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Playful seriousness and serious play: poetry as creative practice in the international prose poetry project

Abstract:

The International Poetry Studies Institute's (IPSI) prose poetry project was started almost accidentally in late 2014. Since then it has become a site of highly productive creative play. At the time of writing, the prose poetry project consists of 21 members who have collectively written more than 1,500 prose poems. We will argue that it is an exemplary site for creative practice because it enables its members to generate new prose poetry enjoyably while asking very little of them except the production and sharing of their creative work. By identifying key elements of play that help stimulate creative practice in the prose poetry project—including the elements of sanctuary and ambiguity, and the interactions among these—we aim to demonstrate the significance of play for producing creative encounters with the world.

Biographical notes:

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Paul Hetherington is Professor of Writing in the Faculty of Arts and Design at the University of Canberra, and Head of the International Poetry Studies Institute (IPSI) there. He has always been interested in connections between play and poetry and has published eleven full-length poetry collections, including *Burnt Umber* (UWAP 2016) and five poetry chapbooks, most recently *Earth*. His collection *Six Different Windows* won the 2014 Western Australian Premier's Book Awards (poetry), and he was a finalist in the 2014 international *Aesthetica* Creative Writing Competition. He was shortlisted for the 2013 Montreal International Poetry Prize, commended in the 2016 Newcastle Poetry Prize and shortlisted for the international 2016 Periplum Book Competition (UK). He recently completed an Australia Council for the Arts Residency in the BR Whiting Studio in Rome. He is one of the founding editors of the international online journal *Axon: Creative Explorations*.

Bethaney Turner's research explores how more sustainable urban living behaviours can be developed and fostered in a time of human-induced climate change. Her current work focuses on how playful engagement with urban spaces can contribute to the development of sustainable, resilient cities. Bethaney has over 20 research publications in these areas and her consultation reports (with colleagues from UC and the ANU) on local food and community gardens carried out for the ACT Government continue to impact on the shaping of Canberra's approach to enhancing the wellbeing of its citizens and sustainability in the ACT more broadly.

Keywords:

Creative Writing – Prose poetry – Play – Possibility – Openness – Ambiguity – Sanctuary – Creativity

1. Play and the prose poetry project

For play is the laboratory of the possible. To play fully and imaginatively is to step sideways into another reality, between the cracks of ordinary life. Although that ordinary world, so full of cumbersome routines and responsibilities, is still visible to us, its images, strangely, are robbed of their powers. Selectively, players take the objects and ideas of routine life and hold them aloft. Like wilful children, they unscrew reality or rub it on their bodies or toss it across the room. Things are dismantled and built anew. (Henricks 2006: 1)

A. Introduction

The International Poetry Studies Institute's (IPSI) prose poetry project was started almost accidentally in November 2014. Australian poet and academic Paul Hetherington, who heads IPSI, had begun experimenting with prose poetry. He was enthused by 'playing' with this new poetic form and had written more than 20 drafts of short prose poems in just over a week. After a brief corridor conversation with two colleagues, he emailed them a draft prose poem:

Sometimes

Sometimes you no longer know your own colour. Rain, washing you, is bland as 'goodbye' at the lame end of friendship. Your skin might be blue, pink or yellow but it looks transparent. You begin to celebrate intensity, trying to find a register that becomes you—to redden speaking and green long afternoons. But you are most alive at night when obliterated by darkness. In a neon's light you are garish. Next to a store window you are a silhouette. In black streets you relish the invisible rain. (Hetherington 2014)

That same day, both colleagues emailed back a prose poem of their own. By the end of December these three poets had shared 22 poems between them. The generative quality of this exchange led Paul to invite two more members to participate. In an email to this extended group Paul stated:

The rules of engagement are simple—I will try to send a prose poem every week (or most weeks) (but others are welcome to preempt me if they wish) and other project participants may respond with their own prose poems as/when they see fit. There are no stipulations about the number of responses required from any participant except that everyone has to write at least three prose poems this year! (Hetherington 2015)

No additional rules for group conduct have ever been added to condition or curtail group activity. The group is a place where participants who wish their work to be visible and present can post at any time, and where others may take a more considered or less active role. The successful facilitation of play within the group depends to a considerable extent on this capacity for different participants to interact differently with the group because, in any 'play group' the dynamics depend on being unforced and voluntary.

Some 20 months on, the prose poetry project has grown to 21 members and includes a diverse range of international and Australian poets—many of whom did not identify as prose poets—who have written more than 1,500 prose poems. For much of its existence the group has been comprised of even fewer people, so the high number of poems that members have produced is remarkable. Interviews with these participants conducted in late 2015 and early 2016 reveal that the project not only represents a generative site for writing, but incites novel modes of encounter with various elements of the creative process.

What emerges from our interviews is that the conditions invoked by participants that enliven creative practice correspond with elements identified as intrinsic to play. For the purpose of

this discussion, play encompasses the ‘field of interactions’ (Rose et al 2011: 337) enabled by particular conditions between the participants and the other elements or resources engaged within the field. Play is also the lived quality engendered by this field of interactions as experienced by the participants (Rodriguez 2006). That is, play is an embodied experience enlivened in the prose poetry project by willing, engaged participants.

We intend to show that the prose poetry project has become a site of highly productive creative play, because its ‘field of interactions’ creates conditions conducive to participants playing with new possibilities. Thus, play is presented as a means of stimulating creativity and creative practice. By using the prose poetry project to identify key conditions that ignite the ‘charge’ of play—and the interactions among these—that help stimulate creative practice in this particular site, we aim to demonstrate the significance of play for producing creative encounters with the world and, in so doing, to indicate ways in which play may potentially be mobilised in a variety of fields.

B. Situating play in the prose poetry project: sanctuary and ambiguity

Play is notoriously non-compliant when it comes to the strictures of definition. If you consider the protean sweep of the literature within which play appears, you can readily understand Spariosu’s claim that ‘Play transcends all disciplines, if not all discipline’ (1989: xi; see also Dyson 2008; Wood 2012; Schousboe and Winter-Lindqvist 2013). Play escapes and exceeds attempts at definition not only because of variations in the disciplinary gaze, or because of the fluctuating interplay of contexts. More fundamentally, the inability to anchor play to a precise, all-encompassing definition is regularly identified as core to the ontology of play (Eberle 2014; Sicart 2014; Shields 2015). Play theorist Sutton-Smith’s seminal work, *The Ambiguity of Play*, propounds this view of the phenomenon, noting that ‘something about the nature of play itself frustrates fixed meaning’ (2001: 80).

Play’s resistance to easy definition is partly due to the fact that play is not a set entity, but rather manifests in acts, or in actions and processes. Traces of play are visible in the to-and-fro, back-and-forth movement of life, but play is not fully mobilised until it is enlivened by embodied actors in particular sites at particular times. Situated as it is, then, in specific moments of encounter, the nature of play is highly variable.

This unsettled quality of play arises in what Rose et al refer to as the ‘field of interactions’ (Rose et al 2011: 337), within which a cluster of conditions and elements come together to mobilise an affective encounter experienced as play by the entities in the field. For participants in the prose poetry project, this embodied sense of ‘being in play’ is mobilised through interactions between two key conditions of affective encounter that we term sanctuary and (borrowing from Sutton-Smith) ambiguity. When *in play*, the conditions of sanctuary enable a refashioning, modification or even transformation of relations between players, and the associated meanings and significances of their encounters. This, we suggest, is the ‘charge’ of play.

The condition of sanctuary attenuates the stakes of engagement for participants by reducing or removing restrictive pressures. As we will discuss in more detail below, the restrictive pressures in the prose poetry site are alleviated by openness to participation and an intrinsically-derived motive for taking part (writing more-or-less for its own sake); demarcation by a set of implicit and explicit parameters that generate an inner world with its own logics and affordances; and feelings of pleasure or other forms of intrinsic reward for the participants (more on this below).

The elements of sanctuary in the prose poetry project invoke an environment in which assemblages of constraints encountered in other modes of material and affective experience are tempered or moderated. When engaged in this field of interactions, then, temporary liberation from various constraints enables participants to make the world anew by exploring the ambiguities in play and reassembling modes of practice.

The ambiguous elements of play tend to operate in ways that are counter to the elements associated with sanctuary, largely by generating uncertainty in the field of interactions. These elements mobilise encounters with varying degrees of unknown-ness—whether through unfamiliarity or happenstance. Embodied engagement with these elements, then, requires participants to take risks and to act in untried ways. This has the potential to loosen participants' habitual attitudes and responses, even generating fissures within them, separating participants from aspects of their usual embodied practices, and illuminating in a 'live' and 'in-process' way different modes of practice and expressive forms. Thus the tension that arises from the ambiguous elements of play holds the ability to generate creative and novel engagement with the elements in the field. The ambiguous elements of play we identify within the prose poetry project include the mode of writing (prose poetry), the generative capacity of relational interplay with other voices and, to some extent, the conduit through which the exchange takes place: email.

In brief, then, the elements of sanctuary as they are enacted within the prose poetry site reduce the strictures of other modes of experience and provide room for willing and open engagement, while the elements of ambiguity enable encounters with the unfamiliar in varying assemblages to enable new and vital modes of creative engagement.

Through its capacity to incite play via generative, affective encounters among the elements of sanctuary and ambiguity, the prose poetry project generates a tensile and emergent dynamic or 'charge' that, we argue, can arise from being 'in play' (Rose et al 2011: 337). Within the field of interactions, the elements in play collide and collude with the other elements in temporary encounters in varying states of unmaking and remaking. The nature of play, then, is highly variable and provisional. It may be that when the elements of sanctuary and ambiguity are brought together, play is enlivened by embodied players and acts as a stimulus for creative practice. Our analysis of the prose poetry site below fleshes out these elements as they are enacted in the prose poetry project.

2. Elements of play in the prose poetry project

That play and creativity are closely connected within the prose poetry project is unsurprising considering the propinquity and complementarity of the two fields. Play is considered by many as the cradle of or natural path to creativity, as evidenced in the writings of Freud (1959), Vygotsky (1966), Huizinga (1950), Turner (1982) and Csikszentmihalyi (1988), among many others. As Dansky says, expressions of play and creativity both 'disregard the familiar, and involve the creation of novelty from the commonplace' (Dansky 1999: 395).

This view is due in no small part to overlapping connections between the two processes as identified in the cognitive sciences. Growing bodies of research suggest that many cognitive abilities—such as divergent thinking and affective processes—required for creativity, are equivalent to those required for effective play (Boden 1996; Lieberman 1977; Russ 2010; Russ and Fiorelli 2010; Russ and Wallace 2013). Further explicit connections between poetry (frequently seen as an exemplary outcome of creative thought) and play have been made by a number of writers. For example, Huizinga writes that:

all poetry is born of play: the sacred play of worship, the festive play of courtship, the martial play of the contest, the disputatious play of braggadocio, mockery and invective, the nimble play of wit and readiness. (1950: 129)

One may quibble with this remark because it fails to mention the many other things that may contribute to bringing poetry forth. But Huizinga's point is an important one and is perhaps even more persuasive when rephrased in Hans' observation that 'all poetry ... is born, lives, and dies in play' (1981: 4).

In other words, play not only inhabits the poetic as one of its preconditions, but readers recognise in persuasive poetic language, no matter how serious it is, the element of play. Persuasive poetry makes the reader aware that its language belongs to the sphere of invention and creation, signalling that an attitude of (often serious) playfulness has been fundamental to its making.

A. The prose poetry project and conditions of sanctuary

i. Openness and intrinsic motivation

A fundamental condition of play is that players participate of their own volition and are open to play (Caillois 1961; Burghardt 2005). At its most obvious, openness is enacted by voluntary participation in the project, rather than obligation or duty to organisation or individual. Within the prose poetry project people are free to join—there are no extrinsic incentives or requirements—and free to leave as they choose.

This openness extends beyond a willingness to participate in the site. It also involves openness to embodied engagement with the lively interplay of elements in the field. One participant, who is not a poet, describes this process of opening himself to engagement in the field of interactions:

I guess I was uncertain about what was supposed to happen. But you can go back and read what people are writing, and then it sort of became clear that really what they were after was ... what I thought were paragraphs really. So I found a way in to doing that, and I ended up just sort of cutting some of the bits of writing that I'd been doing in to paragraphs, and putting them up. That's how I started. And I thought it was a little bit of a pain in the arse, because it was ... it just seemed something extra to do. But as I got in to it more it was engaging, because [of] the vibrancy of everyone getting in to it.

Concomitant with openness is the autotelic element of play. As noted earlier in this discussion, the prose poetry project was established solely to provide writers with a site for collaborative engagement and exchange around a mode of writing and via a digital platform, and for no extrinsic purpose. One participant comments, 'And I think it was the fact that it was play, and that I wasn't expected to be a successful prose poet overnight, and that it was a very small group. All of that was enticing I guess. So it was just an experiment for me'.

Any outputs that arose from the project were incidental and consented to by participants, but they were never the primary reason for engagement. Explicit goals, such as expectations that participants would contribute works of excellence, were not embedded within the prose poetry project. This assisted in freeing participants from meeting the extrinsic expectations of the self and others—which are outside of the production of the work itself—and enabled the focus to be on the emergent work, the process of creation and the flow of the collaborative threads.

The autotelic element enacted within the site loosened for participants the relationship between engagement in writing (and creative practice more broadly) and the need to make

this engagement ‘mean something’—whether as performance, or product, or creative development, or criteria-fulfilling output or something else of weight. Because within the project ‘there’s nothing rightly at stake here, there’s no pressure ... for it to be anything other than itself’ (interview) participants felt liberated to engage in enlivened and more buoyant ways:

it allows for a bit of freedom as well because too often we get tied into writing for the wrong reasons and we write for judgment and publication and all that kind of stuff where sometimes it’s just the joy of sitting down with a pencil and just doing it.

ii. Demarcation

Demarcation serves to distinguish the field of interactions within which play occurs from other assemblages of engagement, and thus indicates to participants when they are *in play*. For the prose poetry project this includes the presence of a series of loose rules, the careful selection of participants, and the positioning of the site of play, and the acts within it, as formed outside of the domain of ordinary, everyday work. The prose poetry project’s explicit rules are deliberately minimal: participants are to contribute three prose poetry pieces per year. The norms and conventions are more complex, and include both occasional positive appraisal of individual works by project participants and the suspension of critique of other people’s work. One participant names this as a kind of decorum and ‘attunement’:

They’re all kind of unwritten rules I think, or they’re rules of judgement, taste and everyone’s private code of right behaviour. Some people are more kind of divulging, or appear to be divulging but perhaps they’re just kind of giving voice to a persona that is an alter ego, not an actual ego, and not an actual person. But there’s ... there are those rules of decorum I guess, that are each person’s own rules. And then when you give over something that indicates a little bit of what your kind of decorum is, other people get a sense of that, and respond to it. So once again it’s this kind of group attunement kind of process always.

Another participant comments, ‘Yeah, decorum. It’s too much fun, even when its hard work it’s too much fun to mess up by bitching about people on the list or, you know, doing anything to make anyone feel unsafe’.

This sense of collective attunement reinforces the embodied experience for participants of operating in a protected environment, but one that does not constrain its participants too fiercely. The participants in the prose poetry project know that unpredictability is a feature of playful environment:

Through the induction of constraints that introduce opportunities for further mastery or further chaos, play maintains its surprise and unpredictability and allows people to exert or to lose control in novel situations. (Mainemelis and Ronson 2006: 90)

To a significant extent, then, demarcation in a project such as this one is guided by important and rather intangible considerations that Stenros characterises as the ‘personal mindset of the participant and the socially negotiated and upheld contract’ (Stenros 2005: 148). This ‘contract’ belongs to the group as a whole and to each individual participant separately, and consists of the rules, norms and conventions mentioned above, *as each participant understands them to be*. Not every participant understands this ‘contract’ in exactly the same way, but as long as the participants’ various understandings are reasonably cohesive, the group is likely to function well. Successful play tends to confirm its own success, and participants in such play tend to want to continue the modes of conduct that have yielded the pleasure of play. For, as Fink says:

playing is maintained and constituted by something binding. One cannot arbitrarily do whatever one wants. Playing is not limitlessly free. One cannot play at all without something binding being determined and adopted. And yet the rules of play are not laws. What binds does not have the character of the unalterable. (Fink 2010: 23)

The adoption of a particular loose contract for the prose poetry site reinforces its positioning as different from the 'ordinary' world. Only writers whom the instigator of the project believes will play well—that is, follow the loose rules and be open and active participants in the interactions—are invited to participate. This helps to democratise the field of interaction so that, even though participants include both internationally recognised poets and writers who have hardly published at all, participants work together amicably and suspend any concerns about differences in writerly status or perceived ability.

Part of the charm of play is the shared awareness that participants have together separated themselves voluntarily from the normal course of events: 'to play together is to commit to one another, to affirm that these moments spent together ... are valuable. Moreover, to play together is to make clear that others are not included' (Henricks 2006: 14). One participant notes of her experience of the prose poetry project:

So you think about it a lot, and you want to be connected, and it's safe, nobody else knows about it, so it's private and safe, and secret. And yet deeply enriching, and it's away from your everyday life. Completely away from it. So maybe it's more like falling in love, an illicit affair than the normal run of things.

Thus the sanctuary of the prose poetry site and conscious lack of goals enhance the affective experience of the site as being significantly removed from usual working life, 'A break away from academic debate, and from worrying about strategic plans and operational plans, and budgets and reports, and my own field work. It's just it's a nowhere space, it's a space that is outside'. At the same time, the initial position of the prose poetry site as a separate space for play enabled engagement in practices that soon became part of the participants' weekly routine: 'It's an amazing way of making you consider that prose poetry's actually part of your daily life, not something that you compartmentalise and sit down to do it at any point. So yeah, that's been really exciting'.

iii. Pleasure

Pleasure arises in part from the intrinsic motivation for participating in the prose poetry project, which is maintained and strengthened through the generation of surprising results. These, somewhat paradoxically, tend to affirm the real-world meaningfulness of the play-generated experiences in the site. Pleasure is induced through the capacity of the site to enable players to make, and remake their creative world anew as often as they wish to do so. While play is not about the acquisition of extrinsic benefits, it is, as Rodriguez contends, focused on the 'the modulation of experience' (Rodriguez 2006) and thus the results of play also tend to have consequences—sometimes transformative ones—for the participants' quotidian lives. Pleasure in play tends to leak into all sorts of other experiences.

This suggests that play is not merely an amusing diversion from the serious activity of life, but fundamental to experience and an infinite and pleasurable resource. In terms of writing poetry, play should not be construed as a helpful distraction from the core business of writing, or a tool or toy for stimulating the creative 'juices'. The pleasure-inducing function of play illuminates its potential to make the world anew. As Fink notes:

All play is pleurably attuned, joyfully moved in itself—it is animated. If these stimulating joys of play are extinguished, the activity of play dwindles straightaway. The pleasure in play is a strange pleasure that is difficult to grasp, one that is neither merely sensuous nor yet merely intellectual; it is a creative, formative bliss of its own kind and is in and of itself polysemous, multidimensional. (Fink 2010: 22)

The pleasure and surprise that play in the prose poetry site induces is, in an important sense, unintentional and does not always lead to deeply meaningful work, yet it is part of a dynamic that sometimes leads to remarkable outcomes:

Yeah. It's just extraordinary. It just flows out. And some of it is worth hanging on to. Some of it's worth doing things with. And even if it's not, I'm happy that I've done it, because I'm making, I'm in a making space. And I think that's okay. But I don't know that ... so talking about deliverables and KPIs, I don't think that you could manufacture this. I think it just happened because it just happened, that's the only reason.

B. The condition of ambiguity

i. The prose poetry form

A condition of play within the prose poetry site is the presence of ambiguous elements within the field of interactions. One of the critical elements of ambiguity in this project is the form of writing itself—prose poetry. The prose poem, like play, is resistant to the constraints of definition (Monte 2000). It is a genre that traverses and transcends the boundaries between the forms of poetry and prose: 'its existence depends partly on its ability to plunder the territories of many other like genres' (Johnson 2000). This hybridity renders it 'an almost entirely open form' (Hetherington and Atherton 2015: 277) and thus a site ripe for inducing play. Smith notes that the prose poem has 'facility for narrative play, and for play with language register, un-hierarchical patterns and unemphasised possibilities' as well as an 'openness to 'unpoetic' language and language from a range of registers' (2014: 13).

In the prose poetry project most participants did not initially identify as prose poets. They are all writers, most of them poets, but the project required them to submit to a new, more open form where many of the 'rules of the game' as they knew it were removed or reconfigured. For some, working with prose poetry represented a form of culture shock:

But I've always written lineated poetry as opposed to prose poetry, until recently. And that has often been a major driver really for me. I'm particularly interested in the movements that one creates by thinking in terms of lines, and ... the effect that has on the meaning that emerges from a poem ... and the rhythm, the shapes, everything, all of that hugely important to me. So suddenly being thrown in to prose poetry was quite a shock.

Such 'shock', induced both by a lack of direct experience working with the form and the lack of concrete rules was both disconcerting and 'liberating'—providing for many participants an 'ensuing sense of freedom' (Delville 1998: ix) from the conventions of other poetic and prosodic genres, as well as multiple access points for engagement.

For some participants this liberation enabled poetry to colonise their days in new and multiple ways. The actual practice of how, where and when they write changed through active openness to new ways of being a writer. In fact, partly because the prose poem has 'never been unequivocally accepted as a legitimate poetic form in English' (Hetherington and Atherton 2015: 266) some of the more traditional poets were freed from habituated practices. One participant, for example, noted of her previous poetry practice that:

if I can't sink myself into the mental space where I can really be absolutely sure of what I'm doing and doing that sort of perfectionist thing, then it's very difficult to do that around the edges and that means long periods without making any discernible progress and that's painful and uncomfortable and professionally uncomfortable.

However, these practices were decoupled from writing through her engagement in the prose poetry project: 'It's like yeah, I wrote something last week and the week before that'.

The hybridity and ambiguity of the prose poetic form, then, enabled participants to engage with prose poetry, with the broader fields of poetry and prose, and with their own creative practice in new and emergent ways. In turn this ignited creative energy, improvisation and, in the case of a number of participants, new sorts of work, as well as increased output. Many participants use the term 'liberation' when speaking of their experience of the project—both from the constraints of the 'ordinary world' and from elements of their own practice. This loosening or liberation manifests in a variety of beneficial ways—from 'productive side-tracking', which reinvigorates old practice or encourages new forms of practice, through to a significant reconfiguration of creative identity.

The brevity and flexibility of the prose poetry form and the sense of liberation associated with the project quickly generated surprising volumes of work. For many participants, this generative aspect was one of the most notable aspects emergent within the project, in part because such rapid and substantial output is inconsistent with conventional perceptions about the temporal and spatial patterns required for the production of creditable poetry or creative prose. It rendered a tangible form of productivity within this field of interactions which ignited and invigorated participant engagement. As one noted, 'I find it being immensely generative of my own creative work. I haven't done so much writing since I was an undergrad'.

This productive capacity was attributed in part to the prose poetry form:

you don't have to think so much about line and metre, and stanza breaks ... You can just sort of lay out the idea really quickly, in a few sentences. And the same with the fiction writing, you don't have to fit it in to a larger picture, you can just sort of hammer out this really small thing, which is really, I think, freeing.

Further, because prose poems are often only a (sometimes short) paragraph in length, this enabled participants to write poetry in ways that challenged established creative practice of labouring over single works. Two quotations from participants illustrate this point:

You don't linger over it. You can do a discrete unit really fast, and get it out there. And I think because of that you've got time, you then have time re-work it in different modes.

Even if you don't have time and you're marking student essays, you're like, well I'm going to have to do this, I think it's a priority because you want to be ... it's like this incredible train.

The volume of poetry was accompanied by bursts of engagement with a thread—with participants ignited by and responding swiftly to other works, which gave, according to a participant, 'an incredible pace' to the project. This put on hold 'thoughtful poetic process' for a participant, for something more instinctive, more immediately responsive and agile.

These factors—the nature of the prose poem and the volume and speed of production within the field of interactions in turn encourage people to take risks with regard to sharing works that are emergent—in a state of becoming, rather than polished. Thus many of the works are not complete but still *in play*:

Yeah. I always see it as a non-stop kind of thing that's evolving. So yeah, with sandcastles that get built up and knocked down and some people build a moat around them but the tide

comes in anyway, and writing on the sand disappearing and somebody else writing over the top, that kind of palimpsest idea ... So yeah, it is playful, like a day at the beach.

And I think it's a thing that develops over time where you just trust everybody and you understand what the project is actually about and it is about responding and collaborating rather than producing a perfectly technical piece of writing ... it's saying you don't have to write a virtuoso piece.

The productivity, in terms of its creative productivity, producing this writing is really strong ... And it was good to see someone like Paul or Jen Webb put up stuff that was maybe not as ... polished as they would have liked ... it was kind of revealing about the way they think about things.

Thus, although more than 1,500 discrete artefacts or fragments exist within the prose poetry project—from which various assemblages of these artefacts have been extracted for use in performance and anthology—participants continue to experience the site as live, generative and emergent, with each artefact part of this state of making and remaking. The artefacts, as well as the participants, are always able to be 'in play'.

ii. Relational entanglements

The other crucial ambiguous element in play in the prose poetry site is the relational nature of the engagement. In the contemporary world, the writing of poetry or prose is frequently characterised as a solitary act that depends on individual inspiration, or at least the solitary hard work of a single person. As Webb and Hetherington (2016) write:

The trope of the lone creator weaves through the history of art, characterised by stories of the genius in the garret and rare individuals burning away their lives in the creation of their solitary art. These artists, almost always depicted as men, are said to have a certain spark that sets them outside of the norm. Pierre Bourdieu describes the ways in which the field of practice applies a sort of 'theological logic of "first beginnings"' in the 'search for the origin of "creative" power': the power—or charisma—associated with the lone, original genius.

However, within the prose poetry project's field of interactions the charge of play is relational rather than dependent upon separate, individual contributions. Participants bounce off each other's ideas, either directly or indirectly, to the extent that many individual works are written in direct response to another work or works. This has been welcomed by participants as a way of sharing ideas, of breaking down boundaries between individual and group creativity, and of generating new work.

In some of its manifestations such interplay might be characterised as associative, particularly when participants responded to a thread thematically or through some other form of connection at a conceptual level. At other times a participant incorporated into their own prose poem a phrase taken directly from another work posted to the group, often making use of it as a creative springboard to produce the new work. Participants saw it as a compliment that another group member would like their idea or phrase sufficiently to make creative use of it. While such a process is not unusual within many creative communities, what is unusual in the contemporary literary context—where poets talk more often about plagiarism than sharing and collaborating—is that no one worries about such borrowing and re-purposing.

Indeed, it was a feature that group members enjoyed, and which liberated them from feeling bound to use *only* their own ideas:

I'd say it's an incredibly collaborative forum where people write prose poems based on maybe a trigger from somebody else's piece of writing or they may even start a trigger themselves.

And it's really a chain of work that belongs together; it can stand alone, but it's much better when it's read in juxtaposition with other peoples' prose poems.

And the joy ... the most exciting thing when someone picks up something from your prose poem and writes their own, is just so exciting and wonderful and you know that it feels the same for other people: so when you take up an image from one of their prose poems, or you take up an idea and you move it into yours, you know that that person's going to think, wow, I've actually sparked a prose poem in somebody else's life.

Such comments illustrate the lively and in-process character of exchange within the prose poetry project.

The combination of such active and willing entanglements and the rapidity of the exchange within the project, coalesced in periods of such high interchange between the participants that the group dynamic became more like a conversation or a dialogue than a chronology of discrete works. This dialogic flow of the project took the focus away from and significantly diminished the emphasis on the achieved quality of singular works:

We are, in a sense ... a single organic unit that is cranking on these things. And I truly don't remember who said it first. And there's a lot of things I don't remember, because it's become the group's thing. And I love that, it's one of the few true collaborations that I've been in.

One participant talks of the project as a 'patchwork quilt' made up of different 'squares'.

Operating within such a field of interactions enables all participants to watch others engage actively in play, which in turn extends their thinking about the creative process or practice. Some participants then leveraged their engagements with the group in order to experiment with their own creative identity through altering their voice, or assuming, at least briefly, another's style, mode, process or practice:

There's a ... sometimes there's that feeling of like someone's idea really interests you, or someone's image really interests you, and you want to see if you can respond to it. Or with me, particularly, like some of the ways that people have phrased things, or some of the techniques they use, I've wanted to see if I could do that as well.

So yeah, that collaborative aspect is very, very important. It's like we're kind of inciting each other, sometimes, to do things.

This even becomes a kind of playful competitiveness:

And there's a certain drive to reflect on and respond to, and do better than, and to do something completely different ... And that's what I mean by competition, it's seeing what other people can do, and trying to do better. Not necessarily better than them but better than you have been doing.

Collaboration takes many forms in the creative arts and, as in the prose poetry project, can be a highly productive way of working, not only in terms of the quantity of creative works produced but also in their quality. There is something about being in the continuing, active present of others' writing that stimulates many individuals to work better on their own terms:

So there's a feeling of ... that nice feeling that you're not working alone, in a way, and that also that you're just seeing what happens, you're kind of putting stuff out there, and seeing what your take on it is, and how your voice operates with it, and how different people are operating with it.

Riffing off somebody else's work is playful. It is somewhere where you're teasing out as well as thinking about the elements in their work and how you can incorporate them into yours, and playing in that mode with it, sort of like a sandpit.

However complex creative collaboration may be as a phenomenon, and however difficult it is to generalise about the nature and benefits of collaborative activity, there is no doubt that the prose poetry project has enabled playful relational entanglements between participants that have been especially fruitful for many of them as creative writers.

3. Conclusion

We propose that provision of the conditions for, and the act of being in, play can be a core stratagem for creativity—or in the more lyrical words of Strange et al, a ‘creative manoeuvre’ (2014: 2). The facilitation of play through the two conditions of sanctuary and ambiguity enable a lively in-process interchange of elements in the field of interactions, and are a crucial feature of the prose poetry site, enabling as they do risk-taking, the creation of novel forms and techniques, and remaking of the world (and, in some cases, the participants). The project exemplifies significant ways in which play is important for all creative practitioners—and all wishing to develop creative ways of being in the world—as it provides opportunities to push against the parameters of the possible.

Further, we suggest that forms of play are particularly helpful for those writers and artists situated within organisational or similar contexts, such as academia, that require engagement with ‘creativity’ in functional or instrumentalist ways and from a distance. This might be through committee work, for instance, or through administration, external engagement, curriculum design and pedagogy, grant-writing, or supervision—and these practitioner’s creative outputs are also frequently connected to extrinsic motivators like professional development reviews and promotional policy. Such unceasing positioning within the ‘constraints and routines’ of professional life (Kane 2004: 39) can, as the participants in this research suggest, stymie, inhibit, interfere with or even sever connection with the creative process.

However, while play is commonly positioned as being oppositional to work, and thus ‘stuck in the contrasting shadow of the putative counter-phenomena’ (Fink 2010: 17) we challenge this dualism. We suggest that play can in fact enliven work in new ways and that the creation of the conditions to enable play may require considerable forethought and a concerted effort. As Mainemelis and Ronson write:

Play transforms the nature of work tasks in the same way, so that the task involves work activity and may result in work products, but the task is not experienced and is not performed as work in the conventional sense of obligatory, instrumental, and efficiency-orientated activity. (2006: 87)

Just as creativity involves work—for creative practitioners cannot rely solely on inspiration—play is not simply a mystical entity beyond our grasp. In fact play is, as Kane asserts, ‘a deep, natural and lasting resource’ that can be enlivened through the creation of particular conditions (2004: 39). While it is not explicitly goal-focused, play can be mobilised to encourage new, potentially more productive engagements with the world. It just requires a cluster of conditions and an imaginative use of available resources.

The prose poetry project is a persuasive example of how play, poetry and creativity may be all part of the same dynamic, leading to high levels of creative energy and numerous outputs while focusing on what is simultaneously pleasurable, transformative and self-actualising.

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