

Collaborative Writing, Collage, and Cooking: From Humanist to Post-Humanist Assemblages

Anis Bawarshi and Mary Jo Reiff

The term “collage” was originally applied to visual art, but most of us are familiar with written collages: single texts that consist of multiple and somewhat disconnected fragments.

—Peter Elbow, “Using the Collage for Collaborative Writing”

An assemblage is a collection of things—bodies, passions, words, ideas, objects—that aid and constrain the actions that transpire within it.

—William Duffy, *Beyond Conversation: Collaboration and the Production of Writing*

In the spring 1999 lead article of *Composition Studies*, titled “Using the Collage for Collaborative Writing,” Peter Elbow offers collage as a method as well as a form for encouraging writers to compose/think/reflect in conversation with each other. Like much scholarship on collaboration at this time, Elbow locates his understanding of collaboration in the social turn and a conception of collaborative writing as dialogic—as an interaction or conversation between individual human subjects. We were drawn to this article because the two of us, a career-long collaborative team, have been thinking a lot recently about the nature of our writing together, both in terms of the productive “tension and energy” that Elbow describes as arising from multiple perspectives (10), and more recently, in terms of the more complex discursive and material ecologies of our collaborations—especially in terms of how our writing together has on many occasions been marked by time spent cooking together. What, we have been wondering, has been the relationship between the material act of writing together and the material act of cooking together? How have these collaborative practices informed one another, and how does their relationship help us engage recent scholarship in the field that focuses on relationality, materiality, and a post-humanist perspective on agency as distributed across human and other-than-human agents (Bennett; Boyle; Clary-Lemon; Cooper; Hawk; Shivers-McNair)? In addition, how does this help us think about (and rethink) Elbow’s ideas about collage and collaborative writing from a post-humanist perspective?

If we were to make a collage of our cooking collaborations, it might look something like the image below (Figure 1), depicting the intra-action of text, material objects, and human and other-than-human actants.



Figure 1: A collage of our collaborative cooking depicting the intra-action of texts (recipes, lists), material objects/tools (knives, plates, forks, ingredients), humans and non-human actants (the coauthors in the kitchen, at the stove), and technologies (pen and paper, smart phone).

Thinking about this image, a collage of our cooking collaborations, in relation to Elbow's method of collage enables us to reimagine collaboration. In what follows, we explore collaboration as post-humanist assemblage by drawing on Elbow's concept of collage—in which the development and organization of texts is "intuitive and associative" with "add[ed] fragments of writing

by others” (8)—and by presenting our own collage of quotations, thoughts, and ideas about cooking and writing together.

“How to conjure up the togetherness of those early days: sitting in the library—or on a lush riverbank—trading stories of family and friends, experimenting with our first gardens, and spending lots of time cooking and eating together” (Lunsford and Ede 3).

“It is 6:00 p.m., 9 December 1988. We have been writing and talking and cooking and reading and listening and writing and talking and cooking and reading steadily for seven days now” (Lunsford and Ede 147).

The well-known collaborative team of Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford have reflected on the seamlessness and recursiveness of activities like writing and talking together and “cooking and eating together,” which piqued our interest because, as collaborators ourselves for over 25 years, our writing collaborations have always included cooking collaborations. Our first co-authored piece, an interview with a major scholar in rhetoric and composition, took place in their home, followed by making lunch together in their kitchen. This would begin, for us, a continuation—over the next two decades of collaboration—of organizing our work of writing together around another kind of making together, cooking—with our creative brainstorming/drafting of projects, usually over a long weekend, merging with our creative ventures into making different cuisines. It would also begin an exploration of the connection between the similarly emergent processes of writing together and cooking together.

Interestingly, Elbow, in *Writing without Teachers* (1973), draws on the metaphor of “cooking” to discuss writing processes, describing cooking as generative interaction: “Cooking consists of the process of one piece of material (or one process) being transformed by interacting with another: one piece of material being seen through the lens of another, being dragged through the guts of another, being reoriented or reorganized in terms of the other, being mapped onto the other” (49). Yet here, and echoed in the 1999 *Composition Studies* article on collage and collaboration, we find the deeply humanist perspective that guides so much of Elbow’s understanding of collaboration as an interaction between individual human subjects, whether a form of weak

collaboration, where writers' individual responses to and from one another "influence each others' thinking and writing," or strong collaboration, which "requires agreement or consensus" among individual collaborators (10, emphasis in original). As we have reflected on how the material practices of cooking and making translate to our writing together, we have come away with a richer understanding of the ways in which material, multisensory, and multi-agentive forces and practices shape writing together—a perspective that can enrich and complicate our field's understanding of collaborative authorship.

"The collaborative collage is a gathering of pieces each written from an 'I' point of view—for the sake of a 'we' enterprise" (Elbow "Using the Collage," 11).

"[C]ollaborative composition, like all discourse production, is materially situated in ecologies we can only ever partially distinguish by observing the various relations between and among the many objects populating these environments, including the collaborators themselves" (Duffy 4-5).

In *Beyond Conversation: Collaboration and the Production of Writing*, Duffy notes that in the current context of new materialist and post-human theories of writing, "now is the opportune time" for an inquiry into collaborative writing and for rethinking our prevailing theories of collaborative authorship (21). Such an exploration would include not just the shared conversations between collaborators but also a consideration of "the material-discursive ecologies that provide the complex of objects with which they interact as *collaborators* to write together" (48, emphasis in original).

Thinking about the collaborative practice of writing together in relation to/ alongside cooking draws our attention to the deep relationality at work in both, a relationality that is epistemological as well as ontological, involving "knowing with" (Broudy 12) not just each other as collaborators, but also knowing with objects such as recipes, cookbooks, ingredients, the physical space of the kitchen, utensils, bowls, pans and pots, timers, and the stove. This relationality also involves knowing with sensory experiences such as taste, smell, and sound, as well as factors such as temperature, and knowing with temporal relations such as cooking time, serving time, and the coordination of various dishes. This deep relationality disrupts and expands our understanding of agency, as the boundaries between actors (human and other

than human, animate and inanimate) are blurred and intentionality is distributed in more dynamic, intra-active ways (Barad). Cooking helps us reveal and cultivate this relationality in ways that have informed, consciously and unconsciously, our collaboration, which also includes working and distributing agency across media, modalities, and objects as we take notes by hand; look up sources online; make lists of topics/sources we want to include; discover new sources; and interact with physical texts, writing pads, laptops, and online resources. This process is continuous and recursive. We are constantly moving across media, modalities, and objects.

But how does the concept of “assemblage” authorship (and agency as emergent, distributed) and of the dynamic interaction of objects, texts, people, technologies across material-discursive ecologies inform methods and practices of collaboration? Does collage still hold up as an adequate method and form for such assemblages?

On Collaborative Collage:

“Each person writes for ten or fifteen minutes—however he or she wants to start. Then people switch papers for the next piece of writing so that what is written is some kind of response to what the first person wrote. And so on” (Elbow “Using the Collage,” 9).

On “Turnaround Writing”:

“The basic conceit of turnaround is to treat collaborative composition like a dialogue or informal correspondence. I write a bit, then give my text to my writing partner, who then writes a bit, they give the text back to me, and so forth” (Duffy 129).

Duffy redefines collaborative authorship as co-writing agency, “as a kind of power or dynamic coauthors cultivate in rhetorical ecologies—or assemblages—of their collaboration” (76). Yet his application of “turnaround writing” is similar to Elbow’s collaborative collage, which has the goal of “help[ing] students ‘place’ their own thoughts and voices—in authoritative dialogue with the voices of others, especially of published writers” (12) and “to give voice to the multiple views and consciousnesses that inhabit us” (13).

But what does it mean to “place” one’s thoughts and voices in authoritative dialogue? And what are these consciousnesses that inhabit us? The process of cooking and writing together can inform our understanding of collaboration as relational, mediated, and codependent with things, places, people, and others.

Our cooking process starts from a common “place”—the couch at one of our houses—as we engage and interact with objects like cookbooks and recipes, pens and notepads, sticky notes to mark pages in the cookbooks, iPhones and laptops to search online recipes or to look up unfamiliar ingredients. These multiple consciousnesses inhabit us as we decide what we want to make, plan the courses, and consider our audience as we decide on a menu. In cooking and writing together, we engage in shared inventions and purposes as well as a sense of synchronicity and being relationally present in time and space with one another. This is what Elbow seems to describe as an interactive process of collaboration, whereas Duffy and other scholars might define it as an intra-active process. How can collage make space for these complex, entangled inter- and intra-actions?

Recently, writing studies scholars (Shivers-McNair; Cardinal; Gries; Micciche; West-Puckett) have turned to the work of feminist philosopher and physicist Karen Barad, whose notion of intra-action challenges the idea that things interact with one another, as if they precede and pre-exist one another and remain separate even as they participate in interaction. As Whitney Stark describes it, intra-action instead understands agency not as “an inherent property of an individual or human to be exercised, but as a ‘dynamism of forces’ (Barad 141) in which all designated ‘things’ are constantly exchanging and diffracting, influencing and working inseparably” (Stark). Offered as an alternative to reflection (in which light or soundwaves bounce off of objects that remain the same), diffraction for Barad is an unfolding process of coming into being as things intra-act and intra-fere with one another in dynamic encounters.

Once again, we turn to how the material process of cooking together can illuminate the materiality of writing together. When we cook, the ingredients and the pan do not dialogue with or reflect on each other; they diffract and absorb. The heat from the stovetop is conducted through the pan and, in creating a chemical reaction in the ingredients, transforms them. Flavors diffract and absorb one another; the ingredients are not distinct; they are altered through their intra-action. In the same way that in cooking, ingredients diffract one another, our long history of cooking together has taught us how to understand our writing together as similarly diffractive and intra-active.

“Writing needs the drama of thinking and the performance of voices” (Elbow 13).

“[C]ollaborators cowrite the agency of their collaboration as it develops” (Duffy 75).

What would it mean to think of collaboration NOT as dialogue but as diffraction? And what would happen to the idea of collage as a result? Elbow seems to anticipate this question to some degree as he describes the performance of conflicting voices and perspectives in collaborative collage: “My goal in this activity is not just to make collaborative writing easier and more inviting, but also more complex and conflicted” (13-14).

But while collaborative collage combines multiple voices and points of view, the individual writer stays “in charge of their own writing,” a process that moves from individual to co-writer (Elbow 10). Duffy theorizes “co-writing agency” as a state of “emergent potential” (75). In this sense, agency in collaboration is not so much a pre-condition for interaction to occur but an ongoing accomplishment—an emergent process and product of negotiations between individuals, conditions, and objects in constant relation with one another.

We need to imagine a post-humanist collaborative collage that resembles the material, multisensory, multi-agentive processes of cooking together!

Our reflection on our twenty-five-year collaboration, through the lens of our cooking together, reinforces the similarly emergent processes of writing/cooking: invention/planning a menu; the tools and timing of preparing to write/preparing to cook; negotiating the shared labor of cooking/ writing; presenting/publishing/serving the meal; getting audience feedback; and participating in revision/cleaning up, along with reflection on what worked successfully and what to change next time. Our own experiences as long-time collaborators have enabled us to examine how our collaborative cooking experiences cultivate practices of creativity and connection that translate into and enrich collaborative writing processes. It is interesting to reimagine collaborative collage as assemblages and the collaborative process as emergent, intra-active, affective, and relational.

“One powerful impetus, and subsequent reinforcement, for our collaboration is our friendship. We enjoy being together, and even though we spend much of the brief periods we’re together—a weekend during the term, four to six days over Christmas, a luxurious two weeks in summer—working, we always

find time for jokes, shopping sprees for exotic foods, and laughter-filled late-night dinners” (Lunsford and Ede 37).

Works Cited

- Barad, Karen. “Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter.” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 28, no. 3, 2003, pp. 801-831.
- Bennett, Jane. *Vibrant Matter*. Duke UP, 2009.
- Boyle, Casey. *Rhetoric as Posthuman Practice*. Ohio State UP, 2018.
- . “Writing and Rhetoric and/as Posthuman Practice.” *College English*, vol. 78, no. 6, 2016, pp. 532-554.
- Broudy, H. S. “Types of knowledge and purposes of education.” *Schooling and the Acquisition of Knowledge*, edited by R. C. Anderson, R. J. Spiro, and W.E. Montague, Erlbaum, 1977, pp. 1-17.
- Cardinal, Alison. *How Literacy Flows and Comes to Matter: A Participatory Video Study*. 2019. University of Washington, PhD dissertation.
- Clary-Lemon, J. “Gifts, ancestors, and relations: Notes toward an indigenous new materialism.” *Enculturation*, 12 Nov. 2019. enculturation.net/gifts_ancestors_and_relations
- Cooper, Marilyn M. *The Animal Who Writes: A Posthumanist Composition*. U of Pittsburgh P, 2019.
- Duffy, William. *Beyond Conversation: Collaboration and the Production of Writing*. Utah State UP, 2020.
- Elbow, Peter. “Using the Collage for Collaborative Writing.” *Composition Studies*, vol. 27, no. 1, 1999, pp. 7-14.
- . *Writing Without Teachers*. Oxford UP, 1973.
- Gries, Laurie E. *Still Life with Rhetoric: A New Materialist Approach to Visual Rhetorics*. Utah State UP, 2015.
- Hawk, Byron. *Resounding the Rhetorical: Composition as a Quasi-Object*. U of Pittsburgh P, 2018.
- Lunsford, Andrea, and Lisa Ede. *Writing Together: Collaboration in Theory and Practice*. Bedford St. Martin’s, 2012.
- Micciche, Laura R. “Writing Material.” *College English*, vol. 76, no. 6, 2014, pp. 488-505.
- Shivers-McNair, Ann. *Beyond the Makerspace: Making and Relational Rhetorics*. U of Michigan P, 2021.
- Stark, Whitney. “Intra-action.” *New Materialism: How Matters Comes to Matter*. 15 Aug. 2016. <https://newmaterialism.eu/almanac/i/intra-action.html>
- West-Puckett, Stephanie J. *Materializing Makerspaces: Queerly Composing Space, Time, and (what) Matters*. 2017. East Carolina University, PhD Dissertation.