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A Preface to the Special Issue on Collaborative Writing

Citation for published version:

Wyatt, J & Gale, K 2012, 'Singularities and Multiplicities: A Preface to the Special Issue on Collaborative Writing', *International Review of Qualitative Research*, vol. 5, no. 4, pp. 345-347.

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Published In:

International Review of Qualitative Research

Publisher Rights Statement:

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS
JOURNALS + DIGITAL PUBLISHING

Singularities and Multiplicities: A Preface to the Special Issue on Collaborative Writing

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Source: *International Review of Qualitative Research*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (Winter 2012), pp. 345-347

Published by: [University of California Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/irqr.2012.5.4.345>

Accessed: 20/09/2015 11:34

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Singularities and Multiplicities

A Preface to the Special Issue on Collaborative Writing

Jonathan Wyatt, Ken Gale

This collection begins as it ends, in the middle (Deleuze & Parnet, 2002), picking up on conversations that have been taking place in the nooks and crannies of the academy for many years, but which, arguably, are only now being given wider audience. Social scientists are increasingly expected and encouraged to develop collaborations (Gingras, 2002), yet doctoral writing, for example, is, with rare exceptions (for example, Gale & Wyatt, 2008), solitary; and, as Moreira and Diversi bring to our attention in their paper in this issue, ‘single-authored’ work is required and collaborative work discouraged for tenure, in the United States at least. Furthermore, collaboratively written work is for the most part presented as seamless: the joint-authored text written as if from nowhere in the first person plural, with apparently no ‘gaps’ between its disembodied and immaterial authors, and with assumed theoretical understandings of what it means to be a ‘single’ author—an ‘individual’—and, in turn, what it means to be two or more authors.

I have written the first draft of these sentences thus far. I write into this introduction—though it might also become our epilogue—with the papers that comprise this issue beside me, some still in draft, in my office at home near Oxford, reading each essay in turn, jotting down sentences that strike me, trying to listen to them so that they shape what I/we might say here. I ask myself: what does an introduction do? What is its/our task? How can we make it something worth reading, rather than the sometimes dull courtesy such texts can be? And how do we make a collaboratively written (whatever that means) introduction congruent with what it tells?

The papers in this collection offer a challenge to these orthodoxies. They theorise collaborative writing as “fluid and contradictory” (Mazzei & Jackson) and as “entanglements of matter and meaning” (Davies & Gannon); they make claims to collaborative writing’s reach for a different—loving, intimate, embodied, messy, fairer—academy/world (Gale et al., Guttorm et al., Speedy, Moreira & Diversi, Bristol Collaborative Writing Group); they propose and inhabit a decolonising, deterritorialising politics (Guttorm et al., Moreira & Diversi); and they de-construct the binary between single- and co-authoring (Speedy, Pineau). Our brief references

here do not do justice to the complexities of each nor the ways in which they speak both to and against each other. Collaborative writing is not presented as easy, or as a panacea. It is, instead, offered as a “noninnocent, complexly erotic practice of making a difference in the world” (Sellers & Gough, 2010, p. 610).

We end the collection with our diffractions on where the assemblage of these contributions might take us all. We begin with Jane Speedy, a champion and pioneer of collaborative writing, whose piece provides both a historical and a theoretical context for this issue.

Beginnings? Endings? Startings in the middle? I feel so activated by the way in which our ‘we’ has struggled with those metaphors of linearity as this collection of writings has gradually taken on new and always emergent life. I write in this preface today as this collection of writing lives in my laptop, almost complete, save for a few sighs and imperceptible breaths of life. I write today loving the simple and beautiful contradiction that is inherent in writing something that will appear in what will be the beginning of this collection. It goes on: each time I have read something here I am moved: something happens. I write now and I remember Deleuze describing his feelings when referring to his reading of Spinoza; he talked of “the feeling of a gust of air from behind each time you read him, of a witch’s broom which he makes you mount” (2002, p.15). And so I feel I will read some more.

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