

Article

Performing *Yuánfèn*: An Exploration of Untranslatable Words in the Lacunae Project

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Abstract: In this paper, we discuss a collaborative research project called *Lacunae: Embodying the Untranslatable*. The issue of untranslatability has been a much-discussed topic in translation studies, with recent debate linking it to performativity. Although untranslatability has received some attention lately, the debate has been largely theoretical, confined to a textual conception of translation. In the study discussed in this article, we explored an applied approach to (un)translatability, working with/through the body in space, positing the body as the vehicle for deciphering the untranslatable. We draw on an embodied way of knowing as a phenomenological framework to construct knowledge as lived experience. The study aimed to investigate the lexical, intercultural, and aesthetic potential of performing untranslatability by exploring a series of untranslatable words through research-based theatre. The data generation process involved a retreat where nine researchers/artists/practitioners addressed the research question through practices like process drama, Butoh, physical theatre, improvisation, and visual arts on mixed media. In this paper, first, we introduce the theoretical framework and context of the study. Next, we illustrate the methodology, data analysis, and findings, with reference to one untranslatable word from the Chinese language, *yuánfèn* 缘分, loosely translated as ‘serendipity in relationships and life events’. We contemplate the practice in this workshop through a philosophical, pedagogical, and research-based lens. Finally, we contemplate future iterations of this project, reflecting on how performing *yuánfèn* could inform theatre-based research on migration and identity in education.

Keywords: research-based theatre; untranslatable words; lacunae; *yuánfèn* 缘分

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1. Introduction

This paper attempts to capture and reflect on a shared experience: one in which the co-authors, along with six other drama, dance, translation, and intercultural practitioners, gathered together in Ireland in 2022 to explore untranslatability through research-based theatre. In doing so, we make a case for embodied and performative approaches to untranslatable words’ enduring problem (and opportunity). This debate has primarily been confined to theoretical, textual conceptions of translation. Firstly, we situate the paper within the theoretical frameworks of untranslatability and intercultural engagement, suggesting that the art form of drama, particularly the element of dramatic tension, provides a fruitful avenue for exploring untranslatability in intercultural education. Then, we describe how the ‘Lacunae: Embodying the Untranslatable’ project was informed by practice-based research and research-based theatre (Lea and Belliveau 2020; Belliveau and Lea 2016). We then take the reader on a journey through a shared experience: an improvisation-based workshop exploring the concept of *yuánfèn* 缘分, led by co-author Modesto Corderi Novoa. We unpack key moments during the workshop to explore how elements of dramatic tension brought about a more profound, embodied understanding of the untranslatable word,

before suggesting how a performative approach to untranslatability can be channelled toward intercultural engagement.

2. Untranslatability and Untranslatable Words

The issue of untranslatability has been a much-discussed topic in translation studies, referring to words in one language that have no single-word equivalent in another, yet can be translated using various strategies (Greaves 2014). Glynn and Hadley (2021) suggest that the label of untranslatability is a beginning point for innovative or creative approaches: the very declaration of impossibility underpins the creativity required to find a workaround solution. While translators are eminently pragmatic language users and adept at finding a way through the densest of thickets (Large et al. 2018), the debate to date has been largely theoretical, trapped in a textual conception of translation.

From Malinowski's ([1935] 2001) analysis of untranslatable words onwards, many scholars have documented culturally specific terms that do not have a direct translation. Malinowski asserted that translation must extend beyond linguistic uses to the different cultural realities behind words. An untranslatable word provides a glimpse, however partial or obscured, into ways of being, doing, and thinking in the culture from which it springs (Lomas 2018). Cassin et al. (2014) outline how each untranslatable word creates a 'problem', acting as a sign that neither words nor conceptual networks can simply be superimposed from one language to another. For example, there are more than 70 different words to describe the concept of 'rain' in the northwest region of Galicia in Spain (Carabaña and Abad 2016), and 32 words for 'field' in the Irish language (Magan 2020). On the other hand, the Chinese word 'yuánfèn 缘分' or the Indian concept 'karma' are impossible to translate accurately to other languages using only one word. Some ideas or concepts that do not exist in different cultures are the most complicated to explain since they do not have a direct translation.

In Table 1, we document in alphabetical order a small selection of untranslatable words across different cultures that we initially contemplated for this study.

Table 1. List of some untranslatable words initially considered for the study.

Untranslatable Word	Culture/Region	Meaning
Aduantas	Gaelic/Ireland	Unease or anxiety caused by being somewhere new or surrounded by people you don't know.
Cazzimma	Italian/Italy	Street savvy know-how of bending the rules with wicked trickery to achieve a goal.
Dépaysement	French/Francophonie	Feeling out of place, overwhelmed or confused, while in a country different from one's own.
Fika	Swedish	Having a coffee break from work that involves a feast where people can relax and engage in non-work-related conversations.
Ichigo ichie	Japanese	The appreciation of the ephemeral character of any encounters with people, things, or events in life.
Morriña	Galician/Spain	The feeling of missing a person or a place.
Ramé	Balinese/Indonesia	Beautiful mess. A place simultaneously chaotic and joyful.
Talanoa	Fiji/New Zealand/The Pacific	An inclusive, generative, participatory form of dialogue through storytelling
Ubuntu	Zulu/South Africa	'Humanity': The conviction that a common link of sharing binds humankind together.
Yuánfèn	Buddhism/Daoism/Confucianism/China	Serendipity in a relationship.

These words, and hundreds of others, cannot be translated directly; only sometimes can they be grasped at a conceptual level. The title of this project plays on the etymological, linguistic, intercultural, and aesthetic connotations of the word ‘lacunae’. Etymologically, the Latin noun *lacunae* can be traced back to 1660, when it was used to refer to a blank or missing portion in a manuscript. It has been subsequently intended, figuratively, as a void or gap in knowledge. In translation studies, the term indicates the lexical gap between two words that cannot be translated literally. Accordingly, in intercultural studies, lacuna theory refers to gaps in cross-cultural communication. In performative arts, ‘lacunae’ can be viewed as the negative space around the dancer’s body. Similarly, this project explores the opportunity of metaphorical knowledge gaps through cognitive and aesthetic modes of knowing.

3. Methodology

Research into untranslatable words has encompassed qualitative and quantitative approaches, such as lexicography (Lomas 2016), factor-analysis (Scheibe et al. 2007), and applied forms of research; for example, Kabat-Zinn’s (2003) therapeutic program based on the untranslatable word *sati*. Yet, recent debate linking untranslatability to performability (Glynn and Hadley 2021) serves as a reminder that the arts enable us to express what cannot be easily articulated. Embodied and aesthetic ways of knowing lend themselves to exploring words that ordinary language struggles to translate effectively. While there is a renewed interest in (un)performability and untranslatability, this is mainly theoretical and disembodied. In the Lacunae project, we aimed to explore an applied, embodied approach to untranslatability, working with/through the body in space, positing the body as the vehicle for deciphering the untranslatable.

This research was informed by the participatory methodologies at the heart of Research-based Theatre (RbT). RbT is a broad and diverse field that draws upon theatre and research practices to engage artists, researchers, and audiences, both affectively and cognitively (Lea and Belliveau 2020). While approaches to RbT vary enormously, projects are generally anchored in a commitment to honouring the contributions of research participants and the stories they generously share (Cox et al. 2023). The field of RbT is best considered as a continuum, delineated by three principal approaches: playwright-centred, collective, and composite, the latter combining elements of both playwright and collective approaches (Lea and Belliveau 2020). We situate this research as a collective approach to RbT, as the workshops became “methods of data generation and analysis, as through repetition, character work, and exploration, new meanings [were] generated or discovered” (Lea and Belliveau 2020, p. 2). Nine practitioners grappled with untranslatability through various practices, including process drama, Butoh, physical theatre, improvisation and visual arts on mixed media. This approach reflects the methodological pluralism (Barone and Eisner 2012) of RbT, where various academic and theatrical approaches coalesce. As Shigematsu et al. (2022) outline, RbT offers the tools to create research and scholarship rooted in empathic exchanges and understandings. The inherent multivocality and reflexivity of RbT means it is a fitting methodology to explore the ephemeral qualities of untranslatability.

The study aims to investigate the lexical, intercultural and aesthetic potential of performing untranslatability by exploring a series of untranslatable words through RbT, guided by the following research question: *How can untranslatable words be explored performatively to channel dramatic tension towards intercultural engagement?* To address this question, we drew on research methods such as artistic practice, documented through photography and video; interviews; written reflections, in the form of collective mind mapping; and a focus group. The data generation process took place in Ireland in the summer of 2022. Nine experts from drama, dance, translation and intercultural studies (including the three authors) attended a 3-day research retreat. Over the three days, each practitioner led an arts-based workshop centred on an untranslatable word of their choosing, drawing on performative approaches as diverse as Butoh and process drama, with workshops facilitated in a local school hall and a nearby forest. The team was accommodated in an

ex-convent, sharing meals and living spaces. Several reference books on untranslatable words were available on the premises (Sanders 2016; Mak 2016; Lyer 2014). In addition, upon arrival, each team member found one postcard featuring one untranslatable word in their room. Through the research retreat, the boundaries between work and play became porous, with conversations related to untranslatable words not being confined to the 15 h of practice but effectively stretching across the three days. However, boundaries between formal and informal practice still existed, delineated by space (the school) and time (10 a.m.–5 p.m.). Moreover, the experience of formal practice (as opposed to informal conversations) was clearly delineated by the presence of a research assistant who, during the practice, acted as a non-participant observer to document the work through photography¹, as well as audio and video recording. She also kept a log where she noted each task within each workshop (associated with an untranslatable word) and its relevance to *dramatic tension* and *intercultural engagement*, in line with the focus of the study.

4. Theoretical Framework: Dramatic Tension and Intercultural Engagement

Piazzoli's (2022) recent publication on the intercultural elements of drama acted as the theoretical framework for the study. The paper, which advances a connection between untranslatable words and dramatic tension, was shared with the Lacunae team members ahead of the retreat and provided the basis for a mutual understanding of the key concepts informing the research question. The key argument of the paper also informed the construction of the Lacunae research tools, particularly the observation log template and the consequent analysis. It was also revisited in the final focus group, as it directly related to the study's research question. In this section, rather than replicate the content of the paper, we briefly address the key constructs connected to the research question of the study: dramatic tension and intercultural engagement, which in turn feed into intercultural dramatic tension (Piazzoli 2022).

Dramatic tension, as an element of drama, has been explored in depth (O'Toole 1992; O'Neill 1995; Bundy 2004; Pheasant 2015) due to its potential for aesthetic engagement. As O'Toole (1992) argues: "The source of tension is the gap between people and the fulfilment of their internal purposes" (p. 132). This gap is generated by imposing constraints in the story to create an 'emotional disturbance'. O'Toole draws on Ryle (1949), who discussed inclinations and agitations using the metaphor of a rock in a current or eddy in a stream: "An important feature of agitations [is] namely that they presuppose the existence of inclinations which are not themselves agitations, much as eddies presuppose the existence of currents" (p. 91). Ryle (1949) continues: "An agitation requires that there exist two inclinations, or an inclination and a factual impediment" (p. 91). Dramatic tension, then, can be framed as an impediment to what the characters are inclined, or urged, to achieve, rather than the achievement itself. This is also encapsulated in O'Toole's statement: "Tension is the spring of drama. Not the action, but what impels the action" (p. 133). O'Toole and Haseman (2017) identify various types of dramatic tension, related to:

- The Task—the problem of the tasks which the characters must complete;
- Dilemma—the problem of choosing between two courses of action;
- Relationships—the problem of relationships between characters;
- Surprise—the problem of the characters not knowing what lies ahead;
- Mystery—the problem of the characters not knowing what it all means.

Moreover, tension also exists in non-narrative form through the contrasts of darkness/light, silence/sound, and stillness/movement, which Heathcote defined as 'the three spectra of theatre' (Heathcote in Wagner 1976).

Finally, there is a form of dramatic tension that may lend itself particularly to intercultural engagement: metaxis. Itself an untranslatable word, metaxis refers to the dramatic tension generated by the gap between the real and the fictional worlds, and a recognition of that gap (O'Toole 1992). This tension is also pinpointed by O'Neill, who states that in process drama: "Participants are in a continual state of *tension* between representing an experience and being *in* an experience" (p. 118, original emphasis). Boal (1994) empha-

sises that metaxis occurs when the individual belongs completely and simultaneously to two different, autonomous worlds, and the fictional world “*must have its own aesthetic dimension*” (p. 43, original emphasis). To belong, or attempt to belong, simultaneously to two different, autonomous worlds seems an apt description of an individual who has one foot in two different cultural and linguistic worlds, an embodied experience of displacement, partial belonging, and instability. Our paraphrasing of ‘a foot in two worlds’ is an intentional reference to what we believe to be a fitting way to approach these sources of intercultural tension: that of working with/through the body in space, positing the body as the vehicle for deciphering the untranslatable. These forms of dramatic tension were all explored, implicitly or explicitly, at various points during the Lacunae workshops, in terms of experiential practice, written reflection, and discussion. These forms of tension were also used as the key descriptors for the observation template, analysed in relation to untranslatable words and the second key construct in the research question—intercultural engagement.

We define intercultural engagement as an active “critical process of cultural reflection”, with the learner being in-between cultures, investigating ‘self’ and ‘other’ (Harbon and Moloney 2015, p. 19). Several practitioners have asserted the potential of drama towards intercultural engagement (Fleming 2016; Bolton and Heathcote 1998; Crutchfield and Schewe 2017). As Bolton and Heathcote (1998) stated, drama is ideal for developing intercultural awareness, as in drama we are always distancing, or decentring, from our own culture; indeed, “*that is what drama is*” (p. 160, original emphasis). The Lacunae project specifically aimed to explore intercultural engagement through the lexical, intercultural, and aesthetic potential of untranslatable words. We proposed to do this with a particular focus on intercultural dramatic tension. This is defined as a response within a drama that engages a participant at an intercultural level, triggering an investigation of self and others (see Piazzoli 2018, 2022). The intercultural sphere adds nuance to existing forms of tension, rather than being a form of tension of its own. The RbT workshops during the Lacunae retreat sought to make this intercultural dramatic tension explicit for participants through the theme of untranslatable words. Each practitioner sought to use theatre and drama-based techniques to bring this intercultural dramatic tension to light. One example of this was one of the co-authors Modesto Corderi Novoa’s exploration of *yuánfèn* 缘分, the focus of this article.

5. Performing *Yuánfèn* 缘分

For the purposes of this paper, we now turn our focus to one untranslatable word, *yuánfèn* 缘分. To do so, we consider this concept through three perspectives: first, we consider it through a philosophical lens. Second, we explore it through a pedagogical lens. Third, we contemplate it through a research lens.

5.1. Philosophical Lens: The Concept of *Yuánfèn* 缘分 in Chinese Culture

China has a rich and long culture with thousands of years of history. While Daoism and Confucianism are two philosophies native to China, Buddhism, on the other hand, was introduced from India during the Han dynasty period (202 BC–220 AD) and played a significant influence on Chinese civilisation and culture (Wright 1971). Buddhism’s influence in China spread to the point where significant amounts of money and labour were invested in constructing complex temples and impressive works of art (Overmyer et al. 1995). This rising popularity of Buddhism encouraged the development of novel deity representations, architectural settings for their devotion, and new ritual gestures, ideas, concepts, and beliefs that enriched Chinese culture (Zürcher 1972).

People from Western civilisations with roots in Christian, Islamic, and other religions may struggle to fully understand the idea of *yuánfèn* 缘分 since there is no equivalent concept in their cultures; thus, there is no direct translation. The word *yuánfèn* 缘分 in Chinese is composed of two parts: ‘*yuán* 缘’ (a fatalistic destiny to meet; an external factor out of one’s control) and ‘*fèn* 分’ (voluntaristic choice and personal effort to be together;

an internal locus of control). Both Chinese characters have two distinct meanings, but, at the same time, they are interconnected as if they were two faces of the same coin (Chang and Holt 1991). Therefore, the idea of *yuánfèn* 缘分 could be translated into English as ‘serendipity in a relationship’ (Hsu and Hwang 2016). This concept includes a reference to ‘destiny’ or ‘chance’ which is part of any relationship, even when that relationship ends.

In the West, people believe that relationships have an internal force that the individual can control. However, in China, people believe in *yuán* 缘, an external force that controls and explains interpersonal relationships, combined with individual factors (Chang and Holt 1991; Lam 2012). Many scholars have studied *yuánfèn* 缘分 from different perspectives: its meaning and functions (Heger 2015), personal relationships (Goodwin and Tang 1996), romantic relationships (Chen 2009), as a defence mechanism (Lam 2012), and the effects of beliefs in *yuan* on coping and psychological well-being (Lee and Chen 2006; Mann and Cheng 2012). Some commentators believe that *yuánfèn* 缘分 is only connected to Buddhism; however, the word *yuán* 缘 that is used today in China is a fusion of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism (Hsu and Hwang 2016; Lam 2012; Liang et al. 2017). *Yuánfèn* 缘分 integrates the concept of Heaven and humans (key in Confucianism and Daoism, for example). We briefly discuss the relationship of *yuánfèn* 缘分 with these three traditions.

Confucianism stresses the importance of ethics in personal relationships and the concepts of duty, obligation, respect for authority and hierarchy. According to Confucius, there are several key relationships in life, such as the ruler and the ruled, parents and children, brothers and sisters, husband and wife, friends, colleagues, etc. In all these relationships, *yuán* 缘 is a crucial element and is seen as the ‘destiny that comes from Heaven’ and *fèn* 分 since it stresses our choices, respect for others, and need to follow our duty (Lam 2012; Liang et al. 2017).

Daoism highlights the idea of letting nature take its course (顺其自然 *shùn qí zìrán*), and the principle of not doing/non-interference (无为而治 *Wú wéi ér zhì*); that is, doing nothing that goes against nature, going with the flow (Hsu and Hwang 2016), both the action and the inaction. Therefore, in Daoism, the key is naturalness in relationships. Daoist philosophers believed in fate (‘the will of Heaven’) and *yuán* 缘 under the principle of “man proposes, Heaven disposes” (Hsu and Hwang 2016, p. 4). According to Daoism, we must accept destiny and the fact that ‘random encounters’ must be seen as fated to come into our lives as a natural flow (Liang et al. 2017) and learn to let go of the need for action because, in the end, all reality is ephemeral (Hsu and Hwang 2016).

Buddhism focuses on cause and consequences and the concept of karma. According to the law of cause and effect, the present moment in this life is the result of previous actions in past lives. Similarly, our actions in the present will return to us in the future: goodwill creates good, and evil will come if we do evil. There is also the notion of reincarnation and predestination (Lam 2012; Niwano 1980). According to Buddhism, every interaction has inherent reasons, and conflicts are just the results of those causes. However, with time, *yuánfèn* 缘分 lost its original meaning from Buddhism and its relation to reincarnation or predestination. Nowadays, it explains a type of serendipity in relationships, an external force that escapes our control (Lam 2012).

To recapitulate, Confucianism places the greatest emphasis on ethics in interpersonal relationships, stressing the obligation to shoulder one’s responsibility; Daoism emphasises naturalness in interpersonal relationships, highlighting the ease of going with the flow; and Buddhism emphasises cause and consequences in interpersonal relationships, focusing on the mercy of letting go. These three philosophies of life tend to appear dialectically in the processing of interpersonal problems in Chinese cultural societies, becoming sources of content for the cultural belief of *yuánfèn* 缘分 (Hsu and Hwang 2016).

As seen in Figure 1, problems in a relationship can be managed with the belief of *yuánfèn* 缘分, which has two distinct parts. On the one hand, *yuán* 缘 was originally a concept that came from Buddhism and is also related to Daoism. On the other hand, the idea of *fèn* 分 is related to Confucianism (Liang et al. 2017). *Yuán* 缘 in Buddhism and Daoism implies accepting your destiny (*Rèn mìng* 认命). Here, ‘accept’ means one cannot

control or change it; it is a passive assimilation and an embodied way of bearing. Everything happens for a reason and has consequences (Buddhism), and one must acknowledge that the will of Heaven cannot be changed (Daoism) (Hsu and Hwang 2016). Therefore, it requires patience to accept things one cannot control and the idea of forgiveness and tolerance (Xu 2012). There is a delicate balance. If one does not accept destiny, then anger and fury will emerge. On the other hand, fèn 分 is related to the concept of ethical obligation and duty in Confucianism, which stresses the obligations to be accomplished in a relationship. One must bravely understand the heavenly mandate of fate and know one’s destiny (Zhīmìng 知命) so that with effort, one will actively face reality (Hsu and Hwang 2016). Hence, one should show gratitude and respect to parents and society as coping strategies to decrease the possibility of regret and resentment (Xu 2012). Hsu and Hwang (2016) state that, when faced with difficulty in a relationship, according to Daoism, one should observe things without prejudice or expectations. Then, one should examine the root causes and effects and be empathetic with a merciful heart (Buddhism). Finally, people should reflect on whether they have made enough effort according to their duties or responsibilities (Confucianism).

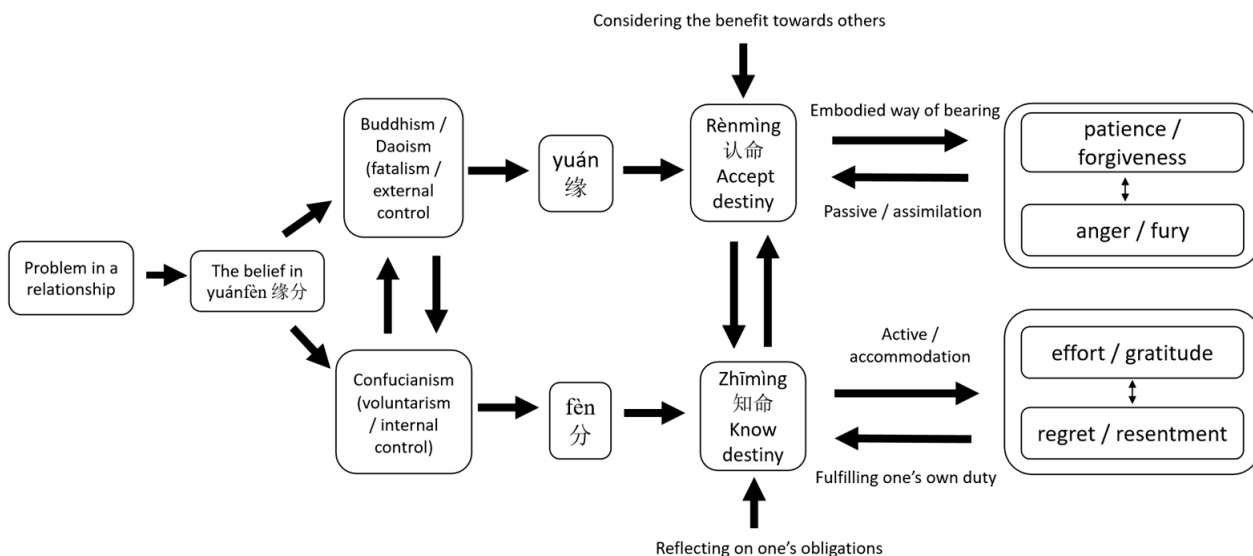


Figure 1. The model diagram of the ‘yuánfèn 缘分’ operation and psychological adaptation in the process of relationship inter-action (Adapted from Hsu and Hwang 2016, p. 3).

As demonstrated above, yuánfèn 缘分 is a very complex concept. As such, we argue that it has a rich aesthetic potential in terms of intercultural dramatic tension: relationships, love, friendships, and the dramatic tensions that can arise from these encounters. In the context of this study, we attempted to explore the aesthetic potential of this untranslatable word through arts-based practice.

5.2. Pedagogical Lens: The Yuánfèn 缘分 Workshop

The primary purpose of the workshop was to afford participants the experience of yuánfèn 缘分, intended as a kind of serendipity in a relationship (Hsu and Hwang 2016), through an unexpected meeting in an unplanned place or time. The pedagogical approach of the workshop was important—improvisation, with its emphasis on creating spontaneous interactions in the moment, with obvious resonances with the notion of yuánfèn 缘分. This workshop was designed and facilitated by one of the co-authors, Modesto Corderi Nova. It lasted two hours and encompassed three sequences: (1) Unexpected encounters at the airport; (2) Embodied loop; and (3) Random encounters. Below, we discuss each phase separately.

1. Unexpected Encounters at the Airport

The *yuánfèn* 缘分 workshop began with an improvisation set in a busy airport. We were invited to use props we had, such as backpacks or suitcases, and the facilitator, Modesto Corderi Novoa, played an airport soundscape as background music. We were instructed to walk through the space as if we were at a busy airport, walking to our boarding gate. After a few minutes, we were advised to ‘bump into’ an old friend by chance (another participant). As we met, we could improvise any emotional response depending on the fictional relationship with that friend. This relationship had to be negotiated at the moment. We were to engage in a short conversation and then continue to our boarding gates. This pattern was repeated several times.

Figure 2 captures one still image of the encounters at the airport. Two women are standing in front of each other, smiling widely, with open hands extended towards each other. The women’s body language transpires the excitement, surprise, and happiness of that particular unexpected meeting.



Figure 2. Unexpected encounters at the airport. Annie Ó Breacháin (left) and Zoe Hogan (right).

In the reflection that followed the activity, it was noted that inherent in this warm-up was a degree of *dramatic tension of surprise*, manifesting as ‘the unexpected’. For some, there may have been an element of *metaxis* occurring, as we embodied the rhythms of air travel that many of us had very recently experienced in the real world (participants had commuted from Australia, New Zealand, Italy, and Spain) and, for some of the group, embodying surprise when bumping into an ‘old friend’. In reality, some of us were meeting in Ireland for the first time, so this fictional exchange initiated an experience of embodied friendliness that deepened during the retreat. In its resonance with the real-life serendipity of nine international practitioners collaborating in a school hall in rural Ireland, this warmup underscored what was being experienced in real life as *yuánfèn* 缘分.

2. Embodied Loop

This sequence was instigated by viewing ‘On Repeat’, a music video by Robin Schulz and David Guetta. This music video was chosen as a stimulus as, although it does not make any direct reference to *yuánfèn* 缘分, it nevertheless depicts the elements of fatalistic destiny and personal choice at the heart of this untranslatable word. In the video, a young

boy wakes up in the morning and starts to do his daily routines (having breakfast, brushing his teeth, and going to class). He takes a bus and sees another young girl. He is compelled to approach her but is too shy and does not talk to her. After leaving the bus, he dies in an accident. Then, we see him waking up again; perhaps it was a nightmare. He repeats his routines, takes the bus, sees the girl again, is too shy to talk to her, and then exits the bus and is killed—in a different way each time. As the facilitator put it: he is stuck in a loop without *yuánfèn* 缘分.

After viewing the video, we were instructed to mime two daily activities in two different locations in the workshop space. We were then instructed to move to a third location where we mimed an ‘unexpected death’. Then, we were to ‘wake up’ and repeat the same actions in the same locations, in a loop. To accompany this embodied improvisation, the facilitator played ‘La Valse a Mille Temps’ by Jacques Brel, an instrumental piece that starts slowly and increases in speed. As the music’s tempo increases, so too does the pace of the improvised embodied loop.

We were free to choose our own daily activities and the manner of our ‘unexpected death’. Some were hit by a car while crossing the street, others had a heart attack. After a few moments’ pause following our death, the loop would begin again with a repetition of daily activities. An example of an embodied loop is depicted in Figure 3, while Figure 4 shows the embodied loop in action in the space. As the song increased in speed, so too did the participants’ performances, alongside and amongst each other. The repetitive, and increasingly frenetic, choreography alongside and in response to the music created an unexpectedly aesthetic sequence; a group of bodies, frantically going about their business, encountering the fragility of life over and over again. Each participant was working to a slightly different tempo, so their paths in the space would overlap and intersect, creating a maddening dance, an aesthetic of unrealised *yuánfèn* 缘分.

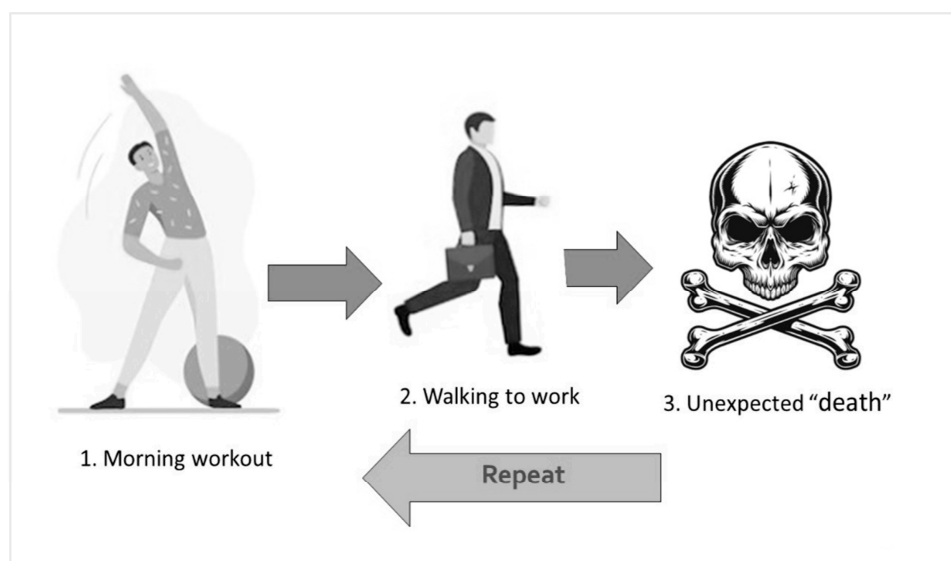


Figure 3. Example of one possible Embodied Loop (images by Freepik).

The repetition of actions in the loop formed a metaphor for the daily routine that we all experience in life. There is an absurd quality to the frantic mimed performances that resonates with the Greek myth of Sisyphus, who tried to trick Death and was sentenced by Zeus to carry a rock up a hill. Every time Sisyphus approached the top of the hill, the rock rolled back down to the beginning, trapping him in a loop for all eternity. Many writers and artists, notably Camus (1965), have explored this myth as a metaphor for humanity’s struggle for meaning against the absurdity of life. This concept has exciting implications related to *yuánfèn* 缘分, since belief in this ancient Chinese wisdom can be a coping mechanism to ‘save us from the absurd’, to believe that there is serendipity in all relationships,

a predestined fate that will create the conditions for us to meet others in a way that gives sense to our lives.



Figure 4. Participants performing the Embodied Loop. From left to right: Serena Cecco, Erika Piazzoli, Zoe Hogan, Peter O'Connor, Annie Ó Breacháin.

To move beyond this existential loop to discover the experience of *yuánfèn* 缘分, we were instructed to repeat the loop, but the ‘unexpected death’ was replaced with an ‘unexpected meeting’ with a stranger (another participant), thereby breaking the loop and avoiding death. When the ‘strangers’ met, they engaged in a brief improvisation of their choosing—this could be dancing, drinking, waving, hugging, staring, or even running away. Figure 5 captures a moment during this sequence where the participants’ loop changes from unexpected death to a random encounter.



Figure 5. Actors breaking the Embodied Loop. From left to right: Serena Cecco, Peter O'Connor, Erika Piazzoli, Helen Smith, Annie Ó Breacháin.

In the initial embodied loop, there was a degree of *tension of the task*; completing daily activities at an increasingly frantic pace. While there was a brief pause after each ‘death’, participants would nevertheless need to get up and restart the embodied loop. When a chance meeting broke the loop, the tension of the task gave way to the *tension of surprise*—breaking the pattern (in this case, remaining alive) as well as *tension of relationship*: Who was the stranger? What were they going to do together? What was their relationship? For some of us, both versions of the embodied loop carried degrees of the *dramatic tension of mystery*, asking what it means to be stuck (or not) in an embodied loop that can end in death or a chance encounter. When we encountered a stranger by chance, some of us experienced a moment of *yuánfèn* 缘分.

3. Random Encounters

The purpose of this sequence was to deepen our explorations of how ‘random encounters’ can be experienced through the concept of *yuánfèn* 缘分. The stimulus was, again, a music video, ‘Speechless’ by Robin Schulz. In the video, filmed in India, a bored waiter instantly falls in love when a beautiful foreign woman wearing a backpack arrives at the restaurant. The woman sits at a table to eat while listening to music. The waiter is speechless in her presence but tries to catch her attention by climbing on top of a table and doing magic tricks. The waiter starts to dance with other people in the restaurant; she finally notices him and laughs. The woman receives a phone call and leaves abruptly, leaving the waiter speechless again. Describing this video, Modesto Corderi Novoa pointed out that the waiter and the woman have *yuán* 缘 because of their serendipitous meeting, but they do not have *fèn* 分, because they could not be together in the end.

For this sequence, we were instructed to create two individual characters that were not originally related to each other. We were also invited to create the conditions for a scene where they might meet for the first time and then improvise the outcome. However, rather than pre-determining roles and situations a priori, these were created spontaneously by letting the body move freely to some background music in silence. This mode aligns with an embodied approach to improvisation, where the body and movement are at the forefront of meaning-making, rather than the mind. To achieve this, as the music stopped, the facilitator asked us to freeze and invited those of us who were watching to co-create the character by responding to the following prompts:

1. What is the person’s name?
2. How old is the person?
3. Where are they from?
4. What is their profession?
5. What is their dream?
6. What is their secret?

This process denotes the improvised embodied creation of Character A. During the reflection that followed this activity, it was noted that the first four questions helped us to create basic information about the character. In comparison, the last two questions helped create a more interesting character by encouraging the development of sub-text, an essential component of dramatic tension. The background song was ‘Common People’ by Pulp. The actor’s embodied silent performance included standing up, making the bed, folding clothes, hanging clothes, etc. The audience gave character suggestions, and the actor chose the following information for character A: Rosa, a 35-year-old maid from Seville working for a wealthy family in New York City, who dreamed of opening her own bakery. Her secret was having three unsuccessful love affairs. Table 2 outlines this information schematically.

A similar process occurred for the improvised creation of Character B. The background song was ‘The Winner Is’ by Mychael Danna and DeVotchKa. The actor’s silent performance included kneeling, taking measurements, and drawing something on the floor. Those of us in the audience gave character suggestions for Character B: Alice, a 17-year-

old dressmaker from Ohio working in Queens (NYC) who dreams of moving to Paris. Her secret was that she was pregnant. Table 3 outlines this information schematically.

Table 2. Information of Character A.

Name	Rosa
Age	35
Origin	Seville, Spain
Job	Maid for a wealthy family in NYC
Dream	To open her own bakery
Secret	She has had three unsuccessful love affairs.

Table 3. Information of Character B.

Name	Alice
Age	17
Origin	Ohio, USA
Job	Dressmaker in Queens, NYC
Dream	To move to Paris
Secret	She is pregnant.

Once the characters of Rosa and Alice were created, those of us in the audience gave suggestions for making their first random encounter. The location, time, and objective of the meeting were very important. The actors who played Rosa and Alice chose one of the suggested scenarios: Alice had arrived at the house where Rosa worked to deliver some tailor-made clothes for the owners, so they met. At this point, the two actors improvised their first encounter. This instant, where two characters met and formed a fleeting connection, was recognised at the time as a lived experience of *yuánfèn* 缘分. The characters' backstories create a degree of dramatic tension, most often implicit in the gap between their dream and their secret—for example, the *tension of the dilemma* in Rosa's situation of dreaming of moving to Paris and her secret pregnancy. Dramatic tension was also present in the knowledge that somehow these characters will meet (however unlikely that may initially appear). Referring to the philosophical explanation of the term (Section 5.1), these forms of tension connect with the Buddhist, Daoist, and Confucian roots of *yuánfèn* 缘分, with its respective emphases on letting go, going with the flow, and ethics in interpersonal relationships. As such, this improvisation activity allowed us not only to gain a deeper understanding of *yuánfèn* 缘分 but also to embody *yuánfèn* 缘分.

Furthermore, some participants experienced a level of metaxis. As we gained an embodied understanding of this untranslatable word, we began to comment on how our presence at the Lacunae retreat, as nine practitioners from across the world, was in itself an experience of *yuánfèn* 缘分. This metaxis between the fictional contexts of the workshop, where characters from different cultural backgrounds meet in unlikely situations, and the real, natural, temporal context of our shared presence in Ireland took on a nostalgic quality directly linked to the Daoist roots of the untranslatable word, where random encounters come into our lives in a natural flow (Liang et al. 2017).

5.3. Research Lens: Investigating *Yuánfèn* 缘分

At what point do the sequences above cease to be 'recreational' and become an experiential channel into *yuánfèn* 缘分? We believe the key to this question lies in an ongoing process of reflection. At the beginning of the workshop, the facilitator explained the concept of *yuánfèn* 缘分. This was peppered with personal anecdotes, enabling us to connect to real life, as well as through the two videos mentioned above—through which the facil-

imator helped us grasp the concept through narrative. This is particularly important when introducing the philosophical aspects of the term, as storytelling helps us to make meaning, processing abstract concepts in narrative form.

Notably, at the end of the workshop, participants were invited to write down their thoughts in the form of a collective mind map. Figure 6 shows a segment of the long scroll on which our thoughts were recorded on paper. Importantly, this scroll was left accessible for the duration of the retreat, with one word added at the end of each workshop. As the *yuánfēn* 缘分 workshop was the fifth in line, this meant that we had the option to write our reflections next to the *yuánfēn* 缘分 bubble or to add to another untranslatable word. The photograph reproduced in Figure 6 captures only those comments that were written directly in relationship to *yuánfēn* 缘分.

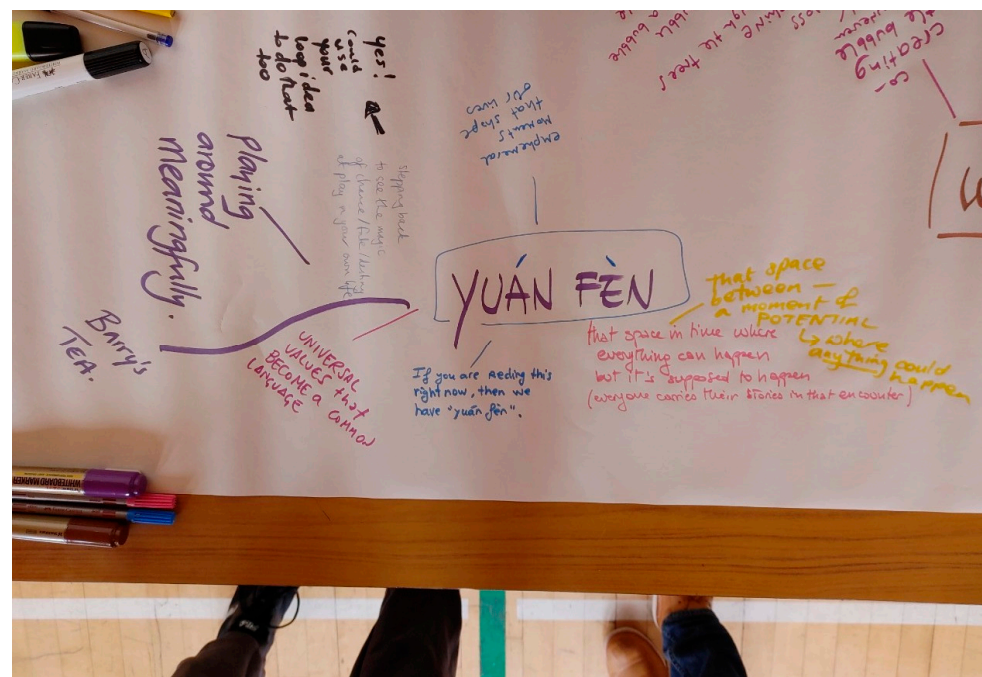


Figure 6. Participant reflections on the improvisation workshop.

The act of writing these comments was performed as a closing ritual, in silence, at the end of each workshop. It took approximately 10 minutes, during which we were free to move from one end of the scroll to the other, digesting the experience of the *yuánfēn* 缘分 workshop, as well as processing the others, and reading each other's observations. This was arguably an essential aspect of the reflection-making process. We begin the analysis with one of the comments, which reads:

“If you are reading this right now, then we have *yuánfēn*”.

This sentence addresses the reader directly, binding the writer and the reader in a unique relationship, defined by *yuánfēn* 缘分. The relational quality of this comment is activated whenever another reads it. In this sense, we argue that this relational approach was made possible by the practice we had just experienced, and RbT as a methodology through which “research is brought into action” (Lea and Belliveau 2020, p. 6). The gaze (if read silently) or voice (if pronounced aloud) of the ‘other’ validates the potency of this statement, bringing the meaning of *yuánfēn* 缘分 into being. Reading the sentence, however, would not be enough to bestow *yuánfēn* 缘分 between the reader and the writer: a contextual awareness is necessary. A Lacunae participant wrote this sentence to another, a group who had just shared a common experience; that is, a workshop on *yuánfēn* 缘分. The sentence thus leverages the shared dramatic experience, which explicitly focuses on dramatic tension. Through the workshop experience, this statement binds participants into a shared understanding. Moreover, the author of the message's reference to the shared

experience does not only refer to the dramatic frame (e.g., the activities above) but also the real context that bound us together. That is, a group of like-minded practitioners that were gathered for three days in an isolated venue, who had just arrived from Australia, New Zealand, Italy, and Spain to be there—whose lives intersected temporarily, as if suspended in time, briefly meeting at the crossroads of a rural school, surrounded by a forest, 230 km from Dublin, Ireland. Thus, the tension arising from this comment is undoubtedly one of relationship and, again, possibly one of metaxis.

Another comment, with an arrow directly connected to the untranslatable word *yuánfèn*, read:

“Universal values that become a common language”.

Here, the writer’s comment denotes having experienced the untranslatable word in terms of ‘values’ that transcend a cultural system’s specificity and cut across the universal. To the left of that comment, another participant had written:

“Stepping back to the magic of
chance/fate/destiny
at play in your own life”.

In this comment, the author used a spatial metaphor (stepping back) to signify that, through the medium of drama, they were able to gain some distance from an everyday routine and contemplate life from a more meaningful perspective. With a direct arrow stemming from that comment, another participant wrote a response:

“Yes! Could use your loop idea to do that, too”.

In this case, the reference to drama is more obvious, framing an actual sequence in the workshop and reframing the philosophical experience (change/fate/destiny) with solid links to a pedagogical activity—the Embodied Loop. Another thread reads:

“That space in time where everything can happen,
But it’s supposed to happen
(everyone carries their stories in that encounter)”.

To which another participant added:

“That space between—a moment of
POTENTIAL
where anything
could happen”.

Here, the two participants feed off each other to delineate *yuánfèn* 缘分 as a ‘space in time’ that breeds possibilities. On the one hand, the first part of the sentence, “it’s supposed to happen”, subscribes to a Daoist philosophy of *yuánfèn* 缘分, whereby one must accept destiny and the fact that ‘random encounters’, as the sequence was named, must be seen as fated to come into our lives as a natural flow (Liang et al. 2017). Yet, the second part of the comment (“everyone carries their stories in that encounter”) may be interpreted through a Buddhist lens, as an individual’s story and their encounter with another is seen as the result of previous actions in past lives. On the other hand, the second comment, “the space between... where anything could happen”, appears to be written from a Buddhist perspective where fate is not predetermined. A final comment directly connected to this untranslatable word reads:

“Ephemeral moments that shape our lives”.

Here, it is worth revisiting the photographic data documenting the workshop and applying a different filter, which can perhaps enable us to distance ourselves from the operational aspects of the workshop, as seen in Section 5.2, to consider it in a different light. To this purpose, Figure 7 is a composition of four key moments of practice, as documented above.

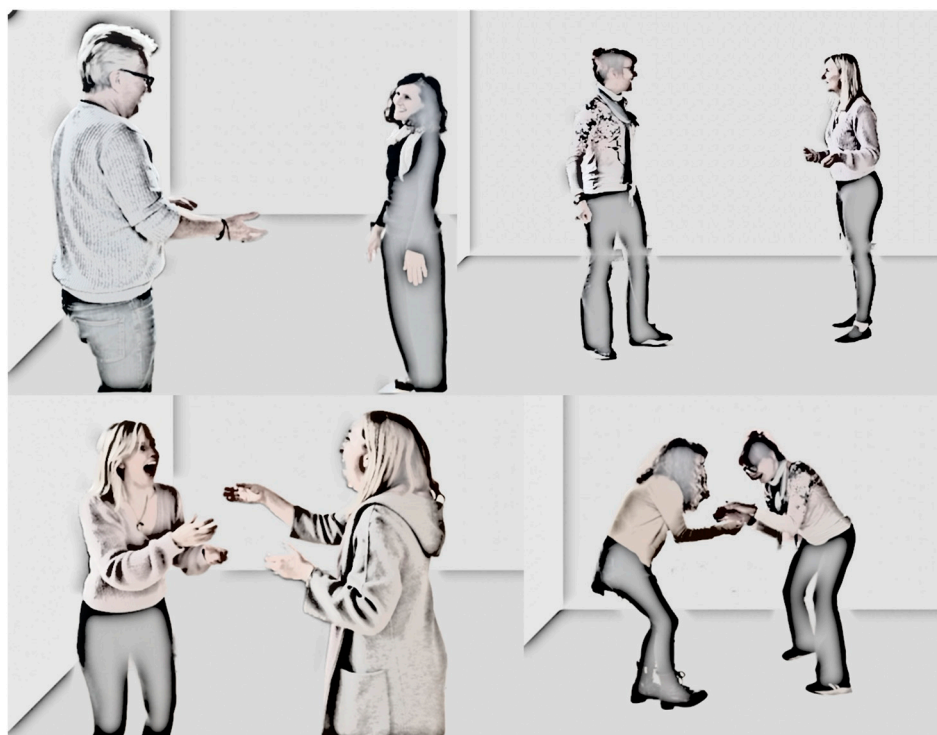


Figure 7. Ephemeral moments of *yuánfèn* 缘分. Top left: Peter O'Connor and Serena Cecco. Top right: Helen Smith and Annie Ó Breacháin. Bottom left: Annie Ó Breacháin and Zoe Hogan. Bottom right: Erika Piazzoli and Helen Smith.

In this image, we have selected four “ephemeral moments that shaped our lives”, as the participant above put it, as a visual representation of practice. The images depict intimate encounters, spontaneous in nature, where two individuals form a momentary connection. The filter on the images is a further layer of representation, to help the viewer consider these not simply as photographic data from an RbT workshop but also as an aesthetic representation of *yuánfèn* 缘分. The monochromatic colour palette essentialises the figures, suggesting the universality of the *yuánfèn* as an untranslatable word. If individuals are recognisable, the viewer may notice that among the eight figures depicted, two figures are represented twice, suggesting that *yuánfèn* 缘分 is an experience we may have many times over in our lives and that even strangers may be interconnected in unknown ways. Finally, the transparent shading of the figures, almost on the cusp of disappearing, nods to the ephemerality of these moments of *yuánfèn* 缘分.

6. Discussion

The comments discussed above about *yuánfèn* 缘分 reflect the research participants’ lived experience of this untranslatable word, informing a co-created glossary based on creative practice. Returning to the research question, *How can untranslatable words be explored performatively to channel dramatic tension towards intercultural engagement?*, we have seen how the practice itself functioned as an incubator to channel various kinds of dramatic tension towards intercultural engagement. Considering the observer’s Practice Log (Table 4), the forms of dramatic tension arising from this workshop are not just confined to those mentioned by O’Toole and Haseman (2017) but encompass other forms of tension such as irony, ‘the space between’ and unintended struggling with fate. In a sense, then, through this engagement with practice and reflection, we experienced a new understanding of the very concept we were looking to examine (dramatic tension). As Eisner notes: “[T]he use of forms of representation that previously had little or no place in research have been recognized as providing new meanings, something needed if understanding is to be enlarged.” (Eisner 2002, p. 211).

Table 4. Lacunae Practice Log.

Yuánfèn	Description	Moments of Dramatic Tension Emerging
Sequence 1: Unexpected encounters at the airport	Role walk—at a busy airport. Improvisation—bump into an old friend and say goodbye. Repeat sequence.	The tension of surprise—unexpected interactions
Sequence 2: Embodied Loop	View music video. Mime two daily routines, followed by ‘unexpected death’. Repeat (with music going slow to fast). Interrupt loop—meet somebody, avoid death.	Tension of ‘unintended struggling with fate’
Sequence 3: Random encounters	View music video. Improvisation (individual mime) Audience create the actor’s character. Repeat with another actor Two characters encounter each other in an improvised scene	Tension of the space-between Tension of relationships The tension of irony

RbT is “a mode of inquiry that transforms data into live performances” (Shigematsu et al. 2021, p. 56). In this research, a corpus of untranslatable words was treated as data, explored through a series of RbT workshops where various theatre and performative approaches became data generation and analysis methods. This methodological pluralism (Barone and Eisner 2012) enabled us to explore the ephemeral qualities of untranslatability. In the final reflective session at the end of the Lacunae retreat, we felt an embodied connection with *yuánfèn* 缘分, further enriched by our collective experience of the retreat—and indeed, this is still the case 18 months later.

7. Conclusions

The possibilities of exploring untranslatability through RbT are vast—even with a single untranslatable word such as *yuánfèn* 缘分, there are countless ways to explore and embody the concept through various performative styles, depending on the lead facilitator, participants, and their learning context. The improvisation-based example outlined in this article proved to be a fruitful approach to exploring *yuánfèn* 缘分, especially in its use of various types of dramatic tension. However, it must be noted that not all untranslatable words lend themselves to dramatic exploration, and not all dramatic conventions effectively unlock the ephemeral qualities of untranslatable words. We suggest that a concept like *yuánfèn* 缘分, which relates to how people unexpectedly encounter each other in life, lends itself to performative exploration through improvisation. In this way, an alignment between the untranslatable word and the mode of performativity can deepen the embodied understanding of the concept. We also suggest that the language of RbT, particularly an understanding of dramatic form, helps to make the untranslatable visible and experiential. A particular focus on metaxis as a source of dramatic tension, an awareness of the gap between the fictional world and the real world, may also have specific implications for intercultural engagement as participants grapple with stepping into ways of being, doing, and thinking in another culture (Lomas 2018) as well as in the fictional world of the drama.

Chinese culture holds that a relationship can only be considered meaningful when both parties share a large amount of *yuán* 缘 (Chang and Holt 1991). Therefore, *yuán* 缘 is the most crucial factor to start an interaction, and it works as an external force for two people who are predestined to meet and develop a relationship; it is a necessary condition, but not the only condition needed to succeed. For example, the seed of the lotus flower is the *yuán* 缘, the primary or necessary condition for the plant to grow. However, it requires suitable soil, usually deep roots in muddy soil, water, air, sunlight, fertiliser, and sometimes gardening effort by humans. All these secondary factors would be the *fèn* 分 (Lam 2012). The following poem illustrates these ideas:

Don't regret that you meet each other too late, but do be precious about your *yuan*, because in this life, any *yuan* is not easy to get. Only those who know enough to cherish *yuan* will realize that even a small encounter might have been prepared for thousands of years. When *yuan* is mature, try your best to make it flower with the most beautiful blossoms. Whether the flower blossoms or dies, if you try your best, you will have no regrets (Xu 2012, p. 91).

These aspects of *yuánfēn* 缘分—the chance or even missed encounter—suggested a dramatic context that would lend itself to further exploration. Indeed, members of the Lacunae project have taken this workshop and adapted it to some of their teaching contexts, including Melbourne and Dublin, using, respectively, Butoh and a process drama approach to explore the aesthetic potential of *yuánfēn* 缘分. Future iterations of this project may involve working with international students to further explore the workshop described in this article, and to disseminate the findings through a performance, collectively woven by the group and addressed at other international student cohorts, with a focus on intercultural engagement in education. The performance would then directly inform subsequent performances, in line with the RbT methodology (Belliveau and Nichols 2017).

Finally, the practice outlined in this article has particular resonances with practitioners working in intercultural spaces in which participants have lived experience of migration and, as such, may be regularly experiencing chance encounters with strangers. As the practitioner reflections in Figure 6 suggest, an embodied exploration of *yuánfēn* 缘分 helps us to become aware of the 'space in time' or 'that space between' where anything and everything can happen, and an awareness that in these chance encounters, 'everyone carries their stories'. In particular, the workshop's use of music, movement and non-verbal performativity creates space for participants to bring their identities to the experience without an overreliance on verbal language. Just as the term *lacunae* is used to describe the negative space around a dancer's body, so too does the silent and near-silent performativity of this untranslatable word, *yuánfēn* 缘分, help us become aware of the negative spaces, or the *lacunae*, in our own lexicons and cultural knowledge.

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Note

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