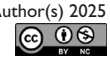
Article

Liminality, flow and *communitas* in 5 Rhythms dance

cultural geographies
2026, Vol. 33(2) 217–231



DOI: 10.1177/14744740251319034
journals.sagepub.com/home/cgj


Natalie Keltner-McNeil
Oxford University Centre for the Environment, UK

Janet Banfield
Oxford University Centre for the Environment, UK

Abstract

Liminality, flow, *communitas* and 5 Rhythms (5R) dance are all considered to have self-transformative powers, and 5R has been analysed as ritual, as movement therapy and as psychologically beneficial. Here, we take methodological inspiration from 5R as movement therapy via nonrepresentational geography, we attend to specific ways in which 5R can be psychologically beneficial by considering participant-identified paths to personal growth, and we examine links between 5R and ritual through a de/reconstruction of the 5R experience as liminal. Drawing on autoethnography and retrospective participant accounts within a research design characterised as 'experimenting experience', we identify myriad micro-liminalities that differ between dance contexts, vary within an individual dance context, and extend beyond the dance context, as well as a set of liabilities that constrain transformative potential. We advance recent work on liminality that moves beyond singular ideas of liminal spaces to multiple spatialities of liminality by framing 5R as an alchemy of liminalities. We also extend critical engagements with the proposed dimensions of flow with respect to its supposed sense of control by proposing the grounding of 5R flow in the lack of control generated by those liminalities, and we challenge the idea that individual flow leads to collective *communitas* by highlighting the incompatibility between loss of self-awareness in flow and the focus on self-identity in *communitas*, suggesting instead that flow and *communitas* are themselves related in liminal fashion in 5R. Thus, we make conceptual contributions to geography, psychology, anthropology and beyond, with potential to stimulate future scholarship in a host of cultural geographical domains, and we offer tentative suggestions as to how we might mobilise 'experimenting experience' for further development in these contexts.

Keywords

liminality, flow, *communitas*, 5 Rhythms dance, ritual

Corresponding author:
Janet Banfield, Oxford University Centre for the Environment, South Parks Road, Oxford OX1 3QY, UK.
Email: janet.banfield@ouce.ox.ac.uk

Introduction

In this paper, we engage critically with 5 Rhythms (5R) dance (a ritual, therapeutic dance form) through the conceptual and analytical lens of liminality (a state of betweenness in ritual processes), to challenge the reductive notions of 5R as a singular liminal space and the liminal itself as singular. Along the way, we question the purported relationship between flow (deep and enjoyable immersion in an activity) and *communitas* (sense of communion in a liminal period), both of which characterised participant accounts of their 5R experience, and tease out both specific forms of self-transformation in 5R reported by participants and factors that impose limitations on such transformative outcomes. Finally, we consider the broader disciplinary relevance of this case study and make tentative suggestions as to methodological opportunities to facilitate development of this line of scholarship.

Briefly, 5 Rhythms is a movement practice developed by Gabrielle Roth in the 1960s. Inspired by the work of Fritz Perls, the founder of Gestalt therapy, Roth developed the dance for people to connect to their bodies and use movement as 'medicine', to work through traumas, suppressed emotions, and bodily ailments by uniting the 'body, heart, mind, soul, and spirit'.[1] 5R is most frequently offered as a 2-hour dance session, where dancers move their bodies through five rhythms: flow, staccato, chaos, lyrical and stillness. This process, called 'the wave', lasts about an hour; two waves happen per class.[2] The tempo of the rhythms follows a bell curve[3]: (1) flow is the 'teacher of fluidity and grace', and teachers play slow music; (2) staccato, the teacher of 'definition and refinement', is met with stronger beats and a slightly faster tempo; (3) chaos, the rhythm of surrender, intuition and creative energy has the most upbeat music and encompasses the 'peak' of the wave. (4) Lyrical, the rhythm of 'synthesis and integration', slows down again, before the wave ends with (5) stillness, where solemn, or slow-tempo music is played once more. Two-hour dances explore the five rhythms mapped onto body movements, although further mappings onto five emotions, life stages, personalities can be explored in 5R retreats and workshops.[4] The music played is typically an assemblage of global, instrumental and electronic remixes of songs curated by a 'teacher' at the front of the dance space, and dancers are usually made aware of the basic rules by the teacher at the beginning of the class: that it is a sober and consent-based space where dancers are encouraged to move how they like, providing their dance does not impede the dance of another person.

5R has been analysed as a ritual, as a movement therapy, and for its psychological benefits.[5] Framed as ritual, liminality becomes central to 5R. Liminality is an anthropological concept developed by Arthur van Gennep, who studied global rites of passage. He separated rites of passage, or rituals, in which a person transitions from one social identity into another, into three stages: separation, when the person is removed from society and stripped of their identity, the liminal, where the individual undergoes ceremonial activities with others in the liminal stage, and incorporation, where the individual takes on a new identity forged in the liminal stage and joins society once more.[6] In the liminal stage, passaging individuals are deemed to be neither their old self nor their new self, but simultaneously both. Liminality has been widely applied in geography to describe threshold, ambiguous, or marginalised spaces, places, land formations, and identities that incorporate self-transformation and, at times, *communitas*.[7] Scholars have critiqued broad applications of the liminal as straying too far from its original formulation, and as being too simplistic, anthropocentric and celebratory.[8] Specifically, we extend recent work suggesting that geographers can add further nuance to liminality through spatialising the concept rather than thinking only of liminal spaces in singular, static terms,[9] by exploring multiple and diverse more-than-human liminalities in 5R.

Victor Turner expanded upon the elements of the liminal stage and applied the idea of liminality to present day societies and non-ritualistic leisure pursuits as the liminoid.[10] Although the term

'liminoid' currently receives little attention in geography, another of Turner's notions – *communitas* – has gained greater disciplinary traction. Turner broadly defined the liminal space as a place of *anti-structure*, or without everyday social norms, a zone of experimentation with identities, norms, and symbols.[11] Stripped of socially prescribed identities, liminal people are ambiguous, oscillating between foregoing and subsequent identities, and – being equally stripped of status – liminal people bond with one another, forming a transient community that Turner called *communitas*.[12] While this notion of *communitas* adheres to dancer experience of community in 5R, it focuses on reflectively forged social bonds and does not capture the pre-reflective experiential spaces that participants mentioned, for which the psychological notion of flow is more appropriate.

Flow was named and described by Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi as an enjoyable experience where people are completely absorbed in an activity, and is typically considered to incorporate nine components: (1) a challenging activity that is finely balanced with the required skills, (2) the 'merging of action and awareness', where sense of self becomes one with the activity or environment, (3) clear goals, (4) unambiguous feedback, (5) deep concentration, (6) a sense of control, (7) self-transcendence, (8) a transformed sense of time and (9) an autotelic component.[13] There is still much debate about the number, nature and relations among these components[14] but the most important indicator of flow for Csikszentmihalyi was the merging of action and awareness.[15] This emergent sense of oneness is allied with a loss of self-consciousness in flow and can entail merging with both human social groups and nonhuman equipment and environmental features in a sense of existential unity and expansiveness. While there is a growing body of work on types of group or social flow,[16] our concern lies with Turner's proposal that individual flow leads to collective *communitas*,[17] as this is problematic due to a seeming incompatibility between reflection on self-identity in *communitas* and the loss of self-awareness in flow. As both flow and *communitas* were variously reported within 5R dance sessions by participants, this study provides an opportunity to explore this problematic relationship further.

Hence, 5R has been framed as a ritualistic dance event with therapeutic and subjective transformational capacity. Moreover, this potentially transformational dance apparently involves both flow and *communitas*, although the liminal specificity of 5R, the relationship between flow and *communitas*, and the dependability of 5R's transformational capacity, are all under-examined. How, though, might such examination be most appropriately conducted?

In cultural geography, Derek McCormack has explored the practice of 5R through a nonrepresentational lens, examining the roles of rhythm and refrain in the dance and weaving teacher instructions from 5 rhythms classes with diagrams capturing the movements of bodies.[18] Consistent with this, we think about bodies as moving entanglements, defined in their ability to affect and be affected, and as human and more-than-human generators of affects, which converge in pockets of time to produce space,[19] and we think of the dance as 'a multiplicity of contingent, affective encounters, relations, directions and speeds'.[20] We therefore also consider space 'as process and in process', where time and space unite – spacetime – in a continuous coproduction.[21] Yet, while we do talk in terms of *affective atmospheres* to describe the constellation of bodies and their combined *energetic affects*, which form a body with a generative force beyond each body's individual energy,[22] we also acknowledge critical perspectives that highlight ways in which emotions and reflective states can be bound up in and create atmospheres as much as precognitive affective embodiments,[23] which themselves do not occur in a vacuum but within a spacetime of practice with specific relations to everyday life. In this way, we can accommodate both flow and *communitas* and we situate 5R in the context of participants' everyday lives.

Relatedly, recent geographical work on flow emphasises the role of flow in placemaking and proposes that engagement with flow might bring methodological opportunities by operating 'through open experimentation', where the future is 'treated as open-ended and neither fixed nor

predictable',[24] thereby encouraging practice-based more-than-cognitive research designs. In this spirit, experimentation from within 5R – as a ritualistic space of nested and intersecting liminalities that produce the person as affected by and affecting others – can evoke less dualistic and more open-ended understandings of both person and place, enabling exploration of how flow and *communitas* co-occur in participant accounts of 5R and interrelate as concepts. Despite participant articulations of feeling more loving towards the self and other dancers, and of carrying aspects of the subjectivity produced in the dance into the everyday world beyond the 5R spacetime, thereby generating behavioural changes deemed to constitute personal growth or transformation, constraining factors are also identified that can impede such benefits arising. In this paper, we thus identify and chart multiple, diverse and intersecting liminalities in 5R to draw out their implications for conceptual understandings of liminality, flow and *communitas*, before outlining the broader disciplinary relevance and applicability of such ideas and tentatively suggesting methodological considerations that might help us to work productively within such an alchemy of liminalities.

Experimenting experience

Participants ($n = 15$ [9F, 6M]), with ages ranging from the twenties to the seventies, and with 5R experience ranging from 6 months to over 10 years, were recruited through posting on 5R Facebook pages and snowball sampling, taking care to secure a balance of teachers and dancers. Beyond conformity to institutional ethical protocols, participant details (e.g. age and duration of 5R practice) and the dances attended are described in general terms only as the dance circles are small and people could become readily identifiable.

The underpinning ethos of the research design was of 'experimenting experience', by which we mean adopting experimental approaches to the subject of study, which is simultaneously being autoethnographically experienced. In this instance, experimentation related to trialling different modes of research to secure diverse perspectives, adopting an attitude and process of learning 5R, being attentive to one's own multiple positionalities, and employing both reflective and pre-reflective modes of engagement with the topic, research and participants. These principles, though, were woven through and integrated with conventional methods of interviews, focus groups and fieldnotes, and we begin by outlining how these methods fit within a sequential research design, before elaborating how Natalie 'experimented experience' through both nonrepresentational and reflective practices.

Sequenced conventional methods

The research process began and ended with a small focus group, of three and two people respectively, to explore how ideas and representations of relevance are picked up and exchanged between participants.[25] As the purpose of the first focus group was to hone the focus and wording of interview questions and gather a variety of opinions on relevant themes, neither prior knowledge nor purposive selection of participants was necessary. By contrast, the closing focus group sought to explore emergent themes and findings from the analysis, including specific reference to co-experienced 5R sessions, so two participants from the weekly dance session and who were known to be friends were invited to take part.

Ten individual semi-structured interview sessions were conducted between the focus groups, ranging from 30 minutes to 2 hours long (average 1 hour 10 minutes), covering topics such as length of and motivation for personal engagement in 5R, both generalised accounts of participant experience of the dance and more detailed reflections on specific occasions or occurrences, comparative consideration of different spacetimes of 5R experience, and individual opinions as to the role and value of 5R to participants' lives. To establish an empathetic approach to participants' sharing of

their own situated and partial knowledges, participants could choose the location (e.g. a park, a café and a back yard), time and duration and format (in person, by phone or on Microsoft Teams) of the interview.

Interviewing ended when signs of saturation were identified through similar themes arising from interview questions and patterns in the data.[26] All interviews were transcribed by hand and uploaded, along with written reflections from dances, into Nvivo. A process of open coding was undertaken, which entailed reading the transcripts and reflections line by line and identifying themes that emerged as relevant to the research focus, then relating these to theoretical work, in an iterative process of analytical induction.[27]

Experimental nonrepresentational methods

Building on the methodological turn towards movement, process and embodied knowledges, including experimental and affective methods for knowing and capturing partial understandings of the world,[28] Natalie's autoethnography took the form of participation in 5R dance sessions on a regular and sustained basis in different spatial and social settings, recording detailed field notes of both bodily/affective experience and reflective responses to them, and drawing variously on her positionality as researcher, dancer and learner.

To understand 5R as an embodied experience, Natalie attended 5R classes once a week in Oxford for 6 weeks, facilitating development of a 'thicker' understanding of the dance, and the sensorial conditions and affects that changed the experience of the dance site week to week.[29] This was supplemented by attending two other London-based dances to provide direct comparison of spatial considerations between the sites. Although autoethnography has been critiqued for being narcissistic and solipsistic, Spry is quick to retort that the focus of autoethnography is always relational, and about producing the 'coperformativity of meaning with others'.[30] Thus, Natalie used autoethnography mainly as a reflexive tool, to relate to what participants said during interviews, and better understand what they had relayed about their experiences of 5R during data analysis, in the context of her own embodied experience of 5R, as a route into the intersections between the becomings of spatiality and subjectivity through 5R for researcher and participants alike.

While autoethnography can 'provide the framework to reflect critically on the ways in which our personal lives intersect, collide and commune with others in the body politic',[31] no researcher can fully separate themself from the power relations within which they are embedded,[32] which makes the learning of 5R and the alertness to one's own multiple positionalities important. The attitude and process of learning 5R placed Natalie in an inferior position with respect to the practice of interest and provided an additional and shifting lens of capability through which to conduct analysis, while her multiple positionalities as dancer, researcher and learner multiplied the autoethnographic perspectives that could be applied for greater analytical nuance and depth. Although these positionalities posed their own difficulties, when, for instance, reading through dance and research logs made clear how much theory, as well as the thoughts of interviewed dancers, was percolating into engagements with research participants, this – once identified – could be remedied with more directed focus on dancers' perceptions of self and space in the analysis.[33]

Through these efforts at experimenting experience, Natalie directly engaged with 5R on bodily, affective and cognitive levels, and the combination of interviews, focus groups and autoethnography enabled diverse perspectives, on the part of both participants and researcher, to be brought to bear on the becoming of spatiality and subjectivity in the context of 5R. Natalie's own relation to and experience of 5R evolved as she acquired greater practice and familiarity with the dance, supporting nuanced comparative analysis, while her progressively established relationships with other dancers facilitated later stages of the research when deeper or more sensitive issues became focal

(e.g. the closing focus group). Moreover, this attentiveness to her own immersion within the practice of interest while varying the spatial and social specificities of that practice highlighted both the possibility and challenge of discerning different intersecting liminalities while in the throes of those liminalities, as well as the aforementioned opportunities and pitfalls of multiple researcher positionalities. Thus – as with any research method – experimenting experience brought certain benefits and insights but also came with challenges and limitations.

An alchemy of liminalities

It is neither novel nor problematic to suggest that 5R is ritual and therefore entails the liminal, as it 'involves creating a space and a time that is distinct from other kinds of standardized or conventional action and [that] the specialized sequences of behaviour are repeated at certain intervals and conform to the tripartite ritual schema of separation, transformation and re-aggregation'.[34] Our research echoed this, with dancers crossing a clear threshold to the site, often changing clothing and shoes, and teachers engaging in their own rites to prepare for teaching, such as burning sage, or saying a prayer to Gabrielle Roth, clearly separating the spacetime of the dance from everyday contexts. This religious motif was significant, with 10 of the 15 participants considering the dance to be a spiritual practice. Moreover, before the dance, an altar is established by a rotating group of dancers, which serves, according to dancers interviewed, to 'set an intention' for the dance, thereby contributing both to atmosphere curation[35] and – alongside stipulation of the ground rules – the generation of *communitas*. 5R thus forms the liminal phase of the tripartite scheme, wherein dancers are encouraged to move their bodies, and express emotions, however they want, in a place of anti-structure, and in which all participants except one expressed their experience as flow. The liberating power of this antistructure is articulated clearly by Cian:

> Sometimes you'll get to lyrical and there are people skipping around and if you were to look at the outside in at 5 rhythms you would think, these people are off their heads. Because it's grown people skipping around and smiling, leaping through the air beaming with joy.

By experimenting with different identities during the dance, often in highly playful manner in pairs and small groups, dancers can undergo a transformation as an old identity is shed and a new one is taken on upon re-entering society,[36] for example by enacting different behaviours in their daily lives after the dance. Following the dance, *communitas* is reinforced in the sharing circle, where dancers form a circle and share experiences that happened during the dance, before changing clothing and crossing the threshold back into everyday life. Hence, 5R not only has clear ritual structure and establishes a liminal spacetime but can also generate experiences of both *communitas* and flow. However, such a singular appreciation of the liminal nature of 5R is too reductive as we also need to consider myriad other liminal qualities, including structuring devices that differ *between* 5R sessions, facets of the dance that vary *within* each 5R event to influence the embodied and subjective practices and experiences of dancers, and the impact that 5R can have on dancers *beyond* the 5R event.

Liminal variations between 5R dances

Features of 5R events that can vary between different sessions, which can be considered liminal and have implications for subjectivity, include structuring devices and group size. The primary structuring devices are the 5R teacher, who provides prompts for movement behaviours and works to manage the dynamics and energies across the room and the altar that provides the 'intention' for

the dance that can be revisited by dancers as the session unfolds. Individual dancers are thus liminal in dancing betwixt and between the influences of teacher and altar, bringing together human and nonhuman elements in this liminality. However, these influences are also mediated by other dancers in the group, who are simultaneously dancing between those two influences, thereby generating a multiply mediated liminality as dancers variously dance alone or with other people.

The significance of other dancers relates to the size of the class, which intersects with the size of the space in which the session takes place. Teachers talked about larger dances having greater collective energy, whereas in small dances, the 'personalities of individuals' could be felt, making the small dance counterintuitively harder to curate because '*It becomes a lot more intimate. There's a lot more going on*' (Jon). Group size also brings implications for individual preferences with respect to use of space as it is easier for more extroverted dancers wanting to dance with like-minded others to do so in larger groups. However, there is a trade-off for some dancers who talked about needing 'enough space to express myself' but not 'too much space', which would elicit feelings of self-consciousness. Such tensions imply that these dancers were experiencing liminality between the elision of self-awareness associated with flow and the targeted experimenting with self-identity associated with *communitas*, as explored further below.

Liminal qualities within 5R dances

The most significant variations within the 5R session, which establish their own liminalities, are clearly the five rhythms, each of which generates a specific atmospheric space produced by the dance. Dancers talked about using flow, the first rhythm, as being a space for 'getting grounded', or 'in touch with my body'. In staccato, many dancers talked of using the rhythm to 'set boundaries', or 'express anger'. As the tempo accelerates into chaos, dancers talked of using the rhythm to 'release' energy, emotions and sensations. Thus, each rhythm's distinct tempo and dancer awareness of crossing from one rhythm to another suggest the presence of clearly demarcated thresholds separating these spaces within the overall liminal space of the dance. However, while musical transitions can be very abrupt, they can also be more subtle and extended, rendering ambiguous the transition from one rhythm to the next. For example, most dancers mentioned the energetic affects of other people, and the collective energy body generated from multiple people, as contributing most to how they experienced each rhythm, so one dancer's response to a change in the music is contingent on the responsiveness of other dancers to that musical change. Together, these considerations generate rhythmic transitions that are themselves liminal, neither the former rhythm nor the new rhythm and yet both at the same time. Relatedly, dancers experience temporary subjective limbo, being neither their former experimental identity nor the one that approaches, yet being both together. This threshold liminality confuses assumptions of the clarity of thresholds in understandings of liminality by raising questions as to when and how such thresholds become perceptible, and suggests that thresholds between rhythmic spaces can constitute their own unique micro-liminal spacetimes, potentially injecting definitional paradox into liminality.

Across the five rhythms, shifts in subjectivity are encapsulated in dancer articulations of a trajectory in their sense of self from being very conscious of a 'self' to having an 'empty mind', or 'no thoughts', and 'being danced' by their bodies through the space, highly consistent with flow and its emergent sense of oneness with the practice or environment. However, other dancers spoke in terms of the group 'all dancing together' in compassionate mutuality, rather than oneness, more clearly reflecting an experience of *communitas*. Although on first reading it might seem that individual dancers might fall into one camp or the other rather than being neither yet both at the same time, significant here is the totalising nature of both flow and *communitas*. In archetypal flow as a sense of unity, those who experience being one organism/mind would feel a sense of oneness with

other dancers even if those other dancers are not in flow but see themselves as a co-member of a social group in *communitas*. Similarly, those who articulate 'all dancing together' rather than dancing as one would include those who do consider the *dancing* (the activity) to be a singularity (flow). Thus, while an individual dancer might describe either possibility and therefore not be considered liminal, the group, and the individual dancers by virtue of their membership of the group, are nonetheless, liminal between flow and *communitas*.

Such group dynamics can hold immense affective power and sense of togetherness – without necessarily generating a sense of oneness into which the dancer is subsumed – thereby maintaining a sense of individuality within the group:

> Sometimes I feel like crying, and sometimes the breaks of laughter and so much joy and sometimes you feel like a crazy idiot, smiling and looking around at everyone grinning, like yeah, everybody, yay, you're feeling this! (Claire).

Conversely, group dynamics can accentuate self-referential dance practice:

> I've been to dances where there's a different energy, where it's more of a pick-up place, and then I don't quite enjoy it that much. I still try focus on dancing, and then I try to dance probably more with myself. If the collective energy is not what I feel like, then I probably go more inside and do my own thing (Lilah).

This notion of 'going inside' speaks to the space of imagination. Margaret, a dancer in her seventies, described imagining herself as a younger version of herself, at age 25, when she dances. She says:

> I am dancing as a young woman when I am on the floor . . . Because I had all these faculties that I'm losing. It's great to experience completeness in my body and agility. I was good at gymnastics and I loved dancing and danced every time I got. It's a nice return.

Otto also mentioned engaging in the dance in a performative way:

> I am imagining myself on the stage, where I am in the spotlight and everything else is dark. I am imagining that there is an anonymous audience.

These imaginative spaces are liminal in being concurrently experienced but not lived and yet there is an actuality to each example: Margaret has been a 25-year-old and Otto does have an audience – the other dancers – so these participants are in both bodies/spaces and yet not fully in either as they are phenomenologically betwixt and between. The ambiguity of such liminal experiences is highlighted by several dancers mentioning being 'unable to tell' if individuals were 'lost in their imaginations' or 'in their heads' versus sharing in the other dancers' emotions or perceptions of the dance. Yet Otto's account is also interesting as in imagining that there is an anonymous audience, the suggestion is that the actual audience (the other dancers) is not anonymous, which sits uneasily alongside both the anonymity imposed through status-stripping in liminal *communitas* and the sense of unity with human and nonhuman others in flow.

Liminality was further evidenced in the intersection between reflective experimenting with aspects of identity and pre-reflective processing of affective and emotional states. Most participants spoke of the dance as a space for processing and releasing emotions, bodily sensations, and affective energies, of using the dance to 'move things' through the body, 'process things', or make 'things' become unstuck. Emma, who has been dancing and teaching for over 30 years, explains:

> For me, it's such a good a good thing if I'm sort of slightly off kilter [coming into the dance]. It's become a tool where if something might feel a bit stuck or there's something that I'm trying to work through, I know pretty much guaranteed that if I give myself the space to dance through a wave, something would have shifted by the end of the wave.

Even when a dancer was grappling with an identified and labelled state (grief), implicit, embodied processes accompanied more explicit emotional expression, such as for Jeanie, who describes processing grief in her dance:

> For the first three years, my dance was just about grief. Especially in stillness I found my body doing these automatic dances. I wasn't in control of it; my body was just moving in expressions of grief. It was profound. Yes, there was some wailing and sobbing and stuff going with it, but it felt deeper than the wailing and the crying. There was something else that was being processed through the movement.

Thus, the ambiguous transitions between states of reflection and pre-reflection during processing and releasing, in addition to the ambiguous nature of what and how things will be processed, makes this form of embodiment liminal. The liminal space of processing and releasing is further liminal due to its transformative nature: this transformation was both pre-reflective for dancers, such as feeling 'something shift', or 'feeling lighter', and reflective, in the form of dancer realisations about the self, and while being each, it was also entirely neither of those things.

Liminality beyond 5R dances

Dancers spoke of both being more loving towards the self after dancing the rhythms, and more loving toward others during the event, further evidencing flow-*communitas* ambiguity through this duality of emergent subjectivities. Consistent with the enhanced sense of self consequent to flow all dancers expressed greater 'appreciation for' or feeling more confident, or trusting, in their bodies and selves from engaging in 5R. However, consistent with *communitas*, over half of dancers also expressed feeling love for, being connected to, or seeing the beauty of other dancers during the dance and in the sharing circle. However, while the latter clearly reflects *communitas*, it is itself consistent with the outcomes of flow, as individuals emerging from flow are considered to feel both more bound into the world around them and more distinctive within that boundedness.[37] Hence, while flow and *communitas* are respectively and divergently grounded in loss of and focus on the self at the experiential level, the outcomes of flow can seemingly accommodate the outcomes of *communitas*.

Further, several dancers mentioned that these affective qualities changed their subsequent behaviours, whether through increased self-care by eating more healthily or exercising more, or through enhanced confidence in bodily comportment, as articulated by Sasha:

> I can go to parties and weddings and just dance now and I know that yes, I'm going to get a few weird looks, but I don't care.

Moreover, several dancers spoke of how rehearsing saying yes or no in an experimental dancing context – typically in the affective atmosphere of staccato, the rhythm of boundary expression[38] – allowed them to express their desires and boundaries more readily in the outer world. For example, Lilah articulated being able to say yes more confidently to life choices, which she described as setting 'natural boundaries', and Jeanie reflected on her response to a national survey, in which she politely declined to participate, in opposition to her more habitual behaviour of saying yes and being a 'people pleaser'. Thus, dancers generated telescopic spaces beyond the dance, liminal in

their rootedness in the expired space of the 5R dance while actualised in everyday life. Such accounts demonstrate how experimentation in the liminality of 5R projected beyond the dance, generating new and modified modes of care and support for self and others, in concrete manifestations of a transformed self.

Liminal liabilities

Despite this seeming role for multiple micro-liminalities within the liminal space of 5R in facilitating positive transformations in subjectivity and wellbeing, such transformative experiences are not guaranteed due to a combination of individual differences, interpersonal factors, and group considerations. Yet these liabilities call forth further liminalities within 5R.

Aside from whether participants (e.g. Margaret, Emma and Jeanie) have something to work through that provides a baseline against which transformation can be discerned and measured, individual differences (e.g. extroversion/introversion and length of 5R experience) can influence whether a given 5R dance event generates positive outcomes. Whether more extroverted or more introverted, dancers are likely to benefit more from dances populated by likeminded others than by their opposites due to a greater degree of mutual comfort, potentially fuelling *communitas* and flow. Lilah's comment that '*if I feel uncomfortable, then I just stay with myself*' indicates that interpersonal factors can incentivise more individualised dancing, thereby impacting on *communitas*. This, however, need not preclude either flow or self-transformation, as participants reported adapting their dance style to accommodate such factors. Anne, for example, says:

> I like when there's few people. I'm very self-conscious and I tend to like when there's a space where no one goes and I can sort of have my own little corner. But when it's really crowded and people take all the space, I'm kind of like, woo, where do I go. It makes the experience bit less enjoyable for me. But I am aware that it's also a part of what it's supposed to do, I guess. So maybe if I go more I'd feel more comfortable.

Different modes of dancing within the 5R event can therefore both pose specific challenges to individual dancers and be mobilised as an adaptive and protective measure to optimise transformational potential within a given dance event, constituting a further liminality between engaging and retracting in response to a sense of personal dis/comfort. Notably, Anne acknowledges that this variety in experience can contribute to the self-transformative potential of 5R, meaning that the telescopic liminality identified earlier can also feed forward to/through later dance events, potentially generating incremental attitudinal and behavioural change through progressively enhancing comfort in the 5R environment. Hence, the influence of any such predispositions is potentially mediated by length of experience, as reflected by more experienced dancers speaking less about feeling self-conscious compared to novice dancers. Teachers and more experienced dancers also spoke more about 5R in a spiritual or sacred capacity than those newer to the dance, suggesting that a dancer might also be liminal between the sacred and the secular through their lifetime duration of 5R practice, in a form of liminality that extends across different 5R events, rather than being contained within them or telescoping beyond them.

A similar interpersonal dynamic also plays out on a larger, group, scale, as evidenced by Sage's thoughts on the shared intentions of a group coming together:

> There's a safety in that and a beauty in that. And a sense of witnessing – there are people witnessing me in my expression and I am witnessing others in their expression. There is a lot of beauty there, and I'm sometimes there with the beauty. And sometimes I'm more like wow . . . it's a bit overwhelming . . . at times it's fear, fear of being seen . . . it's difficult to be a witness in that.

The collective can thus evoke and exhibit *communitas* as a source of mutual strength, validation, safety and beauty, but can equally threaten and dissolve that *communitas*, in a seeming liminality between in/visibility, between seeing and being seen. The visible, the social and the spatial thus coincide, as when participants were less comfortable socially, they were also more constrained spatially, and they turned their own witnessing away from others, back onto themselves. As Sage continued: '*I just want my own space*'. The space of the 5R dance floor, then, might be '*the ultimate free space*', '*a precious space*' and '*completely unique*' (Jeanie), but it is also a very fragile space, contingent upon liminal and unstable spatialities, subjectivities and socialities. This, finally, brings ethical considerations for researchers 'experimenting experience' in such contexts, as their participation fuels these spatialities, subjectivities and socialities, with implications for both their own experiential and transformational outcomes and those of fellow dancers. Thus, such research designs, while productive, potentially bring both personal and professional ramifications.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have explored 5R dance as liminal. Rather than assume a singular liminal space-time, we attended to multiple ways in which 5R might be considered liminal, distinguishing between factors that differ between dance sessions (e.g. group size and structuring devices), facets that vary within a dance session (e.g. transitions between rhythms, reflective/pre-reflective processing and phenomenal/actual spatialities), and factors that extend beyond the dance session (telescopic spaces of behaviour change), as well as a suite of liabilities (individual, interpersonal and group) that impose limitations on the transformative potential of 5R.

Three primary conceptual implications arise from this discussion, relating to liminality, flow and *communitas* respectively. Addressing liminality first, 5R was found to be liminal in multiple, diverse and intersecting ways, beyond its conventional ritual structure, as curational factors or structuring devices of teacher, altar and other dancers provide a multiply mediated liminality between more-than-human sources of stimulus for dancing bodies. Further, group size and dynamics stimulate an ever-shifting embodied liminality for each dancer, potentially entailing subjectivities experienced betwixt reflective and pre-reflective registers of being and between actual and phenomenological places/identities, although these are also contingent upon individual, interpersonal and group factors that mediate both the liminalities and transformative potential of 5R. Moreover, thresholds between rhythms can constitute further liminal spacetimes as the shift in energetic register needs to calibrate between one dancer's adaptation to the musical change and that of others around them, and – finally – the capacity for 5R experimentation to generate behavioural/subjective change in everyday life was framed as constituting telescopic liminal spacetimes, which are sometimes manifested incrementally through multiple 5R events. Hence, scholarship on liminality that concerns itself with singular notions of liminal spaces risks overlooking a host of micro-liminalities contained within it and expansive liminalities that erupt from it.

Dancer testimonies reflected several of Csikszentmihalyi's conditions of flow including loss of self-consciousness (merging of action and awareness), concentration on the task, and the autotelic component.[39] Yet, sense of control as part of flow was not supported by dancer interviews, as most dancers talked about a lack of control as being central to the flow experience, with several using the terms 'surrendering' to the dance or letting their body 'guide' them through the space, thereby supporting the more limited flow literature that proposes that sense of control diminishes when flow occurs.[40] For these dancers, while control over aspects of everyday life after the dance event was reportedly enhanced, and there were instances of control within the dance space (such as dancing alone due to social discomfort), the experience of the event itself was one of not being in

control. It was the loosening of normal strictures that prompt behavioural self-regulation in everyday life that allowed for this lack of bodily control. Given the multiple, diverse, ambiguous and intersecting micro-liminalities that characterise 5R dance events, we suggest that these liminalities are foundational to this sensed lack of control that characterised flow for these dancers.

Finally, the relationship between flow and *communitas* is challenged as – rather than individual flow straightforwardly leading to collective *communitas*[41]– flow and *communitas* can seemingly be liminally related despite being characterised by contradictory person-self relations. We cannot simplistically assume that individual flow morphs into *communitas* or that social flow is synonymous with *communitas* because flow is deemed to bring a dissipation of self-awareness but *communitas* involves self-referential identity reconstruction. However, these two phenomena were found to converge in 5R dance sessions through the blending of two ways of relating to the group: a sense of oneness and a sense of camaraderie, such that individual dancers – by virtue of their sense of group engagement – are liminally both these things at the same time yet also – by extension – entirely neither of these things.

Given the multiplicity, complexity and intersectionality of micro-liminalities identified here, there is considerable scope for expanding work on liminal geographies beyond a reductive focus on singular spaces and binary betweenness, to engage more with ways in which the liminal is spatialised and the spatialising and subjectivising effects that it generates. Similarly, it would pay to look more critically at *communitas*, flow and how they interrelate, especially as liminality, flow and *communitas* are all associated with self-transformation, and geography is increasingly attending to becoming on spatial, subjective and social dimensions. Such matters could be examined in diverse cultural geographical contexts, especially those at the crossover between the sacred and the secular and the individual and the collective, and those that are deemed to result in self-transformative or therapeutic outcomes. Creative practices and encounters, therapeutic spaces and processes, festivals and celebrations, tourism experiences and retreats, collaborative activities from research to spatial planning, educational contexts (especially fieldtrips!), and even workplace personal development processes, all spring to mind as fertile ground to explore further alchemical liminalities and examine in more targeted fashion the flow-*communitas* relationship. As Natalie's fieldwork demonstrates, researching in the midst of an alchemy of liminalities is far from easy, but 'experimenting experience' can be productive, so further design of experimental, comparative, participatory methods that are scaffolded by multiple and diverse participant perspectives, interrogated through researcher positional plurality, and underpinned by an ethos of researching from within a learning environment, could pay dividends in expanding both our understanding of liminality, flow and *communitas*, and that rich and enticing disciplinary landscape.

Acknowledgements

We are immensely grateful to the dancers/teachers who gave so generously of their time and experiential insights and who provided inspiration to continue dancing, and we would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their helpful suggestions.

Ethics statement

This study has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through, the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Janet Banfield https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8515-6829

Notes

1. G.Roth, *Sweat Your Prayers: The Five Rhythms of the Soul*, 1st ed. (New York City: Penguin Putnam, Inc., 1997), p. 2.
2. Roth, *Sweat Your Prayers*.
3. G.Roth, *Maps to Ecstasy*, 2nd ed. (California: Nataraj Publishing, 1998), p. xvi.
4. Roth, *Maps to Ecstasy*.
5. S.Cook and K.Ledger, 'A Service User-Led Study Promoting Mental Well-Being for the General Public, Using 5 Rhythms Dance', *International Journal of Mental Health Promotion*, 6(4), 2004, pp. 41–51; A.-M.Honoré Grauslund, J.Ammentorp and C.Timmermann, 'Moving towards Holistic Rehabilitation – A Qualitative Study Exploring How People Diagnosed with Cancer and Cancer Survivors Experience a Dance-Like Intervention', *Scandinavian Journal of Caring Sciences*, 37(4), 2023, pp. 970–9; D.Weig, 'Rhythms as Cohesive Force: Ritual, Body, and Senses in the 5Rhythms Movement Practice', *Journal of Ritual Studies*, 32(1), 2018, pp. 11–23.
6. A.van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (London: Routledge, 1909).
7. J.Anderson, 'Cathedrals of the Surf Zone: Regulating Access to a Space of Spirituality', *Social & Cultural Geography*, 14(8), 2013, pp. 954–72; M.C.Miller and H.Mair, 'Between Space and Place in Mountaineering: Navigating Risk, Death, and Power', *Tourism Geographies*, 22(2), 2020, pp. 354–69; F.McConnell, 'Liminal Geopolitics: The Subjectivity and Spatiality of Diplomacy at the Margins', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 42(1), 2017, pp. 139–52; J.Prior and C.M.Cusack, 'Ritual, Liminality and Transformation: Secular Spirituality in Sydney's Gay Bathhouses', *Australian Geographer*, 39(3), 2008, pp. 271–81.
8. B.Thomassen, 'Revisiting Liminality: The Danger of Empty Spaces', in H.Andrews and L.Roberts (eds), *Liminal Landscapes: Travel, Experience and Spaces In-Between* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2012), pp. 21–35; A.Szakolczai, 'Liminality and Experience: Structuring Transitory Situations and Transformative Events', in A.Horvath, B.Thomassen and H.Wydra (eds), *Breaking Boundaries: Varieties of Liminality* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2015), pp. 11–38; K.F.Doubleday, 'Nonlinear Liminality: Human-Animal Relations on Preserving the World's Most Famous Tigress', *Geoforum*, 81, 2017, pp. 2–44; A.Franklin and N.Schuurman, 'Aging Animal Bodies: Horse Retirement Yards as Relational Spaces of Liminality, Dwelling and Negotiation', *Social & Cultural Geography*, 20(7), 2019, pp. 918–37.
9. J.Banfield, 'From Liminal Spaces to the Spatialities of Liminality', *Area*, 54(4), 2022, pp. 610–7.
10. V.W.Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 1969); V.W.Turner, 'Liminal to Liminoid in Play, Flow and Ritual: An Essay in Comparative Symbology', in V.W.Turner (ed.), *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York City: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982), pp. 20–60.
11. Turner, *The Ritual Process*, p. 95.
12. Turner, *The Ritual Process*.
13. M.Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Happiness*, 4th ed. (London: Ebury Publishing, 1990), pp. 63–85.
14. J.Banfield, *Critical Perspectives into Flow Research: From Conceptual Detail to Global Geopolitics* (Cham: Springer, 2024); J.L.Ford, J.Vosloo and M.Arvinen-Barrow, '"Pouring Everything That You Are": Musicians' Experiences of Optimal Performances', *British Journal of Music Education*, 37(2), 2020, pp. 141–53.; C.Swann, R.J.Keegan, D.Piggott and L.Crust, 'A Systematic Review of the Experience, Occurrence, and Controllability of Flow States in Elite Sport', *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 13(6), 2012, pp. 807–19; W.A.Sol, 'Music in the Moment: How Twenty-Four Expert Free Form Musicians Experienced Sense of Agency and an Improvisational State of Mind', *Journal of New Music Research*, 51(2–3), 2022, pp. 203–24.

15. B.Y.Ozkara, M.Ozmen and J.W.Kim, 'Examining the Effect of Flow Experience on Online Purchase: A Novel Approach to the Flow Theory Based on Hedonic and Utilitarian Value', *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 37, 2017, pp. 119–31.
16. L.N.Zumeta, X.Oriol, S.Telletxea, A.Amutio and N.Basabe, 'Collective Efficacy in Sports and Physical Activities: Perceived Emotional Synchrony and Shared Flow', *Frontiers in Psychology*, 6, 2016, p. 1960; B.Hackert, A.-L.Lumma, T.Raettig, B.Berger and U.Weger, 'Towards a Re-Conceptualization of Flow in Social Contexts', *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 53(1), 2023, pp. 100–125; B.Rimé and D.Páez, 'Why We Gather: A New Look, Empirically Documented, at Émile Durkheim's Theory of Collective Assemblies and Collective Effervescence', *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 18(6), 2023, pp. 1306–30.
17. Turner, *The Ritual Process*.
18. D.P.McCormack, 'A Paper with an Interest in Rhythm', *Geoforum*, 33(4), 2002, pp. 469–85.
19. McCormack, 'Interest in Rhythm'.
20. McCormack, 'Interest in Rhythm', p. 470.
21. M.Crang and N.J.Thrift, *Thinking Space* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 3; D.P.McCormack, *Refrains for Moving Bodies: Experience and Experiment in Affective Spaces* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013); S.Engelmann, *Sensing Art in the Atmosphere: Elemental Lures and Aerosolar Practices* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020).
22. B.Anderson, 'Affective Atmospheres', *Emotion, Space and Society*, 2(2), 2009, pp. 77–81; T.Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004); D.P.McCormack, 'Engineering Affective Atmospheres on the Moving Geographies of the 1897 Andrée Expedition', *cultural geographies*, 15(4), 2008, pp. 413–30.
23. T.Edensor, 'Illuminated Atmospheres: Anticipating and Reproducing the Flow of Affective Experience in Blackpool', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 30(6), 2012, pp. 1103–22; T.Edensor, 'Producing Atmospheres at the Match: Fan Cultures, Commercialisation and Mood Management in English Football', *Emotion, Space and Society*, 15, 2015, pp. 82–9.
24. R.Boswell, 'On the Intersection of Geographical Thought and Artistic Practice: DIY Urbanism, Flow, and Imagining Urban Futures', *Dialogues in Human Geography*, 14(2), 2024, pp. 302–306.
25. A.Secor, 'Social Surveys, Interviews, and Focus Groups', in J.P.Jones and B.Gomez (eds), *Research Methods in Geography: A Critical Introduction* (Chichester; Wiley Blackwell, 2010), pp. 194–205.
26. M.M.Hennink, B.N.Kaiser and V.C.Marconi, 'Code Saturation Versus Meaning Saturation: How Many Interviews Are Enough?', *Qualitative Health Research*, 27(4), 2017, pp. 591–608.
27. M.Crang, 'Analysing Qualitative Materials', in R.Flowerdew and D.M.Martin (eds), *Methods in Human Geography*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 218–32.
28. P.Harrison, '"How Shall I Say it . . .?" Relating the Nonrelational', *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space*, 39(3), 2007, pp. 590–608; S.Hinchliffe, M.B.Kearnes, M.Degen and S.Whatmore, 'Urban Wild Things: A Cosmopolitical Experiment', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 23(5), 2005, pp. 643–58; McCormack, *Refrains for Moving Bodies*.
29. C.Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 3rd ed. (New York: Basic Books, 1973).
30. S.Pile and N.Thrift, *Mapping the Subject: Geographies of Cultural Transformation*, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 1995); T.Spry, 'Performative Autoethnography', in N.K.Denzin and Y.S.Lincoln (eds), *Collecting and Interpreting Qualitative Materials*, 4th ed. (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2013), p. 223.
31. Spry, 'Performative Autoethnography', p. 217; T.Spry, 'Who Are "We" in Performative Autoethnography?', *International Review of Qualitative Research*, 10(1), 2017, pp. 46–53.
32. K.England, 'Producing Feminist Geographies: Theory, Methodologies and Research Strategies', in S.C.Aitken and G.Valentine (eds), *Approaches to Human Geography*. (London: SAGE, 2006), pp. 286–297; G.Rose, 'Situating Knowledges: Positionality, Reflexivities and Other Tactics', *Progress in Human Geography*, 21(3), 1997, pp. 305–20.
33. Spry, 'Who Are 'We'?'.
34. Weig, 'Rhythms as Cohesive Force', p. 4.
35. K.Boyer and I.Wood, 'Spaces of Change: Everyday Gender Activism through Near-Peer Gender and Sexuality Workshops with Young People in the UK', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*,

49(1), 2024, n.p.; D.P.McCormack, 'Geographies for Moving Bodies: Thinking, Dancing, Spaces', *Geography Compass*, 2(6), 2008, pp. 1822–36.
36. van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*; Turner, *The Ritual Process*.
37. Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow*.
38. Roth, *Sweat Your Prayers*.
39. Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow*.
40. Banfield, *Critical Perspectives*; M.Vuorre and J.Metcalfe, 'The Relation between the Sense of Agency and the Experience of Flow', *Consciousness and Cognition*, 43, 2016, pp. 133–42; Sol, 'Music in the Moment'.
41. Turner, *The Ritual Process*.

Author biographies

Natalie Keltner-McNeil completed a Bachelor of Science degree from UC Berkeley in 2020 and a Master of Science degree from the University of Oxford in 2023. Her research interests include the spatiality of experimental dance and the relationships between coloniality, plants and people. She currently lives in Oakland, California.

Janet Banfield is a College Lecturer in geography at the University of Oxford. Her research explores artistic and other cultural practices in the articulation of implicit or pre-reflective experience and the generation of spatial awareness and experience, and interrogates disciplinary (geographical or psychological) concepts and practices through the lens of the other discipline.