge is best suited. For example, Rendle-Short took on an ‘insider’ participant/observer role as one of the facilitator/writers for the WrICE 2021 residency, together with Alvin Pang, a writer and translator from Singapore who is a WrICE alumni from the inaugural WrICE Penang residency in 2014. Rose Tope and Carlin adopted ‘outsider’ roles as interviewers in 2021, not privy to the residency experience itself (WrICE, 2021) but instead interviewing the writers before and after their experience

of the residency. As did Rose Tope, Ellis and Aung Thin when they undertook focus groups with the broader WrICE alumni group. All members of the research team took part in essaying WrICE. For the purpose of this paper, and in what follows, we will consider these research activities as examples of ‘pedagogical encounter’. The team of researchers as outlined above can be thought of as ‘pedagogical agents’.

WrICE 2021 participant interviews

In late 2021, the project team, in partnership with SingLit Station (a Singapore-based community literary platform ‘where writers and readers meet’), convened the second WrICE Digital Residency, conducted entirely online as a consequence of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic travel restrictions. The ten participating writers were interviewed twice individually by Rose Tope and Carlin, before the residency and in the weeks afterwards. The interview was chosen as a research method because it is the most common method in qualitative research (Taylor, 2005) and a semi-structured interview is the most effective (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). The interview allows a more personal exchange between writer and researcher than a survey. Intonations, facial expressions, and humour are all part of the communicative process in the interview that is hard to capture in any other written form of research. The semi-structured interview is the most effective because it provides flexibility and quick follow-up to an interesting answer. Also, its open-ended structure avoids the finality of a conclusion and suggests a continuation of the exchange at another time and place. Another reason the interview was used is that the interviewers did not participate in the residency and were not privy to the writers’ sharing of their work and of their personal concerns and advocacies during the residency.

The interviews in general began with self-introductions, for both the interviewers and the interviewees. We used first names to keep the exchange casual. To break the ice, the interviewers and interviewees talked about common friends and interests before the interview began.

The interviewees were then asked about their circumstances and creative work. This gave the interviewers context in what the writer would say later. The pre-residency interviews focused on expectations of WrICE and experiences of other residencies or workshops. Here, many interviewees showed curiosity, even uncertainty regarding what was expected of them or why they were chosen. Some knew they were recommended by fellow writers, but others wondered why their names were on the list. An alumna indicated that she was probably chosen because she was a senior writer and was expected to take a lead or guide. There was also trepidation expressed regarding what the writers were supposed to do during the residency. Were they supposed to complete a piece of writing, as in other workshops? Were they supposed to present a completed work? All these were intimidating prospects especially for the beginning writers who were participating in an international residency for the first time. As one writer said, in a pre-interview: “[T]here are all these residencies, and you are expected to write in a room somewhere, but never a place where you can actually sit and think, you know, you’re not given that time. And to think and to share and to exchange? I work in the development sectors, impact oriented, monitoring, evaluation driven world. You know, it’s so refreshing to think that this is happening” (13 October 2021). And another: “[T]he residencies that I did before was kind of ad hoc, and people don’t really talk to each other before and after [...] from the brunch I had that we can just bring our work in progress, and then, so, I don’t know, I’m sensing like something more interesting or wayward could happen” (12 October 2021).

The writers were also asked how they felt about working with people from other cultures. Again, a kind of uncertainty could be felt because of their relative lack of knowledge of the region, a case of cultural unknowing, even skepticism. As one writer said in a pre-interview: “I think cultural exchange has the potential to be loaded. Right? Like, when is it an exchange? And when is it not? Like, when is it more like, I’ve got to, you know, brainwash you. So, for it to be true exchange, I think independence in terms of sources of funding, in terms of political affiliations have to be very clear” (13 October 2021). Writers attested to the fact that they hardly read other writers in the Asia-Pacific region because of inaccessibility of texts and also because history, especially colonial history, has shifted literary centres to the West: “I would like to know what’s happening in these participating countries, what is the literature about. I explained to you the story about our minds, you know, I also like to hear something similar from the other writers” (pre interview 13 October 2021). The writers indicated they were looking forward to meeting fellow writers from the region. For some, it would be their first contact with such a cohort. As this writer said in a pre-interview: “[Being focused on Asia-Pacific] increases the excitement, because I haven’t had significant interaction with Asian communities. And so that’s an area and a world that I’d like to know more about. I’ve read stories from writers of Asian background. And, you know, I think our culture is actually very similar. Because we have things like the respect for elders, family’s really important, the importance of food, the importance of celebration” (15 October 2021).

In the post-residency interviews, interviewees responded with palpable ease and confidence, quite dissimilar from the more guarded and uncertain answers they gave regarding WrICE in the pre-residency interviews. They had by now met the interviewers once already and they had gone through what they thought was a wonderful WrICE experience, “completely exceeded my expectations”, “beyond words really, because I wasn’t expecting it’s going to be this good, to be honest”, “unexpectedly relaxing”, “didn’t seem competitive”, “all kinds of synchronicities”, “everybody felt that it was a very safe space to exchange ideas and to collaborate”, “life-changing”. As one writer said in a post-interview: “I had to say, when I actually went through the whole of the two weeks, it was incredible. Because it was totally unlike anything I’d known in terms of the kind of bonding that took place between the partners” (15 November 2021). Regarding expectations, the writers said they were happy and relieved that WrICE turned out to be a residency without the pressure of production or imposed ideology, and with the freedom of expression: “[T]he fact that we were given one hour, which is unimaginable, in terms of space to speak out, and also the fact that they didn’t give very specific criteria for it, you know, you left it all open, which meant that people interpreted it in different ways. And that was very refreshing [...] And there’s a lot of learning, mutual learning because of that. I think that’s the masterpiece in the workshop, this one hour” (15 November 2021). There was no agenda. There was no censure for unfinished work, in fact, unfinished work became a source of conversation and sharing of writerly experiences: “The second [masterstroke] was the fact that the facilitators also took part as participants. It was very interesting. [...] they] both presented not as facilitators and to teach us how to present but as stressed participants, and that was lovely. [...] And also, they’re kind of very nurturing, supportive attitude, the energy that they brought, really made a difference. It’s very enabling” (15 November 2021). The writers found new knowledge in their fellow writers’ work and lives. Most importantly, they forged friendships with their cohort that often went beyond the residency, creating collaborations and writing exchanges across countries. In the post residency interviews, cultural boundaries seemed to have been forgotten, they did not seem to matter anymore, and disparate histories and cultures resonated with each other. As one writer put

it a post-interview: “What it was that really stood it out and I think for starters, the cultural aspect really worked well, because it was such a cross cultural group and it’s almost as if everybody brought something new to the conversation and so every day when everybody had a presentation, it was just really magical and you couldn’t help but listen and really, with such rapt attention and so I loved that” (17 November 2021).

What the interviews illustrated was the way in which anxieties about the uncertainty, unknowing, even suspicion of the upcoming exchange, were later countered by the experience of curiosity, unexpected intimacy and acceptance. The writers attested to the egalitarian nature of the space, illustrated by the facilitator-writers joining in being open and vulnerable when they themselves presented their unfinished creative work.

The creation of a literary community that is inclusive and democratic, a contact point for writers who do not know each other, or each other’s culture *is* the pedagogy of encounter during which writers meet through their work. This pedagogy occurs by the sheer presence of a ‘stranger’ who might offer a different kind of writing; this is already a kind of learning. The encounter is both personal and cultural. The writers’ residency becomes a pedagogical site with no formal structures of teaching. Everyone is there to teach and to learn.

Focus groups

Aung Thin, Ellis and Rose Tope led the process of conducting focus groups with the writers who had taken part in WrICE residencies prior to 2020. They began by discussing what they wanted to know about the residencies, set against the principles WrICE claims to engender. Themes and considerations for the focus groups included the notion of “aesthetic cosmopolitanism” (Papastergiadis, 2017), as well as western imaginaries of home’ (Berger, 1984) versus tessellated, historical experiences of ‘home’ and ‘origin’ (Amrith, 2013). In addition to this were questions regarding the experience and efficacy of the WrICE residency.

Because the pool of writers had different experiences of WrICE across several years, a focus group format (typical in social science and communication disciplines) enabled conversation and comparison between iterations of the program. The focus group format also gave writers a chance to meet again with peers they knew as well as meet others from the region, potentially an incentive to participate.

A review of the WrICE 2021 interview transcripts allowed identification of power differentials and assumptions. New questions arose such as: How did writers and writer-facilitators account for the potential elitism of the program (English language proficiency and literary background were criteria for selection). In addition to these ethical ‘knots’ of selection, writers’ expectations of the experience and understanding of what the writer-facilitators wanted from the writers proved areas of concern for them. In response, the research team added questions: Why did writers think they were selected for the residency? What did the writers think they were expected to bring?

The mechanics and conditions of the interview experience was itself a site for an ethical, inclusive approach. The researchers factored in the acknowledgement of writers’ time; the management of time zones; the problems of internet access and bandwidth. The focus groups were scheduled across three sessions in May 2022, enabling an iterative approach to the questions and interview techniques.

Unlike the individual interviewees (from WrICE 2021 participant interviews), the focus group writers reflected on their experience from a longer temporal distance – for some this was one year,

for others it was more like five or eight years. Focus group writers were asked how they felt before and after the residency and their answers mostly jived with the recent individual interviewees. They were nostalgic about the camaraderie formed during the residency. Also, like the recent interviewees, they established friendships with one another that went beyond the residency. Asked what they would like to change or do in the future, they universally said they would like an opportunity to meet with the network more broadly and more often. As two writers summed it up: “[W]hat’s remarkable about WrICE is the experience to see the three-dimensional writers across the Asia Pacific” and “[C]ertainly my world has [been raised] and my sphere of reference and influence has, and I think that’s the most profound effect on the writing regardless of whether or not it’s evident in the writing itself [...] the network has also provided opportunities” (focus group 20 May 2022).

At times, especially towards the end, the writers riffed off one another freely. The interviewer questions inevitably led to further questions from and among the writers, as well as comparison and other interactions. Two kinds of knowledge – facilitation and experience – were contextualised within a democratic frame.

Essaying WrICE

The project’s ethos of collaborative, emergent sense-making and its interest in staging ethical encounters based on uncertainty and not-knowing – by holding a ‘nothing’ space – meant that it seemed appropriate to include processes of “essaying” (Carlin, 2018) among our early methods of enquiry. Essaying describes techniques for writing in an open-ended essayistic mode, that can be structured within different workshop settings to elicit and build collective accounts of given objects of enquiry. Essaying, Carlin has argued previously,

offers a way of creatively broadening our critical purview to include the affective, the embodied, the ephemeral, the uncertain, the speculative, the *cuts and knots* within our accounts, in composing the stories we tell and the arguments we stage. Collective essaying offers a site for gathering and rehearsing new approaches to world-making and generating new forms and occasions of risky account (Carlin, 2018, p. 12; emphasis in original).

Essaying can serve as a method for elaborating and sharing tacit knowledge, for wondering into what we know and/or imagine of and around the object of enquiry; it encourages an improvisatory, provisional form of writing rather than more considered modes of argumentation that are often synonymous with knowledge creation in the humanities and social sciences disciplines. Importantly, as well as composing accounts that are open to including the heterogeneous subjective elements listed in the quote above, essaying is a mode of enquiry that argues that what we *don’t know*, and how we (consciously or unconsciously) populate that not-knowing, can bring insight alongside what we think we *do know*. Within a group, then, those who know very little about the object can bring as much value to the accounts being developed as those who are, in one or more domains, considered experts.

The interest in essaying as methodology has been a keen focus of both Rendle-Short and Carlin’s writing and research practice, and indeed is foundational to the principles of WrICE (see Carlin, 2018; Carlin et al., 2018; Rendle-Short, 2014; Rendle-Short et al., 2018; Rendle-Short & Murray, 2021).

An ‘object of enquiry’ for a collaborative essaying workshop or a collaboration-for performance can be anything held in common (even temporarily or conceptually) among the participants, for instance, in our previous experience, ‘[the city of] Manila’ or ‘The Fabpod’ (an architectural

prototype), ‘the Black Summer bushfires’, drawing-as-*dragen* (Latin for drawing), a ‘devotional object/icon’, or queer kinship. For *Essaying WrICE*, we asked what could emerge if we conducted a workshop where we as a research team of five looked at ‘WrICE’ as the object of our enquiry.

We began with the open question: ‘what is WrICE?’ by which was meant: ‘what is WrICE, for each of us, knowing what we know and don’t know, as of now?’ Through ‘essaying’ methods, we hold off from attempting to answer the question immediately. Instead, each of the five of us was tasked with creating a personal list of all the concepts, words and ideas that came to mind as we thought, independently of each other, about the question. This is a method for following and documenting as many as possible of the divergent trails of association our minds bring to the object of enquiry. It is influenced by the ‘myopic’ listing methods of Bruno Latour and Actor Network Theory (Latour, 2005, p. 105). The next step was to look at the ‘strange’ list we had produced, and to discern a thematic concept that connected some or all of the items on the list. This concept – for example, ‘consolation’, ‘the body’, ‘lag’ and ‘heightening’s’, then became the topic for a 25-minute-long exercise in ‘essaying’. At the second workshop, a week later, we each performed a third round of concurrent essaying, during a 25-minute period. This third set of essays was tasked with speculating synthesis of sorts in response to the entire previous set of ten mini-essays.

In sum, the two workshops thus produced a total of fifteen mini-essays. The product of the ‘essaying WrICE’ experiment is threefold: firstly, the rough shape of the essays themselves as potential first draft material for a polyphonic, collaboratively written essay of a kind; secondly, the emergence of a set of key themes related to the definitional, theoretical question of ‘what is WrICE?’, themes which, we argue, might be more surprising or divergent than might be arrived at through other methods; finally, the consolidation of the group of researchers-come-essayists themselves as an ensemble more attuned to each other’s – and our own – biases, interests, obsessions, styles and tendencies. In the conjunction of these three results, we can begin to trace the effects of the concept of “uncertainty as technology for moving beyond” (Akama et al., 2018, p. 103), which we posit here as a key element in the pedagogy of encounter.

Some emergent principles of methodology

When we consider the methodologies demonstrated in the research above, there are distinct patterns and/or threads. Notably there is emphasis on the experimental, the imaginative, the collaborative and iterative or evolving. It is purposefully predicated on knowing and not knowing, uncertainty and the ‘not-yet-made’ or ‘what-might-be-next’. It is about holding space. A very safe space. Declaring the necessity of the imaginary as a route to encounter. As a form of art activism, it is intentionally non-hierarchical and attentive to horizontal, parallel, on-a-level relationships. The proposition of ethical encounter and exchange is informed by values of the slippery, illusive or indistinct (Laws, 2004), the insights of queer and feminist theory that embrace refusals and unorthodoxy (Halberstam, 1998), the hybrid and relational, the margins and interstices, the ‘indeterminate and transgressive’ (Carlin & Rendle-Short 2016, p. 2), and the transformative power of lived experience (Ahmed, 2017). Outlined below are three overlapping compositional principles distilled from the case studies above.

Ethics as a process

The problem with ethics is the assumption that it might be a fixed set of rules. But the principle we are holding onto here is the idea of ‘ethics as a process’. What we mean is that ethics as articulated in this project is an iterative process, a series of encounters; an openness to the other, to difference;

attentive to what is embedded within and beyond. It is a process leading to and within and as a result of the encounter itself. Ethics as brought about *through* the encounter. The relationship between art, artist, and politics is necessarily intertwined. As one writer put it: ‘I actually don’t know what was so special about this group, or the time we shared together, but it really made a big difference in the way I think about writing. And in a way I think about myself, even. And it really changed the way that I think about my job [...] what it means to be alive’ (post-interview 22 November 2021).

The question of ethics within the context of power dynamics is not an acquisitive thing, ‘to have’, but a dynamic ‘that’s constantly changing, something that requires ongoing reflection and response’ (Lillie et al, 2020, p. 42). Tania Canas argues in relation to ethics and self-determination and the role of the researcher, that there is a research opportunity to ‘theorise as’ rather than theorise for (45). Indigenous poet and WrICE alumni Ali Cobby Eckermann, speaks to this power dynamic around the WrICE table: “The more you practise standing in your truth the more you won’t waver in it” (Carlin & Rendle-Short, 2019, p. 276). She speaks of sickness, emotion, literature as well-being; kindness and generosity as measures of strength, how it is through kindness that we establish the grounds for mutual respect, how this is the place from which we can dialogue and tell stories (xviii).

In the research reported on here, we are interested in not just the ethics of encounter but ethics as a process. In other words what happens when *and as* the encounter takes place. How this works in practice is an attentiveness to trust, respect, acknowledgment of the other and/or difference, and the embracing of mistake or ‘failure’ or rupture. One such example of failure was to do with the English language being used as a privileged mode of communication in the residency. Those not fluent in it can be disadvantaged. In one instance when one of the writers struggled with English, fellow residents who knew her native language turned into instant translators. Despite that, as one cohort observed, she must have still missed some of the conversation: ‘I felt quite bad that we were having these quite nuanced conversations. She was very eager to participate. You know, and I learned so much from her, but you know, it was just patchwork. And I really thought for an international residency, I thought we could have done much better (focus group 20 May 2022). In a forthcoming WrICE residency for one of our writers a full-time translator is being engaged for the duration of the residency.

Holding (prepositional) space

The provocation of holding space methodologically is that you are doing just that – *holding space*, no more, no less. But what does that mean? How do you do it?

In the context of this paper, we are thinking about holding space as a team of creative researchers, both as ‘pedagogical agents’, and as writer-participants ourselves in WrICE. This holding is an ethical project: thinking through, exercising attentive listening, being curious and inquisitive, ensuring the engagement is mutually generative and productive, being attentive to hesitancy, doubt, and uncertainty as sites of possibilities. Also being vulnerable, ‘stressed participants’ when sharing work. It’s about reassuring participants that what is said in the room ‘stays in the room’, that silence is okay. It’s a prepositional space where the relations *between* are the thing, *how* the space is being navigated, the crisscross back and forth and around and around, how participants think or relate *across, besides, beyond, around, following, near, toward, beneath* one another and the work (Rendle-Short, 2020). Navigational lines are crucial, it’s a subversive and transformative crisscross where hetero-normative patriarchal positionalities, privileges and structures of power are troubled, potentially subverted. The building of trust is a backbone. This is a liminal, queer space, away from the usual constraints

and everyday living. Untangling, identifying and working out knots that arise in conversation as the time together *is unfolding* is embraced as central to the process. As Ellis et al write: “It’s about languaging. Being attentive to words, to meaning. To the meaning that can be smuggled in however unwittingly. It’s about *taking seriously* – which might have nothing whatsoever to do with being serious” (Ellis et al., 2021, p. 1). The aim or intention of this kind of unfolding is not to underscore or confirm preconceived notions or outcomes ahead of doing it but to welcome surprise. In this sense holding space as encounter as *preposition* is a site of *communitas* (after Edith Turner (2012)): “*inside the between* is where we show up, where we find each other, where we dwell, and yes, where we un-learn also” (Rendle-Short, 2021, p 6).

Uncertainty and ‘the not-yet-made’ or ‘what-might-be-next’

The work of pedagogical encounter as articulated by this research, seeks to repudiate the formal binary and hierarchies of critical and creative knowledges. It encourages new conceptions of artistic exchange that begin from a position of uncertainty and risk, even doubt – what’s going to happen, will this turn out well? This principle of uncertainty and the not-yet-made emerges like ethics as a process and holding space out of the experience of doing and having done, making and having made, being together and having been together. As Ahmed reminds us, it’s the lived experience that informs the theory, rather the other way around (2017). What we have found is that there is a yearning for radically unscripted spaces for exchange and collective dialogue as well as for community. We might think of these experiences in the way Kathleen Stewart refers to ‘atmospheric attunements’ as a ‘compositional process of dwelling in spaces that bears, gestates, worlds’ (2011, p. n.d). There is a need to surrender to the process, to ‘move beyond’, to imagine new possibilities, as Carlin et al argue: ‘these imaginings can be a confident and encouraging force that manifests collective and connected possibilities (2018, p. 122).

Conclusion

In this paper we have considered what we are calling a pedagogy of encounter enacted during our initial ARC research. We articulate an approach wherein iterative, collaborative and process-led practices enable us to ‘meet’ power and ethics as we do the research activities, *as we go*, as it unfolds. We demonstrate the promise of this approach through a set of emergent principles of methodology.

As we have articulated, one of the challenges to developing ethical methodologies is that it is never quite possible to identify and remove all embedded structures of power. Through this research and the writing up of these findings we have endeavored to bring the question of the ethical to the site, practice and experience of encounter (including the encounter between each of us as researchers). Key to this undertaking is the reflexive practice of doing and making and the forging of respectful, equal, inclusive, accepting relationships.

Through the fulcrum of the WriCE residency model our research in relation to public pedagogies has been interested in pushing ‘through’, ‘against’ and ‘towards’ our own set of burgeoning discourses, knowledges and vocabularies. These findings emerge out of the principles distilled above and the notions embedded within, that of the impossible-to-predict, the unforeseen connection, unexpected intimacy, curiosity, impossible-ness, risk, embracing of failure or rupture. In doing this research in this way, in the iterative round, we continue to ground the enquiry close to evolving creative and critical intersectional practices rather than the more traditional literary practices at large. As we have often reminded ourselves in our research meetings ‘we are the encounter’, it begins with us.

Central to these encounters is the impossibility of what we don't know, or to put it another way, the idea of uncertainty as a site of possibility. The 'impossible' we are signaling here is not the impossible-ness of the slippery and pervasive barriers that oppressive hegemonic power structures enforce daily (although this is foundational to any argument for ethical encounter), but a different impossible-ness. It is the impossibility of not knowing and perhaps never knowing, of never arriving; the impossibility of things remaining unresolved. In a practical and practise sense (how we and our writers do this), pivotal characteristics of this 'impossibility methodology' include the always embrace of uncertainty, holding space for the not- or never-yet-made, allowing for what is unfolding, coming face-to-face with the always vulnerability.

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One of the key principles of our ARC Discovery Project research is a rejection of traditional literary hierarchical structures and knowledge generation (insofar as it is possible). The convention of first named authorship, and the prestige associated with the first position in naming does not sit comfortably with the collaborative approach to writing we take consistently in this work. In this sense all five authors should be seen as 'first' authors of this text.

Biographies

Collectively, we the writers of this article are the core research team on the Australian Research Council (ARC) funded project *Connecting Asia-Pacific Literary Cultures: Grounds for Encounter and Exchange*. We are based in the School of Media and Communication at RMIT University, Melbourne, and the University of the Philippines, Diliman. In her research and writing, Melody Ellis is interested in creative practice as a tool for critical, ethical and creative inquiry. Francesca Rendle-Short focuses on getting in/under the skin, prepositionally speaking. David Carlin looks at how stories are desired and resisted, made and unmade in language, bodies, places and encounters. Lily Rose Tope is engaged with Southeast Asian literature in English, ecocriticism and ethnicity. Michelle Aung Thin is concerned with cross-cultural creativity, contemporary creative practice in Burma and southeast Asia as well as freedom of expression.

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