

## COLLABORATION

For many, creative writing always has been, is, and always will be a solo art. For others, this assumption has not always—or doesn't at present—hold true. Consider, however, the entry requirements for the Associated Writing Programs' annual book manuscript contests: "Each manuscript must include . . . the following typed statement: 'This is an original work of which I am the sole author.'"

Traditionally, creative writers have focused on creating original texts for which they claim solitary authorship. They have done so despite cross-cultural, historical, and practical evidence that writing is often—some argue always—a collaborative act. Investigations of the history of authorship (definitions of which have demonstrably changed over time) and philosophies of postmodernism challenge this unitary assumption, suggesting that our thinking and our writing are socially constructed and that our inventions and ideas are influenced by all that we encounter in the world. Definitions of collaborative work and practices, while complicated, may help us productively reconceptualize the creative composing process, encouraging writers to continue to challenge genres, create hybrid forms, and participate in constructionist and cooperative practices, including bricolage, collage, and alternate discourses.

For example, one of our most often taught verse forms, the haiku, derives from an ancient collaborative composing activity. In the *Haikai no Renga* tradition. Japanese poets, circa 1200, would gather to create linked verse together, each striving to produce the "hokku"—the stanza that begins a renga series, in which "each poem in a series was linked to the immediately preceding one either by witty association or verbal play" (Yuasa 1975, 12). In this competitive collaboration—a sequential composing act that produced a multiauthored product—poets often found themselves with many leftover hokku, which became haiku.

However, U.S. poets and writers rarely, if ever, gather with the intention of composing together in a similar manner, for there are a number of artistic and economic pressures on them to focus on the singular.

Obstacles to such collaborative work include the difficulty of finding editors willing to publish coauthored work and the fact that coauthored work is regularly excluded from the thesis and dissertation processes as well as from contests and grant applications like that of the AWP awards contests mentioned above. Indeed, coauthored creative writing is almost an oxymoron and is generally treated with suspicion by other authors. That this should continue to be so may prove problematic in a century that is already grappling anew with definitions of intellectual property and academic arguments over what constitutes plagiarism, as those definitions are being continually challenged by advances in writing technologies.

Instances of coauthorship in creative writing are so rare as to be memorable to those who have encountered them. Early in his career, Mark Doty published with his then wife Ruth as M. R. Doty, and Louise Erdrich and her husband, Michael Dorris, successfully pushed a coauthoring agenda during a number of the years preceding his death, regularly sharing insights into their collaborative composing during interviews. One of the few novelists to investigate collaborative coauthoring—prior to the advent of electronic publishing—was the late Ken Kesey, whose fiction-writing class wrote a novel together. The next best thing to published coauthoring of a literary product in the fine arts is the artistic correspondence. While Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet* represents one side of a conversation, epistolary correspondents like Leslie Silko and James Wright shared insights and ideas about their writing in letters edited and introduced by Anne Wright (1986). Rare but notable is William Stafford and Marvin Bell's *Segues* (1983), a lyric exchange between two already widely published solo artists.

If coauthoring seems to diminish the uniqueness of the creative act and raise questions about the division of labor that goes into producing a coauthored text (and the awarding of merit for that product), it also challenges our assumptions concerning originality and influence. Intentionally, advocates of collaborative learning and teaching practices raise these and other related issues. Though now widely accepted as a meaningful pedagogical tool, as evidenced in creative writers' workshops (see "Workshop"), the writing and reading response groups advocated in composition pedagogies today are based on assumptions that learners benefit from supportive response to their work (including peer tutorials in writing centers). Influential in bringing the workshop concept to composition was Peter Elbow, in *Writing without Teachers* (1973, 1998), and the many MFA-holding writing teachers who staffed required composition courses within traditional English literature departments during the

1970s, when open-admissions students increased the need for time-intensive writing instruction, particularly at the first-year level.

To deal with the complicated needs of first-generation college writing students, these writing teachers drew on the work of creative writers and the work of diverse thinkers and theorists like Richard Rorty (1979), a philosopher who argued that knowledge is a social construction; Kenneth Bruffee (1984), who argued that collaboration was a useful and necessary part of a democratic process; and Carl Rogers (1961), a psychologist who was investigating group response dynamics in the early 1960s—to name just a few whose thinking influenced the growing field of composition studies. Compositionists developed new classroom practices based on several premises: that collaboration could increase writing students' audience awareness; allow learners to pool and increase knowledge; create supportive environments for taking risks in learning and writing; offer a more accurate reflection of the way meaning is made (in discussion and negotiation among and between communities of learners); and challenge hierarchies and encourage investigations of power relationships—to name a few.

Of course, it did not take long for critics of these new practices and pedagogies to raise useful critiques, particularly that of the possibility of forced acquiescence and community norming. While group consensus about what would help improve a writer's text can be profoundly useful to a writer who is seeking reader response, consensus may also prove stifling to those writers who are eager and ready to push against conventions and conventional thinking. Think of the collaborators in Vichy France and the nobility of the Resistance served up in our favorite movie, *Casablanca*. Historically, to collaborate is to buy in to the assumptions of the power structure, and to resist is to remain free and original.

Writers who give in to editorial or community demands, to the temptations of genre writing and its problematic economic rewards, are often viewed on the professional level as sellouts or worse. One need only note a common belief among writers that to suffer and remain in poverty—to live the bohemian life—is more meritorious than to succeed and have one's artistic struggles tainted by the seductions of success and luxury—or, as Jane Tompkins explains, "The first requirement of a work of art in the twentieth century is that it should do nothing" (1980, 210). In this vision, the paid literary collaborator hides her artistic light, her real talent, under a bushel basket in order to boost the prestige of someone who couldn't produce real work. This writer is a hack, a drudge, factotum, plodder, scribbler; such coauthoring is to be abhorred and avoided if at

all possible or undertaken only to return the writer to her art. Equally, the ghostwriter succumbs to the temptations of earning a living by prostituting his talents, taking dictation for the stars (or other nonliterary but successful figures), or overseeing the continuation of a successful series by a now-deceased genre author in order to assure the success of, say, a blockbuster mystery or romance series. Hacks and ghosts include the once famous, now fallen, like F. Scott Fitzgerald writing screenplays in Hollywood instead of completing his last novel.

But concepts of collaboration are more complicated than a concern over “false or forced consensus” or the worry over “who wrote which words?” or “words for money are less valuable than words for art’s sake” might suggest.

Collaboration takes place when we talk through ideas or derive an idea from a life experience. It occurs when we interact with another artist’s work. Collaboration takes place when we coauthor as well as when we share our writing and ask for response that we feel free to use or not use. These are only a few of the many instances of fruitful collaborative and, potentially, knowledge- and art-making activities that have long been part of the writing life. While some argue that all writing is inherently collaborative (Thralls 1992), others restrict the term to discussions of coauthoring. Therefore, a few more definitions and explorations are in order.

#### **WHERE COLLABORATION HIDES**

It is fairly easy to illustrate that writers do not write alone. Even if we were able to ignore theories of influence, we would still encounter the practicalities of production. Most writers find other authors’ acknowledgment pages a transparent primer of influence, collaboration, and community. Here we find the traditional and expected tropes of thanking the publisher, editor, research assistant, the writers’ reading group, the writer’s university that offered sabbatical support or a state arts council that provided grants, the writer’s retreat where good conversation and well-prepared food greased the inspirational wheels, the nanny (oh, lucky writer), and the helpmeet, spouse, or significant other. Even, at times, the muse is acknowledged.

One does not have to go far to find traditions of collaborative authorship, though most instances are found in non-European-influenced cultures or, in the United States, imbedded within traditions of vernacular and oral literatures. If authorship is a social construct, stemming from nineteenth-century romanticism, which valued the concept of autonomous,

original (often male) composition as a reflection of an individual character and mind at work on a page—a page that could then be owned via copyright legislation—then collaboration is the act that undermines that construct. We'll never know if some unsung editor of Shakespeare's work suggested that he add an extra "Never" (or advised taking away one we now value) from Lear's memorable lament on the death of his daughter Cordelia. We could as usefully speculate on what version of the *Wasteland* might we be reading (or not reading?) without Ezra Pound. Ditto, Pound without Chinese and other world literatures to mine. Editors and authors collaborate. Readers and writers collaborate. Writing teachers and writing students collaborate.

Collaboration can be seen as a way to compound knowledge: surely two good minds can often remember more than one, two can sometimes work more quickly to see and make connections between disparate facts or analyze options (we know this holds true in the hard sciences, where research teams are the dedicated norm). It's also easy to imagine that our tools are singular (the paintbrush, the keyboard), although that's rarely true. The painter tends to lay down "versions" as often as does the writer (*pentimento* is the term for an earlier layer of painting that shows through the next layers). There are times when some of those layers and drafts are set down by different hands in a collaborative effort, potentially enhancing the product but certainly complicating current notions of ownership. In fact, collaboration has often been the way of apprenticeship. Renaissance painters had workshops, guilds had articulated apprentices, and writers' workshops have students who are seeking to learn from professional writers via imitation, workshop response, and editorial direction and correction.

Collaborative theory suggests that such relationships are more complicated *and* more important than is commonly admitted. For some, the publishing senior writer is *the expert*, perhaps a gatekeeper, someone to emulate and eventually to dethrone. For others, the senior writer is a mentor, introducing able novices into a guild, society, school, or community. Not either/or, but both/and. Even if few of us coauthor, clearly none of us writes alone. Writing is not entirely a social activity, nor is it a provably solitary one. It is at once an act of individual cognition but also always an act of intellectual and social negotiation with other thinkers. We think and write in the presence of and as a result of our influences, and we can choose to make what is tacit more explicit and interactive. Such a choice is often made by writing teachers, by feminist authors, or by

writers interested in connecting writing with social activism and reform and identity politics. It is also the normal experience of workplace writers and writers in other academic genres.

### COLLABORATION IN ACTION

In the sciences, coauthored research is the given. Research labs work on a variety of funded group projects. Senior scientists direct and compile the work of assistants, training younger researchers and reaping the benefits of that training in contributions to coproduced reports. Credit and authorship are acknowledged in ways different from those composing in the arts and humanities: sometimes seniority and hierarchy are indicated and sometimes funding agencies are given great credit. At other times, coauthorship or joint authorship is evenly spread across a team of senior researchers. That is, credit may be hierarchical *or* dialogic; in certain group writing projects, workers contribute data and brainstorming to a product that is orchestrated by the dominant member. In other projects, colleagues work in tandem, in dialogue, each cocontributing to the final product.

The same is true in workplace writing environments, where a document may be produced on an assembly-line model in which the constituent parts arrive separately on the desk of a coordinator who assembles the whole, smoothes out the text, and produces an introduction or executive summary. More interactively, a team may produce “versions,” one member sending a draft to another to revise before sending it to another member of the team (or the document recirculates and accretes through multiple iterations), although the composite document may still eventually move through an editorial or proofreading hierarchy. Composition researchers have identified and detailed these sorts of models, including the influence of computer systems on our understandings of coauthoring as we produce hypertext or linked texts that are loosely but usefully associated (Ede and Lunsford 1990; Landow 1992, Smith 1994).

Technology challenges our ideas of authorship and increases our options for creative composing (see “Electronic Literature”) in the workplace *and* in academic environments. Technology challenges Jane Tompkins’s (1980) definition of twentieth-century art. In the twenty-first century, art does many things and is sure to circulate in new ways across evolving platforms. Indeed, through the use of classroom Web boards and e-mail exchanges, student writing already is doing so. Sharing work online can allow students informal and formal writing opportunities, increase engagement and dialogue, and encourage revision in a writing space

(Conroy 2001), which may feel “alternative” for students’ instructors, yet is likely to feel comfortable and productive for writing students, many of whom have never actually seen or touched the museum object called “the manual typewriter.”

For creative writers, then, a promising first step (though market forces still appear to hinder the publication and circulation of the same) would be to explore the values of coproduction, as detailed here by Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford. They explain how dialogic writing and “versioning” *both* were elements of their coauthoring processes (at least during their pre-e-mail days of collaborative composing when this was written):

When we are working, whether in Vancouver, Corvallis, or Seattle’s University Inn, our halfway meeting place, we usually stake out different rooms to write in. But we move constantly back and forth, talking, trading texts (one of our favorite collaborative strategies is to revise one another’s writing), asking questions. Often when one or both of us is stuck, we’ll work together on the same text, passing a single pad of paper back and forth, one of us completing the sentence or paragraph that the other began. By the time that most essays are finished, we simply couldn’t say that “Lisa wrote this section, while Andrea wrote that.” Our joint essays are truly collaborative efforts. (1990, 126)

Creative writers might consider the potentials of collaboration, because doing so could lead to balance. Received images of solitary writers at the word processor might be balanced with equally real images of writers talking about aesthetics together and founding schools of poetry, of editorial board meetings for literary journals with their convivial and contentious discussions that help shape the future of U.S. letters, of the public reading where writer shares ideas with writer, with the popularity of writers’ lists and online salons, with the continued growth of academic degree programs, university workshop classes, and community-based writing programs and all the writerly discussion that takes place in those locations. Teachers and writers in school, prisons, shelters, and retirement homes continue to compose within intensely collaborative settings and often testify to those environments’ important cocontributions to their creative work. It’s worth asking, then, how coauthoring and copublishing might usefully enliven a rapidly changing publishing landscape on and off the Web. How can reconceptualizing the creative composing process open new avenues for writing, for writers, for the teaching of writing? How might collaborative practices support social and institutional change?

Last, but not the least important, we might consider the fact that collaboration and coauthoring often prove both productive *and fun* for writers and can change their attitudes vis-à-vis a highly competitive and often discouraging publishing environment.

“I want my ideas to generate talk, to make sense, to provoke. I want a good story. And the only way to get there for me is through the challenges of tough readers,” says Lil Branon. “That’s why I write a lot with other people. That and it’s never quite as lonely. That and it’s just plain more fun. You get to talk a lot. You get to hear yourself think . . . The essay or chapter was just the by-product of the talk. The talk was the important part. The talk was important because it would generate hundreds of ideas which didn’t fit the paper but which could become papers later on. The talk created a future for ideas. The writing never seemed hard either—time consuming but not hard” (1988, 26).

Not only have creative writing communities supported a bias against art that “does something,” but many also hold to tacit associated assumptions that art-making should entail relentless hard work and suffering, perhaps a poor inheritance from a long Puritan tradition (see “Author”). Consider the lilies of the field. Consider the Japanese Hokku writers, who are reported to have enjoyed their group poetry sessions, working hard to prepare, traveling long distances to participate, balancing the insights of the solitary observer with the joys of gift giving, of poetic observation shared in community—and along the way producing haiku that we read with respect and enjoyment some eight hundred years later. Consider creative writing as—at times—a pleasurable collaborative practice. There’s a lot to be said for it.