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Abstract:

While there is a good deal of literature about collaboration and teamwork it is often in disciplines other than literary studies and creative writing. Relatively few writers have reflected explicitly on their collaborative work – and, indeed, writers are frequently characterised as sole creators, valued for their individuality and originality. However, in an environment where collaborative work is being given increased emphasis in the academy, and where there is broad recognition that claims to autonomy by creative artists are doubtful, this paper reflects on its authors' experience of a writerly collaborative partnership that grew out of a mutual interest in prose poetry and creative practice, and which resulted in a co-authored monograph on prose poetry for Princeton University Press. This collaborative relationship, which began with modest aims, has been characterised by inventiveness and trust and has developed in unexpected ways. It may be understood as an example of what Donna Lee Brien and Tess Brady (2003) call Joint Collaboration, or what Vera John-Steiner (2000) characterises as Integrative Collaboration. However, the authors propose the alternative term, Conjunctive Collaboration, as a way of characterising the new connections and combinations that their collaborative relationship has brought.

Biographical notes:

Paul Hetherington is Professor of Writing in the Faculty of Arts and Design at the University of Canberra, head of the International Poetry Studies Institute (IPSI) and co-founding editor of the international online journal *Axon: Creative Explorations*. He has won or been nominated for more than thirty national and international awards and competitions. He founded the International Prose Poetry Group in 2014 and has published and/or edited thirty-six books, including *Palace of memory* (2019) and *Typewriter and manuscript* (2020). He undertook an Australia Council for the Arts Literature Board Residency at the BR Whiting Studio in Rome in 2015-16.

Cassandra Atherton is an award-winning writer and scholar of prose poetry. She was a Visiting Scholar in English at Harvard University in 2016 and a Visiting Fellow in Literature at Sophia University, Tokyo, in 2014. Her most recent books of prose poetry are *Pre-Raphaelite* (2018) and *Leftovers* (2020) and she received a VicArts and an Australia Council grant to work on a book of prose poetry about the atomic bomb. Cassandra co-wrote *Prose poetry: An introduction* (Princeton University Press, 2020) with Paul Hetherington and coedited *The anthology of Australian prose poetry* (Melbourne University Publishing) with him. She is a commissioning editor for *Westerly* magazine.

Keywords: Conjunctive collaboration, writing, co-authorship, prose poetry, practice-led research

Writerly collaboration

Collaboration occurs in a variety of forms, some of it interdisciplinary and some of it between two or more people working in the same discipline. While there is a good deal of literature about collaboration, and also about teamwork in the workplace, creative collaboration between writers has not been widely discussed or theorised. A significant number of creative writers and scholars engage in collaboration but relatively few writers or writer-academics have reflected explicitly on their collaborative processes. As a result, there is something of a gap in the literature about writerly collaboration in creative writing and literary studies, despite the fact that it is now generally accepted that all writers are, at least in a broad sense, engaged in collaborative activities. Lisa Ede and Andrea A Lunsford argue this point in claiming:

> The relentless intertextuality of Web culture, the rapid proliferation of multiple selves online, and the development of what Sherry Turkle has called "distributed selves" of postmodernity would seem to have moved us well beyond autonomous individualism. (Ede & Lunsford 2001: 354)

Further, and more generally, Anne Game and Andrew Metcalfe comment on the inherently social nature of creativity:

> People describing their work processes and creative experience confirm again and again that creativity is not a property of an authorial self, and that, indeed, it requires a loss of self. Whether it occurs in the production of art, the cooking of dinner, or during a walk down a street, creativity is a relation, and happens in-between. (Game & Metcalfe 70 263)

This paper presents a discussion of the key aspects of the collaborative writing partnership we have been involved in for a number of years, much of which happened 'in-between'. This is a partnership that has not only recently yielded a significant scholarly monograph on prose poetry, but which has produced a variety of other publications – and which began with a focus on creative writing and practice-led research.

Having said this, one of the potential difficulties in discussing collaborative relationships is that the word 'collaboration' suggests different things to different people. Donna Lee Brien and Tess Brady clarify such differences by formulating 'a series of [twelve] categories of collaboration' (Brien & Brady 2003) in which they tease out the markedly different ways in which collaboration may function in practice. The forms of collaboration they identify include 'Conceptual Collaboration', concerning the 'generation of a general idea such as a theory or a philosophical principle'; 'Contribution Collaboration', which is 'probably the most common form of collaboration … when several artists contribute to a project in their separate ways'; and 'Joint Collaboration', 'when two or more writers/artists work together on a single product producing a seamless text' (2003). They suggest that 'collaboration is neither a tidy nor a static form of creative practice. Fluidity is the key' (2003).

The nature of collaboration in academia is often affected by the divergent expectations related to collaborative practice in different academic disciplines. For example, there are markedly different practices and expectations for co-authorship and collaboration in the sciences versus the arts. Research collaboration in the sciences is much more of a norm than collaboration between creative writers. Citing Glanzel and Schubert's 2005 analysis of scientific networks through co-authorship, Ryan Muldoon comments that in the sciences,

> since 1980 single-author papers have gone from approximately a quarter of all scientific papers, down to only 10 per cent in 2000. The number of co-authors on papers has also steadily risen, from a mean of 2.64 to a mean of 4.16 in the same period. (Muldoon 2018: 80)

Michael M Crow and William B Dabars provide a similar figure, stating that '[a]cross all scientific fields, single-author research papers … declined from 30 per cent in 1981 to 11 per cent in 2012' (Crow & Dabars 2019: 478). Scientists often work in cooperative teams and frequently write collaborative papers based on data gathered by these teams. However, in the field of English Literary Studies, Australian academics Elizabeth Leane, Lisa Fletcher and Saurabh Garg argue '[o]f all disciplines, literary studies has the most entrenched model of academic authorship: the sole author… Literary studies scholars co-author less than any others' (Leane et al 2019: 787).

This is not a surprise given that there is no well-established model of co-authorship or collaboration for academic scholarship in the humanities despite the current pressure on academics to maximise their number of publications and citations. Leane, Fletcher and Garg discuss this issue:

> The dominance of sole authorship in the humanities means that there are no clear, codified conventions for writing in pairs or teams, from identifying who should be named as an author on a publication to deciding whether to list authors' names alphabetically or hierarchically. (Leane et al 2019: 788)

More generally, creative writers and artist-academics are typically understood to work in relative isolation, and often to be protective of their ideas and inspiration. As Wendy Bishop and David Starkey express it: '[t]raditionally, creative writers have focused on creating original texts for which they claim solitary authorship' (2006: 29). Vera John-Steiner observes, '[t]he notion of the solitary thinker still appeals to those moulded by the Western belief in individualism' (2000: 3). Jen Webb and Andrew Melrose develop this point, giving particular attention to writers:

> creative writing is invariably treated as a private, even a secret act, though one that (ideally) ends up in the public domain… [Many people] have bought into what Alex Pheby (2010) calls "myth of isolation," which holds that writers must preserve not just their independence but also their solitude if they are to be able to produce genuinely original works. (Webb & Melrose 2015: 102)

In other words, collaboration is not always understood as an essential, or even desirable feature of the work of many creative writers, and it is not necessarily seen as critical to the success of those writers – even though there is now considerable pressure within universities in Australia and internationally for academics to write collaboratively, including in the field of writing. Gaby Haddow, Jianhong (Cecilia) Xia and Michele Wilson argue that collaboration is encouraged by institutions as a way

> to share expertise and the costs associated with research, and to boost research productivity and scholarly impact… For researchers in the sciences, the need for large-scale facilities can be a strong driver for collaboration. This has previously been seen as less relevant for HASS researchers as they generally do not have the same requirements for costly equipment and research facilities. On the other hand, sharing skills and expertise, "intellectual companionship", and the potential for higher visibility of research are common to all disciplines… For research funders, policy-makers and institutions, increases in productivity and impact contribute to improved performance in world university rankings and the pressure to collaborate, particularly with international partners, from funding agencies and institutions is applied across the disciplines. (Haddow et al 2017)

This push from the university sector for increased collaboration in all fields is exemplified by Leane, Fletcher and Garg's findings that co-authorship rates are showing a modest rise even in the field of literary studies:

> Of the 51,192 articles surveyed over the five sampled years, a total of 2,135 articles were co-authored. This represents an average co-authorship … of 4.2 per cent. For the first four years examined, the rate varied relatively little, with from a low of 3.6 per cent in 1995 to 4.2 per cent in 2005, but overall showed a gradual rise. Between 2010

> and 2015, there was a striking upturn in co-authorship rates, from 4 per cent to 5.6 per cent. (Leane et al 2019: 793)

Despite the relative lack of research into the nuances of writerly collaboration, there is certainly sufficient existing literature to indicate how collaboration between writers is broadly understood. For instance, at a general level, Julie Reeves, Sue Starbuck and Alison Yeung remind us that 'intellectual collaboration and engagement are as old as the term *akademia* itself; the name of the olive grove in ancient Greece dedicated to Athena … and the place where Plato … founded his school' (Reeves et al 2020: 3). They define 'collaboration and engagement' fairly broadly, as 'two or more people working together to produce an agreed outcome, ideally and preferably one that has been mutually agreed', adding that '[c]ollaborating and engaging signify symbiotic relationships; each requires a two-way process of communication and interaction with others' (11). Vera John-Steiner concurs, arguing that in 'the life of the mind' '[g]enerative ideas emerge from joint thinking, from significant conversations, and from sustained, shared struggles to achieve new insights by partners in thought' (2000: 3). Karen Julien and Jacqueline L Beres confirm these priorities when they discuss their particular 'writing partnership' in some detail, drawing on existing literature to contend that '[w]riting with others can foster motivation through mutual encouragement, accountability, or healthy competition' (2019: 4).

However, there is more to collaboration than these fairly general (if insightful) comments may suggest. Various writers have given more personal, and sometimes highly subjective or impressionistic accounts of collaboration, letting the reader into a closer understanding of the nature of the communication that takes place within many writerly collaborative relationships. For example, Joyce Elbrecht and Lydia Fakundiny – authors of the experimental collaborative novels, *The Restorationist: Text One, a collaborative fiction by Jael B Juba* (1993) and *Hearing by Jael* (2005) – published a 1994 article that conveys how collaborative conversations may merge into a single voice; or, more precisely, may be part of a process where two voices become one:

> *Joyce*: What we do is what we're doing at this very moment – having a conversation… I see here in your OED that our English word *conversation* starts appearing in the fourteenth century.
>
> *Lydia*: Let's have a look. The route of borrowing, by way of early French, goes back not really to *convertere* but to the deponent form, *conversari* … and, so, by figurative transfer: "to pass one's life, dwell, abide, live somewhere, keep company with."
>
> *Joyce*: There you are, the two voices in our novel do not converse with each other in the usual sense of exchanging their thoughts and feelings. They converse in the archaic sense: their voices dwell under the same cover. (Elbrecht & Fakundiny 1994: 248)

American poet Yusef Komunyakaa, who has famously collaborated with dramaturge and theatre producer Chad Gracia, also mentions the importance of a collaborative 'whole' that extends beyond the individual visions of the collaborators:

> The ideal collaboration is a dialogue and negotiation. Of course, one has to … select someone whose sense of aesthetics is interwoven into the character of each endeavour … someone who can grow with you, so that the two of you are like two or more dancers entangled in a tango of the heart and brain. However, the moves are not agreed upon in advance; the collaborators must be able to negotiate that sway of the imagination… Ideas speak to each other; they sing and fight together until they make each other whole. (Collins & Komunyakaa 2017: 107)

Our prior experience of collaboration

Prior to entering our collaborative partnership, we had significantly different experiences of collaboration. Hetherington had already collaborated with a number of other academics in co-authoring academic articles. Each of these collaborative articles was conceived and approached somewhat differently, but in most cases reasonably equal contributions were made by each author – except in a couple of instances, where he and his co-author agreed that they would make significantly different contributions, with Hetherington doing almost all of the writing. Hetherington had also written a few collaborative poems and had collaborated on creating exhibitions with visual artists.

One of Hetherington's significant collaborative projects involved working with Jen Webb on a book that linked photographs of Canberra (by Webb) and poems (by Hetherington) [1]. In the introduction, Hetherington and Webb write of the nature of their collaboration for this project, which emphasised relatively independent creative activity as well as a shared outcome:

> Our approach was to work semi-independently: Jen took photographs, which Paul then used as springboards into poems. Paul's poems led, in turn, to Jen taking new photographs or editing existing ones…
>
> As we worked we found ourselves in the play of a dynamic that was neither ours as two individuals, nor entirely ours as a creative partnership. Rather, it belonged to a sort of reality: that which emerged from what we found in our quotidian lives, from the everyday landscapes of Canberra, and from language. This "reality" went to work on us, turning our creative ideas to unexpected ends and presenting us with sometimes disturbing thoughts about the incommensurability of world, image and word. (Hetherington & Webb 2015: vi-vii)

This book involved what Brien and Brady characterise as Contribution Collaboration, 'when several artists contribute to a project in their separate ways, each maintaining their own signature, but producing a unified object, or achieving a common goal' (2003). Interestingly, however, even in such a relatively loose collaborative relationship – where the authors worked 'semi-independently' – they comment on how their collaborative partnership created 'a dynamic that was neither ours as two individuals, nor entirely ours as a creative partnership', turning 'creative ideas to unexpected ends and … disturbing thoughts' (Hetherington & Webb 2015: vi-vii). This notion of collaboration producing a disturbance in the participants is particularly pertinent and one that we pursue in more detail below.

Overall, by 2014, Hetherington's experiences of collaboration had been largely positive. He enjoyed the challenges presented by collaboration, particularly the opportunity to share and develop creative ideas with others. Atherton, on the other hand, had previously been reluctant to collaborate. She believed that the idea of collaboration – especially for women – sometimes appeared to be a recipe for doing more than half the work and receiving only half, or less, of the credit. This issue of the unequal sharing of work during collaborations has bedevilled many collaborative relationships. Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunford comment on this issue in remarking that 'in collaborative situations, women often play the "secretarial role", one that by definition devalues their contributions' (1990: 138). They also write that some 'feminist scholars have been at pains to argue that the death of the author does not and cannot entail an abandonment of [female] agency' (Ede & Lunford 2001: 116).

Atherton was also aware that collaborations were not always harmonious, and that sometimes a compromised product was the result, particularly when collaborators simply divided the research and writing into various parts, leading to a disjointed outcome. She was concerned that sometimes there could be too much negotiation or too many trade-offs within a collaborative partnership or group. In such cases, a book or an article may end up fairly bland and was unlikely to represent the best or most characteristic work of any of the collaborators. However, notwithstanding these reservations, between 2013 and 2015 Atherton successfully collaborated with a female colleague in co-authoring an academic article and collaborated on editing a couple of journal issues. This included an issue of the *Axon: Creative Explorations* journal on the topic of collaboration, focusing on

> explor[ing] different appeals to ethics, from individuals trying to maintain ownership over parts of a collaborative document, to the use and redeployment of someone else's work within the frame of a new piece of writing. (Pont & Atherton 2016)

Beginning our collaboration

Our own experience of writing collaboratively began with a shared interest in creative writing and practice-led research – with a particular focus on prose poetry – and a shared enjoyment of writing scholarly articles related to these matters. Our collaboration was initiated through sharing a fairly simple idea which grew to become much larger than either of us originally envisioned – and it grew *because* we began to collaborate. In other words, our decision to collaborate generated ideas and projects that otherwise would never have been created.

In 2014, some months after we met briefly at a symposium in Melbourne, we began to correspond by email about a few occasional academic and writerly matters. On 5 December of that year Hetherington, who had begun to write prose poems largely as a result of Atherton's example, emailed her with a suggestion that they collaborate on a practice-led research project on prose poetry. Atherton responded enthusiastically.

At the time both of us imagined this collaborative project would involve each of us writing separate, relatively small groups of prose poems and one or two joint academic articles related to what we agreed were the compressed and room-like qualities of many prose poems. We were both busy with other research projects and diverse academic responsibilities and, initially, we both saw this project as simply one among many – although its connection to creative writing made it intrinsically more interesting than a great deal else we were involved in. While we didn't know one another particularly well, we took the approach that Denise Duhamel, Maureen Seaton and David Trinidad posit: 'the joys of collaborative poetry, the surprise and mayhem … can be adapted to many philosophies and temperaments' (Duhamel et al 2007: iv).

However, even when we decided to write our first article on prose poetry [2], Atherton felt apprehensive. We wanted to write the article because there wasn't a lot of current scholarship internationally about prose poetry and we thought we had new things to say about the importance of prose poetry as part of a proliferation of short and often hybrid literary forms in the twenty-first century. Atherton had been writing prose poetry for many years and, as we have mentioned, Hetherington had only recently begun to write in the form, so producing a scholarly article was also a way of extending our understanding of our poetic practices. Additionally, it promised to address one of the goals we had formulated for our initial practice-led research project, which we had formalised under the title 'Rooms and spaces: the still movement of prose poetry'. In our project outline, we listed two collaborative refereed journal articles as part of our project outcomes.

Atherton's apprehension was connected to her uncertainty about whether she would enjoy writing with someone else on a subject that was of longstanding importance to her. Additionally, she was aware of what Lorraine Mary York calls 'property anxieties' (York 2002: 108). This was not simply an anxiety about preserving what was 'hers' and what was someone else's. Rather, it was anxiety about whether Hetherington would embrace what Joyce Elbrecht and Lydia Fakundiny identify as 'the unmistakable image of both of us working together' (Elbrecht & Fakundiny 1994: 256). She didn't want to receive referee reports for a joint article and have to start referring to 'my parts of the paper' and 'your parts of the paper'. She wanted to discuss all parts of an article as 'ours', in keeping with York's assertion (about collaborations between women) that 'collaborative work is, indeed, not easily divisible or parsable into its constituent parts' (York 2002: 8).

In practice, writing prose poems and writing articles on prose poetry were vastly different forms of collaboration for us. Putting together a sequence of prose poems rarely involved writing into the other's prose poems. While there was heavy editing and discussion of how parts of the sequence would fit together thematically, neither of us wrote whole sentences or significant parts of the other's prose poems. This is, of course, different to poets who write poems together. The anthology, *Saints of hysteria: A half-century of collaborative American poetry*, edited by Duhamel, Seaton and Trinidad, contains some striking poetry collaborations of this kind. Within the anthology, poets have written 'process note[s]' about their collaborative practice, such as Edmund Berrigan's comment:

> The three of us took turns at the computer, transcribing lines that the others shouted across the room from various sources including the self and whatever else is handy. We then each took a turn at editing. The third poem has since been destroyed by fire. (Berrigan et al 2007: 335)

While our prose poems on rooms and spaces didn't follow such a process, it wasn't any less of a collaboration. Indeed, as editors David Floyd and Alice Willits have stated, '[p]erhaps a collaboration is a poem you simply could not have written without "the other"' (2020). Without this collaborative project, neither of us would have – or could have – produced our rooms and spaces prose poems. They were uniquely shaped by the collaborative experience. After we shared an initial three or four prose poems via email, we composed the rest with a clear and developing understanding of the ways our works may be juxtaposed and might intersect as part of an interrelated sequence with shared tropes and themes. These remaining prose poems were composed by riffing off the other's poems as they were emailed weekly, giving priority to a call and response method where ideas frequently sprang from the other's text. It was a collaboration that shared some of the features of Rob Halpern and Taylor Brady's, where:

> "The idea of 'massaging' one another's poems, working with them in such a way that they might yield to the body of an other writing offers a resonant metaphor for the kind of body-work we were after, as we began to think about the affective and political extension of particular bodies in social space." (Halpern & Brady qtd in Warren 2014)

When writing our first article together, there were similarities but also important differences in our collaborative practice. Importantly, we not only found that we shared many understandings about prose poetry, but we also had the happy surprise of discovering that our writing styles were easily accommodated, each to the other. This was an unusual experience for both of us and meant that we were able to produce a collaborative scholarly paper in which our work, as York says, was 'not easily divisible' (2002: 8). In this way, while we were reluctant or found it unnecessary to write into one another's prose poems, there was liberation in re-writing, adding or erasing sentences, paragraphs or ideas in a co-authored article.

We both also agreed that neither of us would have written the article without the other's encouragement and have continued to believe this about all of our collaborative writing – that we challenge each other in productive ways. Furthermore, our ways of working are complementary. We are able to work on the same general idea and produce different insights, enriching each other's perceptions. As Allen Hibbard argues:

> In every instance, people do something they would not otherwise have done without the interaction of others. And, in every instance, works produced bear the marks of that particular interaction, obtaining a different character than single-authored works. (Hibbard 2019: 115)

Once Atherton's initial anxiety about how Hetherington would respond to what she wrote was allayed, she enjoyed the collaborative process. Vera John-Steiner has written of what she calls 'integrative collaboration' in which collaborators 'frequently suspend their differences in style' (2000: 70). She also comments that:

> These [integrative collaborative] partnerships require a prolonged period of committed activity. They thrive on dialogue, risk-taking, and a shared vision. In some cases, the participants construct a common set of beliefs, or ideology, which sustains them in periods of opposition or insecurity. Integrative partnerships are motivated by the desire to transform existing knowledge, thought styles, or artistic approaches into new visions. (John-Steiner 2000: 203)

We are not sure whether our collaborative writing fully meets John-Steiner's characterisation. However, in some respects it does, because by the time we have completed any joint article neither of us could confidently say which part of an article 'belonged' to which person. We live in different cities and draft parts of articles separately, but we both feel free – and always take the opportunity – to rework, refine and edit each other's writing. As a result, almost every sentence, and certainly every paragraph, is the result of two sets of eyes rather than one. This is not to say that we change each other's work willy-nilly. There are times when one of us will receive work from the other and want to preserve both the quality of an idea and its expression. However, even in such cases, because we see our collaborative scholarly writing as depending on ongoing dialogue and risk-taking, we sometimes make changes in an attempt to move an idea towards new ground and away from the expression of our more habitual insights and ideas.

In this way we depend on 'a common set of beliefs, or ideology', as John-Steiner puts it (2000: 203) – although it is hard to say exactly what all of these beliefs are. Our collaboration is not only founded on the pleasure of writing together, but shares a vision of the importance of literature as well as a love of reading that literature. We have, in other words, many of the same ideas and priorities – and even some of the same prejudices – which support us during difficult collaborative periods. As John-Steiner puts it, these sustain us 'in periods of opposition or insecurity' (2000: 203) – when we are tired or frustrated or when one of us may have inadvertently upset the other.

However, our similarities and shared ideas are not our only – and perhaps not even our most important – collaborative strength. That strength derives from our differences. We thrive as collaborators because, despite many similar interests and shared convictions, we see and respond to the world very differently; and despite the compatibility of our writing styles, they are not the same. We also have contrasting approaches to how we like to plan and conduct research. These differences mean that we are always prompting one another to think in alternative ways, or to find greater subtlety of expression, or to reconsider how we might frame a particular project or argument.

Joyce Elbrecht speaks of collaboration as a form of 'conversation', and also in terms of dwelling and abiding (Elbrehct & Fakundiny 1994: 248). We share Elbrecht's ideas, because collaboration for us, and writing together, is an extended, almost habitable form of talking and writing together in order to unearth what the other may think about an engaging topic. If we produce what our universities sometimes refer to as a 'scholarly output', that is a bonus – and we do write partly to achieve such 'outputs' – but the main driving force behind the co-labour we conduct is the enjoyment we get from undertaking the work. It is an excuse to keep conversing deeply, to find out new things, and to share the pleasure of the other's writerly company.

Elbrecht also states that

> [t]he two voices in our novel [*The Restorationist*] do not converse with each other in the usual sense of exchanging their thoughts and feelings. They converse in the archaic sense: their voices dwell under the same cover. (Elbrehct & Fukundiny 1994: 248)

We would endorse this characterisation of collaboration, but also suggest that in our shared conversation and writing we are always tending to be in a state of reinvention, finding ways of thinking and being that are sometimes subtly, sometimes radically, disrupting what we know. In this way, collaboration represents both a constant disturbance and a repeated reinvigoration of our writerly selves. In addition to our commitment to collaborative scholarship on prose poetry, we continue to write separately, continue to engage in collaborations with other people, and continue to resist one another's ideas from time to time, but we never underestimate the value of our collective, enjoyable field of disturbance.

In this respect, it is worth reflecting on Wayne Koestenbaum's contention that 'the decision to collaborate determines the work's contours… Books with two authors … show writing to be a quality of motion and exchange, not a fixed thing' (Koestenbaum 1989: 2). It is certainly true that the collaborative disturbance we have mentioned also constitutes a restlessness. Very often, just as one of us feels that they have settled on an idea or approach to a topic, the other unsettles it by suggesting something unexpected. In such co-labour, it is critical to be prepared to shift ideas and not to hold too determinedly to preconceived notions. This is, of course, sometimes difficult or even upsetting, but it has become a highly productive way of working. In collaborating, we have agreed that nothing is fixed until neither of us has anything more to say about it (and, even then, we each reserve the right to change our minds later).

Writing a monograph on prose poetry

It was initially satisfying to write academic articles together, most of them ranging between 4,000 and 7,000 words. However, our most challenging collaborative project began with the idea that, having co-written about half a dozen articles on prose poetry, we might write a book on the subject. We had begun to wonder why so much prose poetry was being written in the United States; why poets in the United Kingdom – who had so long largely ignored or dismissed prose poetry – were suddenly taking up the form with enthusiasm; why there was so much prose poetry being produced in Australia; and what was this thing people called prose poetry anyway? We pitched a proposal to some publishers in America in December 2016 and Princeton University Press responded promptly and enthusiastically, asking to see samples of our work and sending our publishing proposal to a reader. By July 2017 we had signed an advance contract to write a 100,000-word monograph (in practice, the book is longer), with a delivery date of December 2019. On receiving and signing the contract we were delighted and also a little daunted. To write so many words in a relatively short period of time looked possible but challenging, given the amount of research involved.

Initially, we discussed our ideas for each chapter over the phone, often following up with emails and then updating a file we had established in Dropbox. It was a process similar to our writing of the publishing proposal, and so we were comfortable positing ideas freely and fearlessly. As Carla Harryman argues:

> "Collaboration offers one an opportunity to shift one's perspective with respect to process or ideas, and it also offers the opportunity to sort out how to present work in

> which various perspectives can remain separate and co-exist in the same space. I find such encounters worthwhile in and of themselves regardless of success or failure or whether or not a process resolves in a fully realised tangible something.” (Harryman qtd in Warren 2014)

While we began the process wanting to write each of the chapters jointly, our discussions soon revealed that we each had our own specialisations and particular interests. For example, Hetherington was interested in the history of the prose poem and its French connections, while Atherton was expert in the American tradition of the prose poem and neo-surrealism. We decided that each of us would take primary responsibility for the chapters most closely aligned with our interests and existing knowledge base. We decided that the person beginning a chapter would write two-thirds to three-quarters of it before sending it to the other person to read, edit, continue and potentially finish. This meant that the topic for and approach to each chapter was clearly framed within our overall collaborative enterprise and received significant and detailed discussion prior to writing. The writing process was then followed by periods of questioning, adding and deleting – and involved making or leaving ample room for contributions by the collaborator. In first draft, it was often fairly clear who had written which parts of each chapter. However, after an intensive and reiterative process of rewriting, revising, redrafting and copyediting, it is almost impossible to identify who wrote which parts of the final manuscript.

Warren Bennis and Patricia Ward Biederman suggest that ‘[i]n true creative collaboration, almost everyone emerges with a sense of ownership’ (1997: 28), and that was one of the keys to this project. At times, the prose poetry monograph was almost all-consuming; a true enterprise in co-writing and co-labouring, with each chapter changing hands numerous times, and receiving so many edits, revisions, insertions and deletions, and so many comments and queries – not to mention restructuring – that on many occasions the tracked changes became too congested to be useful.

The trust we had developed through writing together was fully tested. As we worked, researched, wrote, rewrote, edited, added and talked, so we prompted, inspired, encouraged, questioned or (occasionally) upset each other. Sometimes we simply shared a sense of exhaustion. Mostly, the challenges with this collaboration were centred on our different work practices or instances of poor communication. Hetherington often worked on the project in the morning and Atherton in the evening. This was useful for writing into the one document in Dropbox, as we were rarely in there at the same time, but it did mean that discussion rarely happened at a time where we were both equally focused on the manuscript. This caused some misunderstandings along the way, as one or the other of us scrabbled to imaginatively re-enter the shared conceptual and conversational space of the book after – or while – being consumed by other activities in academia such as teaching or administrative tasks. However, a significant part of successful collaboration is understanding the other person’s creative processes (and idiosyncrasies) and, in our case, we were fortunate in sharing a liking for thinking through ideas before making a decision. For this reason, we not only tracked changes but wrote thousands of emails and engaged in many telephone discussions.

Many of these interactions resolved issues but it is also important to remember that some of the best writing may result from being unsettled or shifted out of one's comfort zone. Occasionally, we had such discomfiting experiences. Floyd and Willits argue that collaborations

> create productive tensions that the solo writer does not have to face; a mutual trust, and sharing risk and effort come into play. We think of it as an act of shared creation where poets enhance the capabilities of each other. (Floyd & Willits 2020)

By the end of the writing process every sentence in our manuscript had been scrutinised and, as it were, signed by each of us (somewhat like a contract – but a creative contract, where most of our collaborative understandings were implicit). Then, as we reflected on what we had done, we realised that our collaborative relationship, challenged and tested as it had undoubtedly been, had emerged whole and strengthened.

Conclusion

The poet j/j hastain states:

> "For me, collaboration is only troubling when it ends. I feel affront in my cosmic identities when this occurs, when for whatever reason/s we can't work out a way to keep the telepathy open and pumping, and it atrophies due to human limit." (hastain qtd in Warren 2014)

Our collaboration continues, and it continues to require both of us to unsettle some of our practices and stretch the habits we have each developed over our lifetimes. It has enabled each of us to find an important 'in-between' writing practice and creative space, where we are neither entirely our separate authorial selves, nor entirely a single writerly identity (indeed, each of us remains fiercely independent). Our experience endorses Game and Metcalfe's comment that 'creativity is a relation' (2000: 263).

We almost always write in separate places – Atherton lives in Melbourne and Hetherington lives in Canberra – but, as we collaborate, we always write with mutual aims and goals, imaginatively conjuring an in-between writing space for the duration of each of our co-authored projects. In this way, what one of us has to say is also what the other has to say. (We believe this as we write, but it is hard to explain this sense of trust and connection in purely rational or logical terms. And we can never simply assume that this is true, so we continue to check and exchange what we write, in an ongoing process of combined critique and affirmation.)

Donna Lee Brien and Tess Brady call our form of collaboration 'Joint Collaboration', commenting that this 'collaborative process does not follow categorical steps or demarcations of roles, and remains instead, a more fluid process' (2003). Such fluidity is a key to collaborative success and a pleasure. Important, too, is a genuine tolerance and care for each other. There are times when one of us may not feel enthused by, for example, the other's editorial intervention, but because we believe in the vision we have of our collaborative partnership, such moments are quickly resolved and pass, never assuming any great importance. We are soon able to merge again into the flow of a whole project and its mutual, absorbing space.

Our collaboration demonstrates that the idea of the 'lone creator' is perhaps an old-fashioned model for thinking about creative processes, and for understanding writing practice. As we collaborate, so we remain ourselves apart; and at the same time we fuse our writerly energies, producing what neither of us could manage alone. Donna Lee Brien and Tess Brady remark that:

> Ownership of text, or ego-generated protection of an idea or a piece of text, can cripple any Joint Collaboration. Once a writer becomes precious and insistent on an aspect of *their* text they are running the risk of moving from Joint Collaboration to Contribution Collaboration with all the confusion and breakdown in communication such a shift can generate. (Brien & Brady 2003)

We have never experienced this problem of breakdown and fragmentation of effort, mainly because each of us takes pleasure in the other's writing and ideas – and, also, probably because neither of us likes to waste effort on unproductive labour. We both know that there are times when our collaborative partner writes things that are beyond what we can do. Without our egos in the way, we are able to take pleasure in the other's successes and achievements. In this way, collaboration may become a best-of-both-worlds enterprise. It involves the willingness to resolve misunderstandings, and sometimes the willingness to give reassurance – not to mention occasional kindness – and both of us have easily managed this.

Having said that, we both agree that trust takes some time to establish and it was very useful to write relatively short articles when we were getting used to each other's working methods and preferences. At this early collaborative stage, we found ourselves negotiating our differences and resolving a few misunderstandings along the way. None of that proved very difficult but there were issues we are both glad we addressed early. One of these is the sometimes-vexed question of the attribution of authorship. We decided early on that while first authorship means little in the humanities, nevertheless we would share that attribution.

We agreed that each of us would simply be first author on alternative papers, regardless of whether one of us had written most of a particular paper.

More generally, it is pertinent to note that when Yusef Komunyakaa contends that '[t]he ideal collaboration is a dialogue and negotiation' (2017: 107), he emphasises that one's collaborator should be 'someone who can grow with you, so that the two of you are like two or more dancers entangled in a tango of the heart and brain' (Collins & Komunyakaa 2017: 107). This is an apt simile for our experience of working together. Chasing our joint ideas and creative impulses has often seemed like an intricate dance, in which ideas and feelings merge, circle, lift and subside, emerging in new forms in scholarly papers and prose poems. Further, Komunyakaa insists, 'the moves are not agreed upon in advance' (107), and this is crucial to successful collaboration. We suspect that if we ever knew exactly what next year's collaboration would bring, we would stop working together. The excitement is in the not-knowing and the unfolding of what co-labour makes – its irreducible element of surprise. The other person in any writerly collaborative relationship is always only partly knowable, and always able to bring what is unexpected or even contradictory into the partnership. Collaboration's boundaries are thus always shifting, and always demanding reassessment.

If pressed, we would suggest that we understand our co-labour partly in terms of Brien and Brady's category of Joint Collaboration, and partly in terms of John-Steiner's notion of Integrative Collaboration. However, we would offer a third term: Conjunctive Collaboration, in which the collaborators are neither operating jointly nor behaving in a fully integrated manner. Rather, they are making new connections and combinations together, while remembering their separation; creating new moves through focusing on their sense of a whole project's possibilities, rather than merely offering the sum of their existing individual parts.

Notes

[1] This was published as *Watching the world: Impressions of Canberra* (2015) after some of the same material had been presented in the collaborative display, 'Circles and Intersections', as part of the *Imagine Canberra* exhibition at Belconnen Arts Centre in 2013.

[2] This was published in 2015 in the *New Writing* journal under the title '"Unconscionable Mystification"?: Rooms, Spaces and the Prose Poem'.

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