

AN EXPERIMENT IN CO-AUTHORSHIP #2

In the second instalment of their series on co-authorship, Moya Mapps and Adam Ferner continue to explore the particularities of mainstream academic philosophy and to experiment with alternative ways of writing.

Anthony Morgan

Dear Adam and Moya,

Thanks a lot for this. I have been too busy with this and that to take on primary editorial duties myself but I sent the first installment of the series out to a reviewer who came back with this feedback...

It is Thursday evening and Adam has just finished eating dinner with his parents. On the other side of the table, his mum is finishing her sudoku. His dad is doing a cryptic crossword.

Adam frowns at his phone. He has just received an email from his editor at *The Philosopher*. His editor, apparently, sent his column with Moya out for review. *The Philosopher* does not have a strict peer-review policy, but the editor will sometimes send articles out for feedback. Adam has himself reviewed and edited contributions to the journal. He supports the practice, he reminds himself. But he wasn't expecting feedback this time, and the publication deadline is in less than a week.

"Bed resident" says his dad, *"Son to sleep with horrible woman... Ten letters."*

The crossword sometimes uses clues that Adam finds objectionable, but he is too preoccupied to answer. The more he reads of the report, the more defensive he gets; even the good parts annoy him. The reviewer thinks that:

anonymous reviewer

...something of the pleasure of collaborative work comes through ("it doesn't feel like work"), as well as its awkwardness, dangers ("chilling effect") and doubts ("I'm not sure if it's good"), and, rather charmingly, the personalities of its authors, their cats, their tea.

Adam decides that he dislikes the word *charmingly*. It feels dismissive.

He is not good at taking criticism.

"S-nap-dragon", says his dad, filling in the grid. "S for son. To sleep is to nap. A horrible woman is a dragon. A snapdragon resides in a flowerbed." *A horrible woman is a dragon*, thinks Adam.

anonymous reviewer

...it would be worth tangling with some of the critiques of auto-fiction/auto-theory that are floating out there, including many that view it as symptomatic of neo-liberalism or a reflection of today's digital conditions of production.

In the past, Moya has only received light feedback from their editor Anthony – a word here, a clarification there. They are caught off guard when Anthony sends a critical report from an anonymous reviewer. They skim the list of papers that, according to the reviewer, they should have cited. The list is long, the authors and journals unfamiliar. The final draft is due in two days.

Later, Moya and Anthony are chatting over lunch when Anthony lets slip a detail about the anonymous reviewer: He is not a philosopher. He's a literary theorist or something. The revelation is a relief. On the one hand, the sources he recommended are worth studying. They might prove useful. On the other hand, there are good reasons why Moya had not encountered them earlier. These are not the kinds of theorists that their dissertation committee expects them to know, not the kinds of theorists on whom they'll be quizzed by philosophy department hiring committees.

Lauren Fournier

Moya wonders if their work counts as “auto-theory.” Adam assumes that it does, but Moya is starting to doubt it. If “auto-theory” means marrying autobiography with “theory” in a broad sense, then sure. But many of those in the auto-theory scene seem to mean “Theory’ (with a capital ‘T).” As Lauren Fournier explains, Capital-T Theory is associated with the tripartite lineages of ‘Marxism, psychoanalysis, and structuralism,’ as well as the poststructuralist work of Barthes, Derrida, Foucault, Althusser, Baudrillard, and others. Moya is trained in analytic philosophy; they know little about capital-T Theory except its reputation for being impenetrable to outsiders. They are in no position to draw on, say, Derrida. Perhaps auto-theory is part of an intellectual tradition to which they simply do not belong.

Lauren Fournier

Lauren Fournier

Fournier goes on to describe *the waning of philosophy and the waxing of theory over the course of the twentieth century*, noting matter-of-factly that Jean-Paul Sartre was *the last notable example of “philosophy”*. With a flick of the wrist, she has just brushed aside everyone that Moya studies most seriously, everyone they admire most earnestly, everyone whose work they most hope to someday emulate. Moya laughs out loud, too entertained by Fournier's boldness to take offense.

What does it mean for work to be *impenetrable to outsiders*? Adam isn't sure. He has always found elements of analytic philosophy impenetrable and sometimes, when Moya says things, or writes them, he finds himself struggling to know what is being said. But he is not “an outsider.” He fits in the academic world (though he rarely feels that he does). He knows the language games. He has been trained in art history (BA, joint honours),

Adam Ferner, Thomas Pradeu

analytic metaphysics (PhD) and psychoanalysis (MA), but he still finds work in all these fields impenetrable. While he and Moya agree about many things, he feels a nagging doubt that they only *appear* to agree – and do not know enough about each other to be sure. *People talk past each other – indeed, they think past each other – and often fail to realize it.* He wants reassurance that when someone says something, he can hear them.

It is a grey weekday morning and the column deadline is looming. Adam sits at his kitchen table, stirring a teaspoon of syrup into his coffee. There is one passage in the reviewer's comments to which he keeps returning. He has set aside an hour to write to Moya about it, but his thoughts are coming slowly. His meds have been affecting his sleep. He is tired. His eyelids droop while he types.

anonymous reviewer

The reviewer thinks it is unclear *what exactly is at stake* in their work.

anonymous reviewer

It lacks the intimacy, the daring of something like Nelson's Argonauts... Perhaps the reader can manufacture some answer to the very good 'why are we doing this' question with which the piece closes. But the corresponding question of 'why someone should read it' goes unasked and unanswered. Why should a reader care, beyond the marginal novelty of the form? The 'resistance' alluded to feels like it would be too easily assimilated, as easily as the piece assimilates the italicized quoted material. Too many other fields use collaborative methods without it mattering a damn to the power and authority the authors would like to challenge.

Why should a reader care? It is a troubling question, so probably a good one. Adam is not sure if anyone *should* care. He is not even sure that *he* cares. This doesn't stop him being strangely hurt by the reviewer's phrasing. He thought he and Moya had done something original, that the first instalment demonstrated more than *marginal novelty*. But demonstration is different from explanation and it is true there was no real explanation of the importance of co-authorship.

Adam Ferner

The reference to Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* is off-putting too. Nelson's influence is overt, not least in their marginal citations (a marginal novelty?), but the analysis of the publication process is importantly different. Adam has *always found it strange that Nelson's partner, Harry Dodge, isn't credited as a co-author. Nelson has written The Argonauts, but it emerges out of a lived conversation with Dodge, whose voice and ideas are present throughout. It's sold as a 'memoir' and promoted as such, and this is a function of the way the publishing industry works, and the legal framework that surrounds it...*

He has finished his coffee without having written a word. He dozes off, leaning against his kitchen noticeboard, and later wakes with a crick in his neck and the vague but persistent feeling that he has done something wrong.

After the final version of their first column has been sent to the printers, Moya attends a conference on interdisciplinarity. They do not expect the conference to relate to co-authorship – they are giving a talk with a friend on a (seemingly) unrelated topic – but they keep finding themselves bringing it up.

At the conference, they meet a girl. She gives a talk on biologist-turned-philosopher-turned-feminist-theorist Donna Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto." She weaves stories of medusas and sphinxes and harpies – ancient monsters that are part woman, part animal, part god, and wholly capable of ripping your bloody, still-beating heart from your chest. Moya is enchanted.

Later, Moya emails her to continue the conversation. They attach a copy of their soon-to-be-published column. "Did you just assign this poor girl homework?" asks a voice in their head. "Is this really your idea of flirting?" But it seems to work. They keep talking, and the girl agrees to get a drink.

Adam and Moya are talking on Zoom. Moya starts:

"So the other day I was at this conference on interdisciplinarity–"

"'Interdisciplinarity' always feels like a scam to me," Adam interrupts. "It's just a way for departments to get more research funding. It's a function of neoliberal universities that breaks areas of study into parts to be more easily digested by capitalism."

Moya decides to ignore Adam's grouchiness. "I've been thinking about different types of 'interdisciplinary' work", they continue. "Some interdisciplinary work seems to culminate in the establishment of new disciplines. 'Bioethics' wasn't a thing until maybe fifty years ago; now there are dedicated bioethics journals, jobs, departments. I don't even know if it counts as 'interdisciplinary' anymore – at this point, it might simply have become its own discipline. And for bioethics, that seems like a good thing. It's useful to have a whole community of experts studying the intersection of medicine and philosophy and theology and law.

"But not all interdisciplinarity works that way," they continue. "Some projects *flourish in the liminal spaces between categories and fuse seemingly disparate modes to fresh effects*. The liminality – the freshness – is the point.

Lauren Fournier

"Then there's a question about who does the work. Sometimes interdisciplinarity means 'I'm trained in a bunch of disciplines and I'm drawing on them all.' Like Donna Haraway. But sometimes it means 'I'm trained in one discipline and you're trained in another, so let's work together to do something that neither of us could have done on our own.' That's how this conference was structured: everybody presented in pairs. That kind of interdisciplinarity is necessarily collaborative, which is why I kept finding

myself talking about co-authorship. Interdisciplinarity-as-collaboration requires learning how to write with others.”

Adam still looks unimpressed.

Adam Ferner, Thomas Pradeu

Adam listens to Moya talk about interdisciplinarity, but his mind is on his postdoctoral research in Bordeaux; he is thinking about the conversations he encouraged between metaphysicians and biologists. How enthusiastic they all seemed, and how oblivious to the perils of interdisciplinary communication. *Not only is there a risk of being misunderstood, there is also the greater risk of not being aware of being misunderstood – and thus being unable to correct consequent mistakes. Interdisciplinary work... inhabits an epistemic no-man’s land, where the ability of intellectual communities to critically assess the piece is impaired by its correlative knowledge requirements.* He dislikes thinking about his time in academia. When Moya drops the subject, he is relieved.

His keyboard is becoming ever more fragile; he has super-glued the keys in place.

**anonymous reviewer
Olúfémi Táíwò**

Why should a reader care? He wants to write something meaningful, something with political and philosophical and literary value, but everything is *too easily assimilated*, too easily captured by the elite.

anonymous reviewer

That evening, after writing Moya an unsatisfactory message, he goes to the cinema to see *Everything Everywhere All At Once*. The film stars Michelle Yeoh and Stephanie Hsu. It reads at first like a liberatory portrait of Asian queerness – then the credits start rolling and he sees the film was co-produced by Anthony and Joseph Russo, the mainstream directors of Marvel franchise movies. Everything, everywhere is *too easily assimilated*.

Moya has been reading a book called *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*. The author, Patricia Williams, is a scholar of property law. And a Black woman.

Patricia Williams

A few years ago, I came into possession of what may have been the contract of sale for my great-great-grandmother. It is a very simple but lawyerly document, describing her as “one female” and revealing her age as eleven; no price is specified, merely “value exchanged.” My sister also found a county census taken two years later; on a list of one Austin Miller’s personal assets she appears again, as “slave, female” – thirteen years old now and with an eight-month infant.

What does it mean to study American property law when, not so long ago, that same legal system defined your great-great-grandmother as an

object to be bought and sold? When it treated the rape of that twelve-year-old child as an ordinary business transaction? Like many Black scholars, Williams finds herself at war with her own discipline.

Perhaps this kind of conflict prompts another, different kind of interdisciplinarity: if you are at war with your own discipline, you may be forced to find allies in others. Perhaps interdisciplinarity is a survival tactic.

Moya Mapps

Moya remains surprisingly optimistic about academic philosophy. They value its precision, its clarity. They like the no-nonsense way it lays out premises and conclusions. Yes, they want philosophers to pay more attention to the ways in which their experiences – *their particular, contingent, embodied, socially-located experiences* – inform their work. But they do not want to lose their commitment to clear, rigorous argument.

Adam, on the other hand, has grown impatient with academic philosophy. He is tired of its literalism, its stubborn insistence on explaining itself point by point by point, its refusal to trust that readers can figure things out on their own. He thinks that working with a text is part of the point.

“We’ve been playing with two things”, Moya says, trying once again to coax their work with Adam into the shape of an argument. “There’s the embodied writing style. Then there’s co-authorship. How are they related?” Moya often talks with their hands, holding them up, gesturing, demarcating thoughts by partitioning space. “Neither seems *necessary* for the other. It’s possible to do personal writing without a co-author, and it’s possible to co-author without writing personally. So, what do they have to do with each other? Anything?”

Adam thinks for a moment, then proposes an answer. (Not *the* answer – surely this question has no single answer – but *an* answer.)

Isabelle Graw, Brigitte Weingart

Auto-theory can insert the author into the text and by doing so allow for *vivid descriptions of social constraints; more precisely, of the personal dimensions of capitalism: how it infiltrates our minds and even shapes our life crises into predetermined structural patterns*. In auto-theory, the writer writes about the process of writing. They make visible the material conditions under which books and papers and artworks are produced; they make possible a materialist critique of the academic world.

Lee Konstantinou

Perhaps, Adam thinks, co-authorship can take this anti-capitalist, politicizing impulse a step further. In traditional, single-authored auto-theory, the focus is on the individual, *the becoming institutional of the individual*. The mainstream publishing industry is oriented around individual authors; co-authorship challenges this individualist orientation.

A collective is harder to market than an individual, and their intellectual property rights are harder to determine. He knows from experience how publishers struggle to accommodate alternative payment models.

anonymous reviewer

Of course, co-authorship need not always be disruptive. *Too many other fields use collaborative methods without it mattering a damn to the power and authority the authors would like to challenge.* But still, it has potential. Perhaps, by writing about themselves – together – they are modeling a way of creating literary intimacy, the kind of intimacy necessary for political progress in philosophy and further afield. Traditional auto-theory can be written without interpersonal intimacy; you can sit alone in your office and write it without talking to anyone. But, while auto-theory *may appear to imply a narcissistic and solipsistic insularity*, its collaborative analogue requires often painful openness. To co-author requires making space.

**Alex Brostoff and
Lauren Fournier**

As they pull together the threads of their second column – this column – Moya sends Adam a voice note:

Moya Mapps

When I write on my own, I can change stuff and cut stuff and if I'm on the fence about whether or not to keep it I can stick it in another document. It's very casual. I was trained in high school to do a lot of cutting and rearranging and paring down with my own writing. But it feels like a whole different ball game when I'm writing with someone else. I find myself... worrying about the politics of what I'm cutting or changing, worrying about whether I'm offending or hurting your feelings. It's an interesting thing. You don't get that when you're on your own. It's a question that never arises. Anyway, I'm rambling. I guess the point is that... I hope you don't mind.

Adam sends one back:

Adam Ferner

I don't mind at all. I'm grateful. I suppose these co-authorship concessions are part of the point. I take it we're both politically interested in what's required for collaborative action, inside and outside philosophy. I think that's what we're exploring in these columns. We interested in opening up literary spaces. Without wanting to sound too naff, I think the consideration you show towards me – and hopefully the consideration I show towards you – is a demonstration of a political practice.