

Building Community: Teaching Collaborative Poetry in Trump's America
Creative Writing Studies Organization Conference, 2017
Amy Ash and Callista Buchen

I WAS NOT EVEN BORN WHEN YOU STARTED TO HAVE ANSWERS
By Nick Sturm and Wendy Xu

Everyday I stand up on this desk and start
writing you a letter filled with embroidery. It is a replica
of Norway. A sensible constitution I invent
in an attempt to get serious about how amazing it is
to just be. I totally agree with you re: BIRTHDAY.
I'll hang an archipelago from your party hat
and wear my dress like a sermon. Did you know
my roses hurt? I said that before somewhere else
but it feels different saying it to you. At some point
I'm going to stop losing everything I ever put in my pockets.
But this rollercoaster isn't something you walk away from.
It's where I learned violin. It's where I met my mother.
What was the last thing I had in my pocket? Oh yeah,
it was an antler with half of Massachusetts hooked
to it's beautiful white fingers.

Inter/rupture, 2015

Summer

I still marvel at all the people who first mapped the summer sky —
the pretty patterns from chalk and string they pulled
across the fresh-swept floor. Every monster wishes their teeth
gleamed louder than Vega, summer's brightest star. Every night
has its own delights: waxwing, paper moth, firefly larvae.
I would drink the red and blue stars if I thought my thin throat
could handle it. Even at the darkest hour, my garden throws
furtive dots of pale light to guide my steps: the bubble of fresh
egg-froth on a frog's back, the secret bloom of moonflowers
when the children have been tucked into their tiny beds.
O teasel bur and grasshopper—how you catch in the hem of my skirt
like a summer cough. It's exhausting, this desire. But I would never
trade it for any shiny marble. Would you? I love the silence
of sweat in these slow days of summer. All the mysterious sounds
in the trees — like a sack of watches — while I tend to tomato plants
who have only thought to give four fruits this entire month.
— AN

It's true. No golden marble or treasure chest or even
tongue mapping me ankle to the cove behind my ear
quells that guttural tug by which I unwind bindweed
from each thorny raspberry cane, or clip the fish pepper
from its scaffolding, or swing my ax if need be.
With which I hack back the jackass branch
or beg the rampant sunchokes this way, or that.
Or dream beneath the currant's
myriad golden mouths.
Some days I catch glimpse of the hurdy-gurdy path I make
through this garden: ooh! the gooseberries aglow,
ooh! the lemon balm tufting up, ooh! wasps swilling the golden florets
of bolted kale, and Good Lord the strawberry flowers
are the pursed lips of ghosts
I want to know. Yes, today I am on my belly
for that scant perfume, this invisible parade
of dying and bloom.
--RG

Lace and Pyrite: Letters from Two Gardens, Ross Gay and Aimee Nezhukumatathil

The 10 Commandments of Collaboration:

1. Thou shalt trust thy collaborator's art with thy whole heart.
2. Thou shalt trust thy collaborator's judgment with thy whole mind.
3. Thou shalt trust thy collaborator's integrity with thy whole spirit.
4. Honor thy own voice.
5. Honor thy collaborator's spouse.
6. Thou shalt not be an egotistical asshole.
7. Thou shalt not covet all the glory.
8. Thou shalt love the same foods as your collaborator.
9. Thou shalt eat and tire at the same time.
10. Above all, honor the muse.

--Denise Duhamel and Maureen Seaton

Collaborative Writing Exercise: Dialectical Poem

One of you will start by writing a line that begins “If you are” and then finish it (with something abstract, concrete, a noun, a description, a definition, an image—anything).

Your partner will then write the antithesis “then I am” and follow it with the next “If you are” phrase.

Try to continue with this process for at least 10 lines. Then you may write the final line together working toward synthesis, bringing the poem together.

Epithalamium by Nick Laird

You're beeswax and I'm bird shit.
I'm mostly harmless. You're irrational.
If I'm iniquity then you're theft.
One of us is supercalifragilistic.

If I'm the most insane disgusting filth
you're hardly curiosa.
You're bubble wrap to my fingertips.
You're winter sleep and I'm the bee dance.

And I am menthol and you are eggshell.
When you're atrocious I am Spellcheck.
You're the yen. I'm the Nepalese pound.
If I'm homesteading you're radical chic.

I'm carpet shock and you're the rail.
I'm Memory Foam Day on Price-Drop TV
and you're the Lord of Misrule who shrieks
when I surface in goggles through duckweed,

and I am Trafalgar, and you're Waterloo,
and frequently it seems to me that I am you,
and you are me. If I'm the rising incantation
you're the charm, or I am, or you are.

Further Reading:

Saints of Hysteria: A Half-Century of Collaborative American Poetry. Denise Duhamel, Maureen Seaton, and David Trinidad, eds. Soft Skull Press, 2007.

Lace and Pyrite: Letters from Two Gardens by Ross Gay and Aimee Nezhukumatathil (Organic Weapon Arts)

Ghost/Landscape by Kristina Marie Darling and John Gallaher (Blazevox, 2016)

Suture by Simone Muench and Dean Rader (Black Lawrence Press, 2017)

Collaborative Project

Now that we've introduced and played around with collaboration a bit, it is time for a more sustained and substantial exploration of collaboration with our own work. We've read and discussed several examples of collaborative poems, focusing on the energy of the poems, the push and pull of the lines, the associative movement through sound and image, the use of enjambment as a gesture of invitation, and the "third voice" that is created in the poems. Now, I invite you experience the work and wonder of collaboration.

Assignment: For this assignment, I've paired you up with someone whose poetic style and approach might both challenge and complement your own. You will collaborate with the poet you have been assigned to work with and write a series of at least three poems. Before you begin writing, take some time to create your own "10 Commandments of Collaboration." Create your own boundaries and rules for interaction, discuss potential topics or approaches, think about process, and figure out the mechanics of how and when you will write your poems. For the final component of the project, you will each write a 3-4 page reflective essay describing your experience and discussing what you have learned about your own work.

Poem 1: Together, you will decide on a setting/environment (e.g. a lake, the inside of an engine, the surface of Mars) and an abstract idea or concept (e.g. fear, anxiety, hope). These will become the boundaries of your poem, grounding and focusing the poem and giving you some images to work with and from. Once you've decided on an environment and an abstraction, each of you should free-write separately, with one of you writing about the environment and one of you writing about the abstraction. What images are brought to mind? What might you compare an element of the environment or abstraction to? How might the image or abstraction be brought to life through image or gesture? After at least ten minutes of free-writing, you may begin your poem.

Choose who will write the first line, and continue to write the poem by alternating lines and not discussing them with one another as you write. As your partner is writing, use that time to free-write about element you did not choose for your first free-write. Keep in mind that although this might help you generate images and ideas, you cannot simply pull lines from your free-writing exercise, since your line needs to respond to your partner's in some way. Don't be afraid to break your line mid-phrase or mid-thought. Give your partner some imagery and musicality to work with, and see where they take the poem. If you run out of time in class, please continue your poem through text message, email, or some other electronic format. Once you feel that your poem is close to being done, you can talk about the poem and write the final line together.

Poems 2 and 3: Feel free to come up with your own collaborative strategy, though all of your poems should be connected in some way.

Grading Criteria: Your work for this project consists of three parts, including a series of at least three collaborative poems (30%), a collaboratively written list of rules and procedures (20%), and an individually-written reflective essay (50%) describing your experience and discussing what you learned about your own writing from this collaborative project.

Sample Assignments

Collaborative Writing as Revision Project

Over the course of the semester, you've written many poems, practicing techniques, experimenting with voices and styles, and testing your ideas. As we work on revising some of that work, we'll explore how collaborative writing can inspire new insights.

The assignment: For this assignment, you will collaborate with another poet. Each of you will select poems that you've started this semester but with which you are not yet satisfied. These poems must also not be poems used in your individual final portfolios.

Using these "failed" or incomplete poems as starting points and inspiration, you and your partner will craft one new piece that does what the two pieces separately could not. You may use any collaborative strategy to create the new piece. You might each write alternating lines or stanzas. Each of you might write one half of the poem, or perhaps you will write the entire poem together. You might also experiment with different ways of collaborating.

Once you have worked together to craft a new draft, as a pair, you will create a broadside of your collaborative poem. Each group will read and present their work to the class. During your presentation, you will read all three poems (the two original pieces and the new poem that came about as a result of your work together), explain and reflect upon the process of your collaboration, and show off your broadside.

Grading Criteria: Your work for this project will be divided into three categories for evaluation, including the collaborative poem (30%), the broadside (30%), and the class presentation (40%).

Your collaborative poem will be evaluated for the extent to which it

- Responds to and combines the aims of the original poems
- Has an identifiable project (argument, intent, etc.)
- Successfully deploys poetic techniques appropriate to the poem's project

Your broadside will be evaluated for the extent to which it

- Creates an appropriate visual display of the poem (without being illustrative or reductive)
- Furthers the poem's project through visual means

Your class presentation will be evaluated for the extent to which it

- Effectively describes the collaborative process and methodologies used in detail
- Demonstrates thoughtful reflection about the nature of that process, both for the writers as a group and as individuals
- Is well organized, engaging, and easy for the audience to follow