

## Thinking to ourselves: the possibility of collaboration to build and destroy

‘By abandoning the single-author text, we create a space outside of (or beyond) the linguistic marketplace.’

— Kristina Marie Darling with Chris Campanioni

‘I am not i can be you and me.’

— Trinh T. Minh-ha

‘As anyone who has listened to the last few recordings of Frank Sinatra knows, duets can go horribly wrong.’

— D.A. Powell

This all started in 2021 with an invitation. Rising from a craving for social and artistic connection. Then, of course, it required agreement. The ‘Yes, and...’ rule from improv. Without making the move and gaining consent, we would have remained frozen, fixed in the constant sense of global urgency and despair.

With the help of Australia Council of the Arts funding and in-kind support from Red Room Poetry, we commenced a collaborative writing project. Fifty practising artists across diverse mediums were invited to collude with us by selecting a writing prompt from our *Menu of Constraints* and seeing what happened.

Would it be possible to create? To ask for vulnerability and trust from ourselves and others? To have – dare we wish it – fun? Miranda Mellis says, ‘the possibilities are infinite as to what may go inside those brackets’. What we’ve learned over these past few years of writing with so many beautiful people is beyond what we had ever hoped.

Of course, this didn’t start with us. Collaboration has been an ongoing poetic concern for centuries, drawing on a long tradition of multiform collaborations between poets, musicians, visual artists and dancers. Often, too, the creation of a single-authored poem does not occur in a complete vacuum or silo – it may draw on existing writings, forms, voices and editorial input before it takes its final shape. And sometimes we co-write with different parts of the self.

In a contemporary Australian context, co-writing projects (prolific since the 70s) are, of late, increasingly returning to the fore. Journals, such as [Cordite](#) and [Rabbit](#), have published collaboration-themed issues (both their editors happen to be part of this project as a continuation of this lineaged dance); experimental poetry projects like John Kinsella’s ‘duets’ with Charmaine Papertalk Green, Thurston Moore and Kwame Dawes, collectives like Generic Ghosts, Machine for Making Sense and Arf Arf, or Red Room Poetry’s own [Fair Trade](#) First Nations poetic conversations, all showcase the findings of deep, shared experiences and a collective sense of risk and reciprocity.

The influences that brought *Author unknown* to life – and the creation of our editorial pseudonym – were a combination of art movements, personal connections, musical associations, our own prior collaborative experiments, and the desire to nurture relationships and community. This has included the foundational work of the Surrealists and Dada artists; a shared love for the canon of duets albums, including Frank Sinatra, Roberta Flack and Donny Hathaway, Kenny Rogers and Dolly Parton, Mickey and Sylvia, and Tammy Wynette and the KLF; our collaborative poetry projects *Flight* and *The Outlandish Watch*; and a key text we read and discussed in detail that informed much of this project’s premise and prompts – *Saints of Hysteria: a half-century of collaborative American poetry*, edited by Denise Duhamel, Maureen Seaton and David Trinidad.

These factors enabled us to evolve that space alongside friends and peers open to the element of surprise, never quite knowing where it would all lead. As Lucille Clifton says, ‘poetry and art are not about answers to me; they are about questions’.

The process behind this body of work was constantly shifting; shaped by degrees of proximity, aesthetic harmony, the limits of time and space, an extraordinary array of online communication tools, and simple calendar capacity.

— Thank you very much for your kind email and invitation. This is such an interesting project. I wish I could co-write with you, but my workload is so heavy that I’m not able to take on anything more. I’m sorry.

— I love this idea and would so love to be involved, to write a piece with you! It fits so well with things I have been thinking, along other tangents like translation and performance – that we could really stand to rethink the myth of single author ownership of a text.

— i’m already in a major constraint entanglement (and have been now for quite a few years -- stay tuned!).

— This is going to be good. I’m in!

— I am keen and ready to go.

‘Oh, we’re in it now!’ Now begins the age of near starts, real starts and jumpstarts. It is one thing to embark on a collaboration. It is a whole other juggling act to embark on fifty collaborations swirling in and around at different paces, frequencies and registers! We follow the threads, even though it’s never to where we expect. We look for footholds and cup our hands to stop things seeping through. We are having, as Cole Swenson says, ‘conversation[s] through literature, using literature’.

Do we need to know WHAT we’re writing?

Keith Waldrop said in an interview, ‘You don’t have to decide whether you’re going to be serious or unserious. You simply don’t have to make that decision. Romantic or classical. Comic or tragic. And you don’t have to decide whether you’re going to “think” or to “feel”, to use high diction or low diction, or whatever. I mean you can combine these things – *any* things – *if you can do it.*’

The beauty of collaboration, whether it’s jamming and playing in a band, writing something with someone else or using their instructions to write, is that the outcome will never be the same as if we did the creating alone. It’s that phenomenon Thurston Moore describes when two horns play and both lines are changed into ‘a fresh take’. It’s Donald Hall’s ‘third thing’ that attracts double attention and brings us closer. We slip into the stream to discover more about art and ourselves. Sometimes it’s more intimate than expected, stretches out over years, and stirs startling emotions – from raucous laughter, to hand-on-heart *simpatico* rushes, to forlorn heaviness.

One of the most captivating elements of *Saints of Hysteria* is the process note attached to each poem. Sometimes they can be more interesting than the pieces themselves. While there are minimal process notes included in *Author unknown*, be sure that these collaborative pieces host untold narratives.

This world is full of anguish and despair at the moment / it's hard to try to focus on the beauty / but this project is helping / which I am so grateful for / aware of just how much language is out there at any given minute / feels like the clouds are more solid than time at the moment / it was so hot here and so cold there / palms touching is probably the core of this project / I'm feeling like I need to make loads of lists / let the connections between spiritual, physical and technological find themselves / this week has had little trickles, little gushes and little reunions / keeps me breathing deep as well as from coming undone / sometimes the to-do is coming from the other direction / still chasing an elegy topic as if I have too many / none of them want to be put down on a page / *be as sand, not oil in the thirsty machinery of the world* / I had forgotten writing is play / many have not responded yet and many will respond soon / feel as organised as I can be, free of the need to ascend or defeat. neat / *work deliberately in the form of the fragment* / got to chase a bunch of silent partners / ready to latch onto a tyre thread / when the hours are knocked over by an open window, we know the candle is out.

In writing this introductory essay one of us also posed the question, 'Do we need to know WHO wrote what?'. Over time it has become more difficult to respond to this accurately as the work, which began with individual permissions, was transformed via the human rituals of communion, compromise, procrastination techniques, vagaries of memory, life's interruptions and ongoing revised negotiations. We credit our collaborators for every word we wrote.

The 'WHO' became less about singular ownership of text and ideas and more about the discoveries found within lines that any of us could have written or shaped. One of our collaborators said, 'I found myself submitting FOI requests,' and this could also be applied to the project as a whole; the redaction and liberation of the recorded self via the surrender to anonymity. Andrea Rizzi and John Griffiths write that 'intentional anonymity in some cases deliberately restricts or expands access to information and cultural delectation in ways that would not be possible otherwise'. We find opportunities getting lost in work attributed to the whole.

*Author unknown* would not exist without the people involved; those who were collaborating for the first time, those seasoned adventurers, and even those who were invited but couldn't participate. We hold a deep gratitude to every contributor. For the friendships nurtured and the intimate catch-ups to share aesthetic and ethical perspectives. For having fun within this form, knowing process was at the heart of the work, and that what took shape need not be a masterpiece; it had unimpeded permission to be, in the words of Fred Moten, 'a bunch of writing held in practice'.

We thank Red Room Poetry for providing an online home for this project (this is the first of two releases – stay tuned for more in June). We also know that if other writers undertook this experiment, the outcomes would be completely distinctive. It is our hope that *Author unknown* entices you to read the array of poems published here and that it might spur further collaborations. We invite anyone to choose an item from the menu, and cook it their own way, in the company of another.

## References

- Abendroth, Emily and Mellis, Miranda. 2016. *The Instead: a conversation between Emily Abendroth & Miranda Mellis*. Carville Annex Press: San Francisco.
- Darling, Kristina Marie and Campanioni, Chris. 2018. 'Re: Verse: On Anonymity and the Future of Collaborative Poetry'. *Gulf Coast*.  
[gulfcoastmag.org/online/blog/on-anonymity-and-the-future-of-collaborative-poetry](http://gulfcoastmag.org/online/blog/on-anonymity-and-the-future-of-collaborative-poetry).
- Davis, Lydia. 1987. 'Form as Response to Doubt'. *HOW(ever)*. 4: 2. pp. 13–14.
- Duhamel, Denise, Seaton, Maureen and Trinidad, David (editors). 2007. *Saints of Hysteria: a half-century of collaborative American poetry*. Soft Skull Press. Brooklyn, NY.
- Eich, Günter (translated by Michael Hofmann). 2007. 'Dreams'. *Poetry Foundation: The Translation Issue*. 190:1. pp. 3–5.
- Fitzgerald, Adam. 2015. 'An interview with Fred Moten, Part 1'. *Literary Hub*.  
[lithub.com/an-interview-with-fred-moten-pt-i](http://lithub.com/an-interview-with-fred-moten-pt-i).
- Holladay, Hilary. 2010. 'No Ordinary Woman: Lucille Clifton'. *Poets & Writers*.  
[https://www.pw.org/content/no\\_ordinary\\_woman\\_lucille\\_clifton](https://www.pw.org/content/no_ordinary_woman_lucille_clifton).
- Minh-ha, Trinh T. 1989. *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism*. Indiana University Press. Bloomington, Indiana.
- Moore, Thurston and Kinsella, John. 2020. *The Weave*. UWA Publishing. Perth, WA.
- Popova, Maria. 2022. 'The Third Thing: Poet Donald Hall on the Secret to Lasting Love'. *The Marginalian*. [themarginalian.org/2022/07/13/donald-hall-the-third-thing](http://themarginalian.org/2022/07/13/donald-hall-the-third-thing).
- Rizzi, Andrea and Griffiths, John. 2016. 'The Renaissance of Anonymity'. *Renaissance Quarterly*. 69: 1. pp. 200–212.
- Swenson, Cole. 2011. 'Translating Writing/Writing Translation'. *Noise That Stays Noise*. University of Michigan Press. Ann Arbor, Michigan.
- Waldrop, Rosmarie and Waldrop, Keith (edited by Ben Lerner). 2019. *Keeping / the window open*. Wave Books. Seattle, USA.