

Creative Writing Methods for Collective and Regenerative Thinking

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This article asks how creative practice researchers — ordinarily working in disparate fields — might find common ground to speak across disciplines in addressing important issues and shared problems. It makes a case for the value of creative writing methods as tools to enable this shared space, and through which diverse scholars can explore the embodied and networked aspects of their “thinking” and “doing” as (creative practice) researchers. Specifically, we discuss a writing workshop that we ran in Vietnam’s Ho Chi Minh City, as well as the *Listening* chapbook that developed as a result (and which accompanies this article), as a case study for how these methods might be deployed. The chapbook, we believe, highlights the poetic and material aspects of language and writing, and explores how these can enable the expression of more than the “informational” aspects of reflective writing. We reflect on how the chapbook emerged as an extension of previous work by co-authors Jessica Wilkinson, David Carlin and Michelle Aung Thin in creative writing methods, specifically around essaying, collective writing and poetic inquiry. We hope that one of the contributions of this article is in the detail of its description of the process of this experiment which gave rise to the *Listening* chapbook.

The authors are part of a sizable group of both staff from RMIT University (based in Australia and Vietnam) and external creative practice collaborators who had been working together on a collective project, known in shorthand as “Regen VN,” across 2024–2025. This larger project has been attuning to socio-ecologically-minded practices in Vietnam. By this, we mean that the extended project group was attempting to respond to the interconnectedness between human societies and the natural environment through our respective practices, and to consider how we might practise in more sustainable ways. We were trying to understand — through connecting, conversing, and collaborating with practitioners and their practices, which were already in advanced or nascent development in Vietnam — how *academic* practitioners might assist in augmenting (or simply learning from) the plethora of innovative socio-ecological practices in and around Ho Chi Minh City (aka Saigon).

As noted below, there were several clusters of activity taking place as part of this project, and much collective thinking and discussion was emerging and evolving. This creative writing experiment, then, arose as we were asking the question of how we might creatively capture some of this thinking beyond the bland documentation of a report. Three of us, who are academics in the discipline of creative writing (Michelle, David, Jessica), proposed to lead this group through creative writing methods, including essaying and collaborative writing, and to see how this can provoke new articulation, reflection and documentation of/on a collective project.

In every scholarly discipline — creative or otherwise — writing is used as a tool to discuss and critically reflect on research findings. However, those of us outside creative writing, who do not consider ourselves as “writers,” often find writing daunting; we have not been trained to consider how to deploy creative writing techniques to help unearth and articulate new perspectives on our work and thinking. This creative writing experiment, then, was put forward

as the first “deliverable” in a potential series of similar activities, because everybody can write, and writing is generally “accessible,” although not everyone has the training or skills to make that writing perform in “artful” ways.

This is where the creative writing workshop provided an intervention of sorts. We suspected that this exercise might help our colleagues capture reflective and critical perspectives and also the *affective* components of our research and engagement experiences. Further, we wanted to test ways to generate creative outcomes that do not delimit our findings or knowledges, but which might continue to resonate with and provoke readers. In this sense, the project aligns with such research methodologies as autoethnography, where the experiences of the researcher and their personal narratives are significant components of the research, and enable them to explore broader cultural, social, and political contexts.^[iii] It also has strong alignment with narrative and poetic inquiry, where the writing of narrative prose or poetry becomes a qualitative method through which researchers can process, present and analyse research.^[iii] As we discuss below, the *Listening* chapbook and this article offer a distinct contribution to the field of creative research methodologies, through demonstrating how colleagues exercised new skills in verbally articulating creative practice thinking; they also show how a creative writing workshop can spur a cross-disciplinary exchange of ideas. In addition, we canvassed co-authors’ responses to the workshop experience and this paper also draws on these voices. In this way, the chapbook and article together capture the multiple voices of the group communicating in multiple registers through this experiment.^[iv]

Co-author, design practitioner Francesco Mazzarella:

“[This workshop] exposed me to the wonderful world of creative writing. I attempted using this technique for the first time during my ethnographic research in Saigon. This allowed me to attune to the whole of my feelings and get closer to the essence of my experience. It felt like such a liberating activity, and I plan to do more on this, in my future field research trips and projects, even in combination with other forms of expression, such as film, textiles, drawings, exhibitions, etc.”

Regen VN – a brief overview of the broader project

The “Regen VN” project has been focused on exploring socio-ecological issues in Vietnam (specifically in Ho Chi Minh City), amplifying existing regenerative practices in that location, and exploring ways to deploy creative practice in the face of contemporary crises. Many of us involved in this project work at RMIT University, which has campuses in Melbourne and Ho Chi Minh City. We had been working together to expand our research training program in the Asia-Pacific region — the Practice Research Symposium (PRS) — which is a program for creative practitioners to undertake higher degree research (Masters and PhD).^[v] The project, then, developed from conversations taking place between local and visiting colleagues as well as peers in Ho Chi Minh City at these gatherings, where disciplines represented include media, design, sound art, architecture, landscape architecture, interior design, visual art, fashion and textiles, and creative writing — as well as creative practice adjacent fields, such as business and entrepreneurship.

Given the nature of this particular moment of global polycrisis (climate change, war, famine, untenable costs-of-living), it is unsurprising — and exciting — that transdisciplinary research teams have burgeoned in university settings as a way to share ideas, skills and support for problem-solving difficult futures; further, we are seeing creative practice methodologies play a

lead role in driving such teams and their research. For example, the “Creatures Collective,” based in Canada, USA and Australia, introduce themselves as “a group of Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars, knowledge keepers, activists, artists, thinkers, learners, and educators working to confront the erasures enacted by colonial and other forms of violence” (Hernández et al. 840). Members of this interdisciplinary group are based across the globe, though they put forward the idea of “manifestings” as a means by which they can “demonstrate the workings of [their] research and relationships” as a collective (839), and “embrace and embody [the group’s] plurality and multi-vocality” (858). As they note, the Creatures Collective “gather[s] and co-create[s] knowledge... through conversation, shared experience grounded in place, the navigation of relationships, and the constant (re)interpretation of stories, experiences, reflections, and imaginings” (839). They offer this “collective manifesting as a methodology”:

not only as a way of generating and sharing knowledge, but also of relationship-building by making ourselves vulnerable to one another, and indeed to those who read this work. It is in those spaces of (albeit always unequally) shared vulnerability and co-reflection that we believe we can find bases for working together against colonial-capitalist violence and its effects on our other-than-human kin. (858)

“Regen VN” has brought together a similar collective of researchers, and our project grew out of our mutual desire to probe the power and potential of creative practice in the face of intractable socio-ecological problems. As a situated project, we wanted to investigate how creative practice might help us to rethink and reconfigure the ways we engage with each other and the local environment (chiefly in and around Ho Chi Minh City); how it might help us to work towards so-called “sustainable” futures. We have variously explored what creative practice can and might “do” to help “problem-solve” — or perhaps, more accurately, “problem-frame” — current local concerns, questions, anxieties and their relationship to those issues as felt or experienced on a global scale.^[vi] Creative practice research is the methodology that most of us use, but the distinct, discipline-specific creative practice methods we use vary. We were also curious as to what might happen if such a broad range of disciplinary thinkers came together for the one project, and how we might collaborate when looking towards the same set of issues.

Our initial approach was to explore “the city” of Ho Chi Minh City through four clusters of activity that leveraged particular expertise:

- “Practising Vietnam”: in which cluster leads and participants visited small architectural practices in Ho Chi Minh City, Hanoi and Hue to observe vital emerging architecture characterised by its adaptation to climate and place;
- “Murky Mapping”: in which cluster leads and participants embraced the inherent ambiguity in map-making to reveal diverse aspects of urban life and landscape in Ho Chi Minh City;
- “Cultural Intelligence”: in which cluster leads set the scene for conversations between local and visiting artists and writers through a sharing of (sustainable) practices and of making things together;
- “Saigon Sound Cultures”: in which cluster leads and participants used sound and listening to recalibrate relationships to the world and each other in Ho Chi Minh City.

In our first week of on-site activities (April 2024), we not only explored the city through these clusters of group activity — sharing stories, contexts, and ideas; we also brought together

creative practitioners (internal and external to the university) and representatives of local businesses and NGOs (including Novotel, Red Cross, Oxfam, Hemp Oi, Hity, Arbor, Green Ant, KPMG and more) as well as local artists and makers. We shared ideas on local sustainable and environmentally-minded practices and contemplated what creative practice research thinking might do to amplify, extend or support the approaches that are already demonstrating innovation or success in Ho Chi Minh City. Some of us began to wonder what might emerge if we were to process some of this thinking using some creative tools.

Co-author, researcher in entrepreneurial macromarketing, Vicki Little:

“Stepping from the social science world into a world of poets, designers, and architects was sometimes disorienting, and perhaps because of that, generative of new ideas and inspiration. Being open to experimentation and risk taking with new ways of thinking and writing, and with new collaborations, felt truly luxurious in these quantified, output-oriented times.”

Deployment of creative writing methods

Six months later, when the “Regen VN” collective regrouped in September 2024, our writing workshop tested how discipline-specific methods might be used across a cohort of diverse researchers to foster collaboration, think anew, iterate the thinking process and strengthen creative contributions to intractable problems, such as climate change. We were keen to explore how methods could bring us all together — that we might foster a “common ground” for creative communication, using our common tools of language, but in different — aesthetic, poetic, imaginative, provocative — ways. While some of us (as academics in creative writing, for instance) are more actively “trained” in using language in these ways as part of our practice research, we are also adept at easing “non-writers” into creative spaces through workshop settings.

The *Listening* chapbook emerged from a workshop led by creative writing practitioners/scholars within the larger Regen VN collective: David Carlin, Jessica Wilkinson and Michelle Aung Thin. The workshop, conducted at The Old Compass Café in Ho Chi Minh City in September 2024, invited participants to “essay,” each from their own position as a node within the network. Afterwards they moved into “random,” disciplinarily diverse groups. The aim was to get participants to reflect and report back on their cluster activities, but to do so from perspectives that were emergent, synthetic, and unrehearsed. To enable this, their usual relationship to writing as a seemingly transparent technology for description and analysis were made strange by introducing unfamiliar writing methods: essaying and collective writing.

Co-author, practice-researcher in interior design, Roger Kemp:

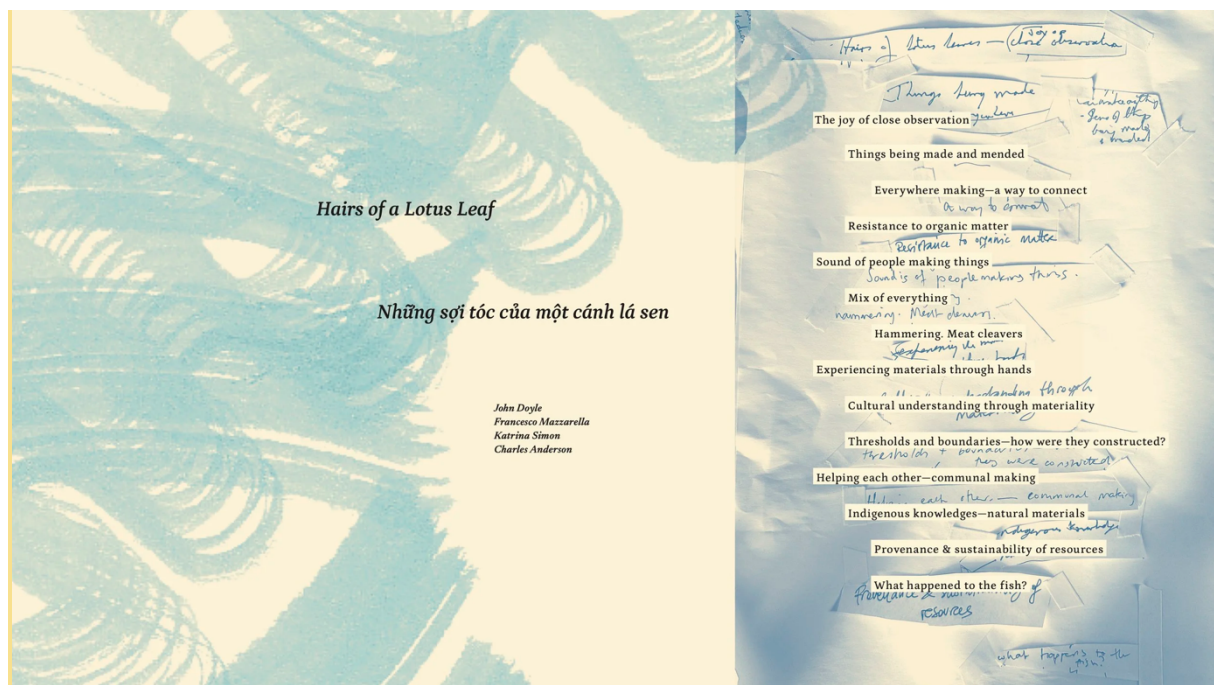
“Coming from a design discipline that is inherently visual and spatial, writing is often a secondary tool in the expression of ideas. A lack of practice and a lack of skills and methods means that writing becomes a laboursome process — [I have found myself] unable to find the words or provide a compelling narrative. The writing workshops have provided a set of tools and processes that have allowed me to move beyond the perceived formality and linearity of writing that seemed so pedestrian to a space of exploration and creative expression.”

The workshop was about using language in different ways — for instance, paying attention to the poetics of writing, and inviting expansive and improvisational (“essaying”) approaches to

narrative storytelling — to articulate understanding of experiences, encounters and thinking related to the project. In line with the broader ethos of the Regen VN project, the workshop embodied Anna Gibbs' argument that "writing is a critical form of resistance to important aspects of the present, including the injunction to communicate in ways codified by the academy" (222). Our thinking is aligned with Lahman et al. (41) in asserting that researchers need only aim for "good enough research poetry" for that mode of inquiry to be effective and useful. That is, we believe creative writing methods can provide shifts in thinking for amateur writers, and not just for advanced practitioners. We were also influenced by ideas from Rendle-Short et al. on writing "in communitas," where "writers of different backgrounds and levels of experience [have] the chance to step outside their familiar writing practices and contexts, and connect deeply with writers from different cultures and across generations" (3).

Co-author, practitioner-researcher in architecture, John Doyle:

"I place a lot of personal importance in being [an] architect, and doing architect things — drawing, making, modelling and producing spatial outputs. I don't feel comfortable writing. I am suspicious of designers who rely on writing to demonstrate their ideas. It is not our medium. But in this process, I found a sense of spatiality in the process of writing. The speed at which we worked, and the free exchange of ideas in the form of observations, anecdotes, worries, hopes somehow reflected my perceptions of the city around us, which mirrors this process at a much larger scale. I was reminded that architecture and urbanism are discursive practices. While we make with our hands, we spend much time discussing what is to be made, how to make it, when and most importantly why. The writing we produced is an attempt to capture this process as an outcome which augments spatial practices and serves to help others understand the vitality of this city."



Essaying

The first part of the creative writing workshop focused on the practice of “essaying.” This drew from techniques previously trialled by members of the group in various interdisciplinary and international settings (see Carlin; Akama, Pink & Sumartojo; Carlin, Cunningham, Pang & Wilkinson). “Essaying” refers to the long tradition of the personal essay, which can be traced from Seneca, Sei Shonagon and Montaigne to Woolf, Didion, and Baldwin, among many others (see Lopate; Chevalier). The essay is often opposed to other nonfiction forms such as the scholarly article, in that it openly acknowledges and deploys the affective and embodied, the speculative, tangential and multiple, within the human subject-who-writes. In this, it aligns with other experimental writerly forms as — what Kathleen Stewart calls — “thought-acts”:

Experiments in poetically re-pairing composition and critique such as autoethnography, prose poetry, fictocriticism, flash fiction, and many others matter, not as models, embodiments, or performances of thought but as the actual thought-acts of sounding out, timing, voicing, cutting, chafing, gliding over, evading, and so on. (521)

Conventional wisdom is that the essay has tended to be “personal rather than collaborative in its approach,” as Graham Good puts it in the “Preface” to *Encyclopaedia of the Essay* (Chevalier xix). However, increasingly this individualism has been challenged. In this workshop, participants, sitting alongside each other, were led through a sequenced set of exercises designed to let them approach and assemble their accounts of their “Regen VN” experience in ways surprising and curious to themselves. These exercises involved techniques of heterogeneous listing, reframing, and improvised writing — time-constrained “essaying” (see Carlin).

Co-author, creative writing practitioner-researcher, Jessica Wilkinson:

“As a poet, I responded to the essaying activity with a poem-essay. By this, I mean that the piece that emerged took on the form and structure of a poem (lineation) but with the spirit of the essay — i.e. ‘taking an idea for a walk’ (a metaphor that is used regularly to refer to the essay, but which no one seems to assign to an originator...though it has origins in Paul Klee’s idea on drawing as taking a dot for a walk), or an attempt to probe complex feelings about encounters in Saigon, discursively. Writing in a collective setting — many creatives writing at once, on separate things — can be a great way to focus on the ‘task’ of engaging with words, engaging the mind to transpose complicated thoughts and feelings into text. Equally, constraints can help to channel thought, to weed out detritus or the mess of swirling thought. Pulling threads — palm leaves, lines of a poem — from the morass to then weave into patterns — swirls, flowers, successfully mimetic or unsuccessfully unbounded — generates shapes in the mind, on the page; connections between unconnected things; an essay, a poem.”

The quiet, parallel essaying was followed immediately by a sharing — reading aloud — of the resultant essay drafts in small groups. This helped to socialise the strangeness and vulnerability of the process, especially for the “non-writers” in the group, and opened the way for the next, collaborative stage of the workshop.

Readers can see the “results” of this essaying in the *Listening* chapbook. All participants were urged to title their mini essay “On ...” — e.g. “On Silence”, “On Movement”, “On Choosing Pleasure”, “On Continuous Cloud” — so that there became a “meeting point” of minds thinking together, a weave of perceptions, a constellation of noticing.

Co-author, design practitioner-researcher, Yoko Akama:

“Chaos — calmness

Brrrrr — Hmmm

Hot on the streets — freezing AC rooms

Possible to imagine — impossible to deliver

Body feels things — body can’t type on laptop

Body taste things — body won’t let it out on laptop

Inspired by others — judging my own limitations

Herding cats — exciting collective outcomes”

The workshop leads engaged with each participant by giving them light feedback on their draft essays, often drawing the author’s attention to creative ways to enhance these works: for example, through possible structural adjustments, or “reordering” of lines or paragraphs, to enhance the aesthetic potential of textual “revelation” of ideas; or, by augmenting the texture of language and line to evoke sensorial experiences. Or, the “editors” drew attention to latent aesthetic qualities that were developing in these pieces already.

In Charles Anderson’s “On Frequency,” an array of alliterative, assonantal and onomatopoeic phrasing evokes impressions of Tan Quy market and the surrounding hems, where the Saigon Sound Cultures cluster had organised a sound walk the day before the writing workshop. The sound walk had used digital apps to “map” the area of the market, which has been sold to developers and is slated for demolition. Anderson’s use of these literary devices to “meet” the market noises in language is emphasised by the brevity of lines, which, centred on the page, create a shaped poem that alludes to the title’s recording of “frequency.” And so, the poem offers another mode of “documenting” sound at the market.

Several other authors also “essay” along the currents of sound, smell and sights of that same market, where motorbikes fume and roar, vendors call to customers, and an array of feathered and finned creatures confront the knife’s edge between living and dying. The sensorial overload in Yoko Akama’s “On Being Swallowed” sparks consideration of the divide separating ideal and real, divine and earthly. Agnieszka Kiejziewicz’s “On Silence” follows the energetic hum of the place as it permeates everything, and is detected between two people as an unspoken language. Kok Yoong Lim’s “On the Chopping Board” observes the life-and-death that sustains the market stalls; Lim submits Mandarin characters (Lim’s mother tongue) to the “chopping board” to contemplate the constitution of 命 (life), 时 (time) and 空 (space) — extending experience, through language, towards transformations of thought. Michael Graeve’s “On Approaching Distances” “languages” the experience, too, using repetition and a free-associative logic to capture the “sounded memory” gained from “one attention leading to the next.” Renick Bell’s “On a Fish and Pink Socks” follows the team of “listeners” who are archiving the sounds of the market before its impending destruction, using smartphones covered by athletic socks to protect against wind noise. Men who are “sitting in the street, selling something” laugh at these sock-covered phones; self-reflective humour captures something of the twinned passion and absurdity of the researchers who are shoring up these fragments against ruin (to paraphrase T. S. Eliot), finding sense and joy through shared purpose.

Co-author, practitioner-researcher in media arts and design, Kok Yoong Lim:

“Even as I tried to speak with the bird, for the bird, through the moment of death, I was still speaking as a human. Listening and writing become a method of empathic engagement. Listening is an act of surrender, giving up mastery and allowing the world to speak. The act of writing however binds the experience to human meaning. The poem becomes both a gesture of humility and a confession of human limitation. Regen [VN] is not only about ecosystems; Regen [VN] is also about regenerating our ways of seeing, of listening, and accepting that even our most sincere efforts are still ours. Regen [VN] is shaped by human desire to repair what we have broken.”

This gathering of textual explorations of the Tan Quy sound walk demonstrates a plethora of approaches to recording and processing data gleaned from sensory, embodied encounter. Where the smartphone could record, map and capture movement in space and sonic data, the sensing human was noticing, interpreting, associating; the creative pieces hold space for this embodied data to be explored through inventive transmutation. It is noteworthy that these methods of essaying are capacious enough to enable participants to bring in modalities from their own practice, such as sonic and visual elements, as seen, for instance, in the alliteration of Anderson’s piece, or the visual poetics of Kok Yoong Lim’s essay.

Co-author, researcher in music and art practice, Renick Bell:

“[The essaying] workshop freed me from expectations of writing a ‘normal’ essay about my sound practice, whatever I had assumed normal would be, and allowed me to find some philosophical threads related to my raw sensory feedback and emotional response to that situation. I’m encouraged to try that again, maybe much more, and possibly even to integrate it in the storytelling that is part of my regular performance practice.”

Another set of poetic essays[vii] — Becky Lu’s “On Comfort,” Michelle Aung Thin’s “On Choosing Pleasure,” David Carlin’s “On Folding” and Jessica Wilkinson’s “On Energy” — all reflect on a creative workshop that had taken place days earlier, where participants attempted to make coconut palm leaf sculptures together. A shared anxiety runs beneath the surface of these four pieces. Where all four authors more-or-less describe the difficulty of making the palm leaf flowers, following the instructions of “the Uncle,” each draws different material into parallel relation as part of the process of reckoning with diverse feelings of discomfort. Lu and Aung Thin place themselves in the moment of the weaving workshop, their thoughts roaming widely, restlessly, from concern about being a good host (Lu) to “violent daydreams” of craft-related wounds (Aung Thin). Cut, fold, staple, knot evolve in different hands as Aung Thin concludes that design “is making with what is in front of you.” Carlin constellates memories of travel along the Mekong Delta with news about the recent, devastating typhoon in Hanoi, as he sits with discomfort in his body, which needs to adjust to time and language differences, heat, climate crisis, the weaving task at hand: “Nobody can be prepared,” he writes. Wilkinson, too, considers what energy she has consumed and whether it is enough for what lies ahead; if the poem is as flaccid and failing as the woven flower, or if it is at least an “event” for understanding one’s contradictions, connections and failures.

A third set of essays in *Listening* lasso perceptions of Ho Chi Minh City, as refracted through the perceptions of architects and interior designers. Phoebe Whitman’s “On Greening” draws green imagery into focus, marking “green” as a human desire, our effort to restore and revive. In John Doyle’s, “On Making Lots of Things in a Hurry,” he states that “Green growth is not a

thing,” and observes a turn from growth to transformation: “the work of many hands... bit by bit adapting the city to the future,” Doyle’s final sentence — “The uncertainty of youth ... open, never finished, always in a process of alteration” — rounds out the surprising emotional edge to this short essay, a gesture, perhaps, that this experience will be held close, carried home as ethos. In Roger Kemp’s “On Continuous Cloud,” the Mekong Delta offers a dual metaphor that carries a murky thickness (history) and reflects endlessly regenerating clouds passing overhead (future). This metaphor finds its parallel in the view “between two buildings, steel on one side and stone on the other” — the essay points us towards twin energies of “purpose and negotiation.” Katrina Simon’s “On Movement” charts the passage of a group through a landscape (specifically, Crescent Mall Park in Ho Chi Minh City’s District 7), documenting the non-human flows and currents that move around and through the space while also meditating on the “lines and traces of hands and eyes” that constitute — and can continue to constitute — a city’s developed/developing terrain.

The Mekong Delta appears in several of these essays, but is drawn to the fore in poetic works by Milica Božić and Nhã Thuyên. Božić contrasts a visitor’s sense of being overwhelmed by Ho Chi Minh City with the image of a local woman gliding her boat gently on the river – a lesson, perhaps, on how to navigate a hectic space. Nhã Thuyên’s “On the Form That I Don’t Want to Carry Along” flows along and with the River; the poet tries to hold the River’s many-stranded stories (myths, histories, anecdotes) and wonders how this heavy entanglement might be both honoured and reconciled — might “demand a new sentence.”

Finally, Francesco Mazzarella’s “On (Dis)connection” kicks into a manifesto-like register — its weave of reflections on visiting Ho Chi Minh City give way to questions, suggestions and imperative commands for how we might collectively act to ethically sustain the next generation of creative practice.

As can be seen in some of the co-author reflections included in this article, what emerged was contingent, improvised, sketchy, and would likely have emerged differently on a different day — yet we think of these as productive aspects rather than bugs in the system. They draw attention to the always-situated, embodied nature of the work that we do, and enable us to capture something textually parallel to our project’s engagement with the city and with others through writing.^[viii] As demonstrated by the pieces in the *Listening* chapbook, these methods led to formally diverse outcomes that were unanticipated by the authors. Indeed, although “essaying” was at the forefront of what we set as a task in the first part of the workshop, we would argue that implicit to that is a grounding in poetic inquiry, which is reflected in the way that some of the essays evolved as poems. This poetic element was enhanced through the next stage of the workshop.

Collective writing

For the second half of the workshop, we wanted to test the porousness of our respective practices in another way — that is, where the first half of the workshop invited a diverse range of creative practitioners to “think with” creative writing methods and approaches as a way to transmute one’s thinking into engaging creative outcomes, the second half of the workshop pressed these practitioners to “think with” one another, regardless of their own discipline or participation in specific cluster activities.

“Collective writing” in the academy has been referred to as a “resistance practice” that can help ease the “alienating experience of the academy’s individualisation of both labour and

knowledge production" (Campbell et al. 1); as a way "to disrupt the ferocity and narrowness of individualistic writing" (Sonja Arndt, in Peters et. al. 876); as a way to move against the conventions of the academic article "that tightly structure it as a product of industrial culture" and which drains scholarly writing of creativity (Michael Peters, in Peters et. al. 871); and as a pathway towards "new collective intelligences" (Richard Heraud in Jandric et al., "An Inquiry" 108). Liz Jackson suggests that collective writing acknowledges that "the other has something to contribute to one's own understanding and knowledge," and that it is therefore an "educational" practice (in Peters et al. 876). Sean Sturm extends this idea of openness, noting that collective writing involves an openness to "dissensual (diverse) rather than consensual (unified)" perspectives or positions; to "alliances" with others; to experimentation in the writing process itself — that is, collective writing as an "openness to the outside" and (borrowing from Deleuze) to the future (in Jandric et al. "Continuous Struggle" 857).

Collective writing — as "creative writing" — has been tried and tested, through various approaches, by the workshop facilitators in several of their previous projects. In one of these (Carlin et al.), four writers met online during the pandemic to "write together" through the common experience of impasse with respective projects; in dwelling with the sticky stuff together (writing, sharing, redrafting, editing) they used collective writing as a goad to push through moments of "impasse" together. Carlin had also co-written, with 12 other artist-researchers and environmental humanities scholars, *100 Atmospheres*: a 400-page, multi-voiced interweaving of planetary concerns. In another example, Wilkinson (a poet) and Tammi Jonas (an "agroecologist" and writer) collaboratively crafted a hybrid essay (constituted of mini essays, lyrical prose, poetry and exegesis) as a way not only to creatively explore and communicate ideas about food ethics, but also to test the essay form as a space for enacting collaborative thinking and mutual learning (Wilkinson and Jonas). Aung Thin discussed her writing with a Myanmar artist about a project that reinterpreted archival photographs to reclaim history (Aung Thin and Khin). The process required the crossing of cultures, languages, and geopolitical realities — due to political sensitivities, her collaborator's identity had to be concealed. What developed was a collaborative practice that focused on trust and has resulted in further projects. In each of these examples, which were shared with the workshop group, the writers had used writing as a multi-faceted tool with which to approach obstacles (of impasse, of cultural differences or sensitivities) and find a common ground and purpose to communicate with one another and to a future reader.

This collaborative activity was partly inspired by the conceit that we need to collaborate and think together to address the problems we are faced with. That is, many minds bring many perspectives, diverse disciplinary expertise and methods, and generative cultural and ideological differences. In collaborating, we might prompt one another to explore things in different or new ways. We wanted to test collective writing strategies on this multi-disciplinary group of practitioner-researchers through experimental writing prompts, which might then also seed collective scholarly approaches down the track.

Co-author, poet and Adjunct Professor in creative writing, Alvin Pang:

"The assemblage that is the Regen workshop is itself an extension of the processes it critiques. I mean this in the sense that we have agency. The wild is not out there but with us, is us. It prompts me to consider what it means to conduct a different economy of generation, dissemination and reciprocity, which involves recognising not just our similarities but our meaningful differences in perspective, position, discipline, culture, language, life-practices. To let the wild win also means listening to the detritus of each

other's untamed reflections, speculations and reactions, without immediately jumping to sorting or selection. Perhaps what can be done is to sift — seeking what nourishment we need in any moment, leaving the undergrowth be to provide for the future."

The large group was split into cross-cluster (and so, often cross-disciplinary) groups; they were asked to be curious about other group members' cluster activities and their contexts, to ask questions, to listen to responses and to document this group discussion through writing or sketch. Drawing on Bonnie Stone Sunstein and Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater's *Fieldworking* methods, participants were prompted to share what surprised, intrigued and disturbed them through the cluster activities; to tell the story of "what happened"; to determine the connections to climate thinking and sustainability goals; to discuss what might "come next."

Once some preliminary notes were made, the groups were instructed to look at this documentation and to note down common themes or threads — or "key words" or metaphors — that "run through" these notes, the questions or trouble spots that arise. Then, each group was asked to "build together" a collaborative piece of writing that might synthesise different threads of thinking, drawing to the fore how we share and problem-solve/frame, through language, our concerns about socio-ecological issues.

The groups then presented their "results" from this activity. We read Lam Hong Lan and Michael Graeve's twinned poem, which "calibrates perspectives" on time, space and movement through the city; Roger Kemp, Renick Bell and Becky Lu presented the product of processing their group discussion through a digital permutation: a haiku confronting the productive frustrations of reconciling perspectives, punctuated humorously with a pixilated photograph of a little dog crossing the road alone. Phoebe Whitman, Yoko Akama, Nhã Thuyên, Milica Božić and Michal Teague began note-taking on a large piece of flood-stained butcher's paper and ran with the visual metaphor to "poem" the flows of "rivering" together — tributaries branch off from documentation to memory, from pen mark to photographic trace to digital permutation. Vicki Little, Alvin Pang, Duc Trinh Tran, Kok Yoong Lim, Katrina Simon and Andy Stiff developed a collective scholarly article (led by Little) exploring the tensions in human-nature relationships implicit in climate change. This was later condensed (via Pang's cento-like intervention) into a poem deploying anaphora, using the definite article ("the") to begin each line to generate a sense of unrelenting momentum, of "face-off" between capital and "the wild," asserting that "the wild will win" in the end, with or without us. John Doyle, Francesco Mazzarella, Katrina Simon and Charles Anderson constructed a poem from the group's various handwritten notes made on butcher's paper during the workshop using cut-up and bricolage techniques. In a statement accompanying the poem, they refer to a local architect colleague's reference to "Rasquachismo" — "an approach to urban life in which you adjust the city with what materials and means you have available to you".^[ix] This cut-up/bricolage poem, then, offers a metaphor not only for sustainable practices occurring in the city, which is "constantly being adapted to meet the needs of its residents," but also for "communal making," which encourages us to take into account multiple perspectives and "to help each other."

Co-author, practitioner-researcher in sound and visual art, Michael Graeve:

"Coming together in Listening isn't about being radically innovative. Instead, to allow for overlap, you move into a shared space of negotiation. Nonetheless, common intent and context unfold subtly to reveal unspoken assumptions, habits, and hopes. It is in

this oscillation that meaning and momentum can be co-re-encoded, allowing construction of an activating archive.”

Interestingly, all five collaborative works emerged as poems in different forms, using a range of techniques to bring voices together — a pair of lyric poems (with equal number of lines); a haiku; a visual “river” poem; a cento; a cut-up/bricolage poem. This recalls Sturm’s (in Jandric et al. “Continuous Struggle” 857) observation that collectively written texts will often deploy “a logic of juxtaposition that is open to multiple interpretation” — and using techniques such as collage, exquisite corpse, or splicing genres together — thus demonstrating an openness not only to the multiple voices and contributions of the collective, but to the act of writing as a space in which the collective can come into being.



Publishing as proof of concept (and excuse for a reading event)

We see lines of connection between our project and that undertaken by the “Ecopoetic Encounters” group, a collective of eighteen poet-researchers (based across the UK and Asia-Pacific) who use ecopoetry as a way to “raise intellectual and affective awareness of ecological issues” (Walker et al.145). They put forward the idea and practice of “anthologethnography”, as “creative writing research that pursues ethnography (cultural writing) via anthologising (collating poems or other creative works)” (140). This methodology, they claim, “weaves distinct voices and perspectives into interrelational assemblages that illuminate connections as well as divergences” (141). Our project takes an “anthologising” approach to bring our voices together also, although we differ in the multi-disciplinarity of our collective, and the fact that only a limited number of us are established creative writing practitioner-researchers.

As noted above, everyone was encouraged to continue working on their individual and collective pieces after the workshop; these pieces were then sent to the workshop leads for feedback. Through the editing process, we encouraged authors to develop the draft pieces so that they might focus on one coherent idea, and so that this idea might be conveyed and enhanced through one or two craftily wielded devices or techniques. In other words, we focused on lifting the aesthetic interest of each piece, and to enhance the relationship between the articulation of a concept (in relation to the Regen VN activities) and the idea of the writing as a creative artefact. This is well reflected, we believe, in the *Listening* chapbook.

All of these contributions were then translated into Vietnamese by Hanoi-based writer Nhã Thuyên (a participant in this project) along with Phạm Thu Uyên and Chu Lan Anh. Translation of this work was important to honour the place in which the Regen VN project had unfolded, of the many acts of translation that had taken place as we moved through various landscapes and other spaces and exchanged ideas with local thinkers and makers. While some of us speak fluent or basic Vietnamese, others among us know merely a few words and phrases; our continued engagement with the city relies on the “openness” and generosity of other bodies and other tongues.^[x]

This bilingual manuscript was then delivered to WeDoGood, a risograph publisher based in Ho Chi Minh City. Excitingly, the WeDoGood team designed the layout of the chapbook with an eye towards its creative innovations — each collective piece was realised, for example, through a range of fold-out designs, as if the text was enabled to become a physical metaphor for the extension of self and selves through collaborative endeavour.

We celebrated the chapbook with a launch and reading event in Ho Chi Minh City in March 2025, identifying a sense of joy and excitement amongst the group, which had arisen through these moments of coming together not just through the workshop but through the publishing and celebrating of an artistic publication together.

Conclusion

This writing experiment grew from an already interdisciplinary project, and was fuelled by a compulsion to test how creative writing might deepen our thinking in relation to the “Regen VN” project while also extending our creative engagement with one another.

We draw on Sonja Arndt’s discussion of the power of collective writing, which

is demonstrated in its ability to build on deviations from restrictive norms, that aim to imagine, argue for and create academic and scholarly spaces where all academics feel they have a space, and where...there is not only an acceptance of, but a common, respectful expectation of “‘re-critiquing,’ ‘re-voking’ and ‘re-conceiving’” both the sense, purpose and appreciation of the writing and of the institution as a whole. (Arndt in Peters et al. 877)^[xi]

The *Listening* chapbook showcases collective writing in several senses: that is, from writing side-by-side, to writing together on a shared output. This framing article demonstrates an extension of this collective endeavour into exegetical spaces. Further, as noted in the italicised reflections throughout this article, the contributors to this project reveal how they have been variously stretched through this experiment, not only through testing how ideas can emerge through writing, but how writing alongside and with others can catalyse thought-pathways beyond the “restrictive norms” of academic spaces. For some, this writing process has given them permission to elevate the personal, emotional and embodied experiences in their

research; for others, it enabled risks in thinking and writing. Some note the potential this exercise unlocks for new collaborative partnerships and possibilities, while others express how gaining new tools and approaches would help them to augment their own practice and research.

While exploring transdisciplinarity is not the focus of this article, we have explored here how creative writing — including essaying, collective writing, poetic inquiry and creative publication — can help us to shape creative and critical discourse around transdisciplinary activities. This is a topic that deserves further investigation. While this particular experiment was led by the creative writers in the group, we imagine that further experiments — led by other disciplinary methods and expertise — are also possible, to lead the group to test their flexibility in other ways, thus gaining additional perspectives and facilitating new approaches to addressing socio-ecological problems. Further, if a creative writing workshop can spur a cross-disciplinary exchange of ideas, we wonder how workshops led by other disciplines within the collective might add further dimensions to such exchanges, and in fact become a model for collaboration, helping us to shape discourse around the transdisciplinary. We therefore look forward to further experiments together.

See [here](#) for the full list of endnotes linked in the essay.

For the full list of references, see [here](#).

The *Listening* chapbook contains illustrations by the artist Becky Lu, whose art is also featured elsewhere in this issue of *PR&TA*. To see more of her work and read about her creative practice, click [here](#).

Download the full *Listening* chapbook [here](#).

This chapbook was originally printed in limited edition risograph by Wedogood, where the English and Vietnamese versions of the writing met in the middle of the book. This downloadable version of the chapbook presents the English and Vietnamese versions in sequence, though note that the collaborative writing pieces appear only once, with three appearing in the English section of the book, and two in the Vietnamese section. These collaborative pieces appear in different page sizes, as they were foldouts in the original printing.

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The Regen VN collective are a sizable group of both staff from RMIT University (based in Australia and Vietnam) and external creative practice collaborators who had been working together, across 2024–2025, on a project attuned to socio-ecologically-minded practices in Vietnam. The authors listed for this article were specifically involved in this creative writing experiment, though the collective itself is an even larger group of academics and practitioners.

Please see [here](#) for more about individual authors.