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Non-material beings and the excesses of collaborative writing

Abstract:
In a 1976 interview with Brazilian-Ukrainian author Clarice Lispector, the interviewer asks why Lispector is describing one of her fictional characters as though she is real. Lispector pushes back, claiming "but the person does exist, I see the person, and she orders me around". Building on Lispector's interview and the long history of writers detailing the influence of characters and transcendental beings on their craft, this paper puts into question current understandings of collaborative (creative) writing. Collaborative writing provides many opportunities to expand and challenge dominant Western and capitalist understandings of authorship, and yet, contemporary scholarship on collaborative writing tends to focus on human-to-human relations. Drawing on theories, ambiguities and gaps within feminist and post-humanist critiques of authorship and Donna Lee Brien and Tess Brady's 12 overlapping categories of collaborative writing in "Collaborative Practice" (2003), this paper aims to expose the *metaphysics of substance* that determines who and what is seen as collaborator. Ultimately, I argue that collaborative writing should not be understood as a voluntary mode to enter or leave, but rather as a lens or intrinsic ethical component of authorship that needs to be continuously unearthed and expanded.

Biographical note:
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Introduction: When a character talks back

In a 1976 interview with the Brazilian-Ukrainian author Clarice Lispector, the interviewer, Marina Colasanti, queries Lispector about her relationship with one of her characters:

> COLASANTI: When we were on our way over here, you said that you were already tired of the character in the novel you're writing now.
>
> LISPECTOR: That's right, from having to deal with her so much.
>
> COLASANTI: You speak of the character as if you were speaking of someone who really exists, who orders you around.
>
> LISPECTOR: But the person does exist, I see the person, and she orders me around a lot. (Moser, 2023)

There is something strange in the way Lispector purports that her character (recognised most likely as Macabéa from *The Hour of the Star*) has some sort of exteriority, autonomy and control over her, and it raises several questions that have inspired this paper: should we take such a relationship between Lispector and her character at face value, or should it be read as a metaphor or part of Lispector's psychology? What does such a relationship say about the agency, stability and singularity of Lispector as the author of her characters? And, most pertinent to this paper, can this relationship between Lispector and her character be understood as a form of collaboration, and, if so, what does that say about our understanding of collaborative writing?

But it is not enough to solely question Lispector's logic. Hovering over this excerpt is an important affect of hesitancy or disbelief coming from Colasanti. While Colasanti's comment may be read as an interviewer's clarification, it (and Lispector's "But") points to an impasse of understanding where Lispector's words are not only interpreted as peculiar but they also push against Colasanti's fundamental understanding of what it means to be an author and a character. Such an affect poses one further question: what mechanisms or epistemologies are preventing Colasanti from seeing Lispector's character as real, autonomous and a potential collaborator?

While this interview acts as an important case study, it should not be taken in isolation. As I will show, it echoes a long genealogy of writers, poets and artists claiming to work with, against or through what I am calling *non-material beings*, such as gods, spirits, aliens, ghosts, personal demons and imagined characters. This paper aims to bring together this genealogy within Western thought with contemporary scholarship on collaborative (creative) writing, arguing that our understanding of collaborative writing needs to be further expanded and reimagined to not only include non-material beings, but to see it as an ongoing ethical process of opening up to Other and otherness. While for the most part in Western frameworks, collaborative writing has been associated with human-to-human interactions, a growing amount of feminist, post-humanist and decolonial work has sought to show collaborative writing's potential to help

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destabilise or decentre the Western image of the author as an individual stable genius. There are even some writers and researchers who claim that all writing is collaborative, such as Mindy Svenlin and Sofia Jusslin (2023) who understand writing as an assemblage with human-and-more-than-human relations, even when writing by oneself (p. 3); or Mike Sharples (1998) who insists:

> All writing is collaborative. It has to be. Writers are in constant dialogue with the surrounding world and that world includes other people. Guidance from a teacher, support from a partner, criticism from a reader, a letter from a friend, a conversation in a bar can all alter the course of writing by offering ideas and constraints. The influences may be subtle but they are nonetheless direct. (p. 168)

While Sharples' claim is an interesting (if not fairly literal) idea that I will return to at the end of this paper, I am more interested in exploring which collaborations are recognised or not by contemporary scholarship, and why.

The first section of this paper provides a rough overview of writers within Western discourse describing themselves working with, under or through non-material beings. Moving from Ancient Greece to Romanticist, Modernist and contemporary periods, this section identifies society-wide and individual accounts of writers describing their writerly relationship with non-material beings. This section partly aims to show the range of these relationships, such as shifts from external to internal loci, and from transcendentalism to secularism. Importantly, I am not arguing that there is a clear linear connection between these different periods of time in Western thought, but rather I am showing that older otherworldly collaborators (if they are to be called such) appear to haunt contemporary epistemologies.

The second section explores and interrogates contemporary scholarship on collaborative creative writing. While partly critiquing humancentric assumptions about collaboration, this section aims to highlight potential openings within the scholarship that allow for a more expansive understanding of collaboration and collaborators. Analysing Donna Lee Brien and Tess Brady's (2003) 12 categories of collaborative writing in their article "Collaborative Practice", I seek to show a post-humanist potentiality within a seemingly humancentric comprehension of collaboration.

The third section addresses several potential counterarguments against the inclusion of non-material beings as collaborators, such as the limits of its material impacts, the misinterpretation of the rhetoric, and the conflation of influence with collaboration. In order to respond to these potential counterarguments, I draw on Judith Butler's theorisation of the *metaphysics of substance*, highlighting the concealing and powerful mechanisms that lead to the minimising belief that a collaborator needs to be a human writer.

I end the paper with a discussion on the ethical imperatives behind expanding our understanding of collaborators to include non-material beings. Building on Quinn Eades's (2022) concept of *collaboration-as-love*, this section formulates collaborative writing as a

continuous process of recognising and engaging with Other and otherness (including within oneself), suggesting that collaboration should not be understood as a writing mode to willingly enter or leave, but rather as a "lens" that a writer uses to illuminate the ethical potentiality of their practices.

Part 1: A genealogy of writerly ghosts

Throughout Western artistic thought, there has been a noticeable number of artists, writers and poets referencing some sort of non-material being assisting, inspiring and/or controlling their artistic practice. Importantly, outside of and/or prior to Western discourses, different artists and cultures (such as the First Peoples of Australia) have engaged with the physical and metaphysical for artistic inspiration (if such terms can be separated), drawing on a complex relationship between land, spirits, ancestors and community, such as Koori and Lebanese writer, Mykaela Saunders, who writes, "Our stories are not just beautiful moral or metaphysical narratives. They are also ancient geographical histories" (2022). I will address this further in Part 2 of this article.

Regarding the Western tradition, in some cases, the aid of non-material beings was epistemologically hegemonic, where artistic inspiration was commonly understood as coming from a transcendental locus outside the writer. Take, for example, Ancient Greece where poets were believed to be passive bodies into which the Muses imparted their wisdom and knowledge. This form of creative inspiration originated from an "external supernatural force" (Ustinova, 2020, p. 266): there was the poet and, separate to them, the divine inspiration. According to Tiger Roholt (2013), the ability of experts in craft could be taught and understood by principles, but, conversely, artists "work through divine inspiration; while creating, artists are not in control" (p. 16). In other words, artists were understood as the vehicle that expressed divine inspiration. In *The Ion*, a non-material source of creative inspiration is clearly observed in Plato's theories:

> For a poet is an airy thing, winged and holy, and he is not able to make poetry until he becomes inspired and goes out of his mind and his intellect is no longer in him … it's not by mastery that they make poems or say many lovely things about their subjects … but because it's by a divine gift – each poet is able to compose beautifully only that for which the Muse has aroused him. (Plato, 1995, p. 10)

Plato's notion of divine communication seems to haunt much of Western thought around artistic creation. In the medieval period, the notion of the Muses becomes Christianised, and the poet (to a certain degree) was understood as a passive receiver of the Holy Spirit's visitations, much like a mystic (Cieśla-Korytowska, 2002, p. 49). After Ancient Greece and the medieval period, examples become largely secularised and seemingly individualised, especially within and after the Renaissance, and yet many writers still make claim to some sort of intimate artistic bond or reliance with transcendental or imagined beings. The following collection of quotes aims to paint a picture of the diverse rhetoric and examples of non-material beings referred to by writers. While there is a benefit in future research closely distinguishing these examples – analysing their personal, historical, mythological, religious and social

relevance and differences – such a task is beyond the scope of this paper. Rather, the purpose of listing these examples (some of which are from very famous authors) is to illuminate the presence and persistence of these strange relationships within writerly discourse.

Some examples still explicitly hark back to ancient mythologies, such as John Milton in *Paradise Lost* (1667/2011), who indirectly references his muse Urania in the following passage:

> Of my celestial patroness, who deigns / Her nightly visitation unimplor'd, / And dictates to me slumbering; or inspires / Easy my unpremeditated verse. (p. 311)

Other examples are equally phantasmic, tying their artistic practices and drives to supernatural companions:

> Rudyard Kipling: When your Daemon is in charge, do not think consciously. Drift, wait and obey. (1937/2014, p. 210)
>
> George Orwell: One would never undertake [writing] if one were not driven on by some demon whom one can neither resist nor understand. (1946/2004, p. 10)
>
> T.S. Eliot: [The poet] is haunted by a demon, a demon against which he feels powerless, because in its first manifestation it has no face, no name, nothing; and the words, the poem he makes, are a kind of form of exorcism of this demon. (1957, p. 98)
>
> Jack Spicer: It's as if a Martian comes into a room with children's blocks with A, B, C, D, E which are in English and he tries to convey a message. (Spicer, 2021, pp. 32-33)
>
> Margaret Atwood: Now, what disembodied hand or invisible monster just wrote that cold-blooded comment? Surely it wasn't me ... (2002/2015, p. 31)
>
> Hilary Mantel: I am conscious of psychological undercurrents and sometimes I call them ghosts. Sometimes I call them fragments of possibility. I think of them as torn-off pieces of text, sometimes anonymous, sometimes in unknown languages, or half-obliterated by ink spills. (cited in Taylor, 2020)

Some examples toe the line between material and non-material, such as the following quote from crime fiction writer Jane R. Goodall, who acknowledges that some writers see the unwritten novel as a haunting para-material entity:

> Even among the most hard-headed novelists there are those who accord some kind of uncanny autonomy to the book in the making, as if an unwritten novel is a determining entity that takes possession of the writer, generating nightmares of technical impossibility from which the only way out is ever deep resignation to the work as daemon. (2009, p. 205)

In a similar fashion, Hélène Cixous, in a 1994 interview, describes her writing as an engagement with darkness:

> When I start writing, I'm feeling my way in the dark. It's a kind of darkness that's not altogether black – there are a few indicators, lights to guide me, black stars. But the darkness is the one in charge. It's the darkness in which all human beings live. It's there behind the door. As soon as you enter thought, there it is. (2008, p. 4)

While darkness is arguably a material (possibly psychoanalytical) entity, there is an abstracting, almost transcendentalising, tone in Cixous' words. Darkness as a writerly companion or motivator is also observed by Margaret Atwood who, in the introduction to *On Writers and Writing*, summarises "darkness, and a desire or perhaps a compulsion to enter it" as the common link among fellow writers on what it feels like to write (2015, p. xxii). It is worth noting that in the same introduction, Atwood lists the many motivations behind why writers write, including in the list:

> Because I was driven to it by some force outside my control. Because I was possessed. Because an angel dictated to me. Because I fell into the embrace of the Muse. Because I got pregnant by the Muse and needed to give birth to a book. (p. xx)

Many examples of collaborating with non-material beings, like that of Lispector, refer to a dictating and/or contributing fictional character, such as the following:

> Alice Walker: Just as summer was ending, one or more of my characters – Celie, Shug, Albert, Sofia, or Harpo – would come for a visit. We would sit wherever I was, and talk. They were very obliging, engaging, and jolly. They were, of course, at the end of their story but were telling it to me from the beginning. Things that made me sad, often made them laugh. Oh, we got through that; don't pull such a long face, they'd say. (1983, p. 359)

> Michael Frayn: It does seem – and I realise this is a psychological trick and it sounds very coy – but it is as if they are speaking and leading those lives. It's a very symbiotic relationship. You do seem to be with people who have minds of their own, thoughts of their own, but at the same time you're very much involved in leading their lives with them. (cited in Taylor, 2011)

> Toni Morrison [Regarding the character Pilate in *Song of Solomon*]: She was just taking over the book. And I kept saying, "Wait a minute, this is my book! Not yours!" (2019)

These examples support a 2020 study by Foxwell et al., which surveyed 181 professional writers at the Edinburgh International Book Festival about their characters. It found that "a large number of writers report vivid experiences of 'hearing' their characters talking to them, talking back to them, and exhibiting an atypical degree of independence and autonomy" (p. 1). While the study noted that there were some discrepancies between writers who believed their characters were communicating from within the writer and those communicating externally, across these examples there was a significant focus on the characters having agency, consciousness, freedom and the ability to make decisions or push against ones from the writer (p. 11).

While the examples listed in this section vary in form and positionality, as well as in whether the writer is talking generally or personally, they clearly show that some writers believe that they have relationships with non-material beings that are not purely one-directional in their communication (i.e. the writer talking as or to the non-material being) and in their control (i.e. the writer dictating the actions of their non-material being). It is safe to say that some writers understand these relationships to be collaborative and generative (if not essential) for their creative process, even if they do not use such terms. The following section aims to see whether non-material beings as collaborators can fit within contemporary scholarship on collaborative writing, and more so, if it fits within the ethical and political goals behind collaboration.

Part 2: Openings within collaborative writing scholarship

In understanding the definitions, processes and benefits of collaborative (creative) writing, a significant amount of contemporary research focuses on how it challenges Western capitalist systems that uphold the author as genius, stable, individual and, predominantly, white, male and cisgender. It is the same image of the writer that Jen Webb and Andrew Melrose (2015) observe:

> [Many of us] have bought into what Alex Pheby (2010) calls "myth of isolation", which holds that writers must preserve not just their independence but also their solitude if they are to be able to produce genuinely original works. (pp. 181–182)

According to Hennessy, Cothren and Matthews (2024), the collaborative process of writers writing together pushes against "Western Eurocentric prose writing" that privileges "the idea of the transcendent author, locked away in their garret" (p. 136), and instead reimagines "creative identities as a sticky web of connections" (p. 145). Lisa Mazzei and Alecia Jackson (2012) describe a similar belief: "Certainly, in some ways we are indeed two authors, but in the threshold, we meet in that in-between space, a space of shared deterritorialization in which we constitute one another" (p. 450). This is reminiscent of Gérard-Georges Lemaire's contribution to the idea of "the third mind" in William S. Burroughs and Brian Gysin's book *The Third Mind* (1978) (and note that the following quote carries similar characteristics to the previously listed non-material beings, as I have italicised):

> It is not the history of a literary collaboration but rather the complete fusion in a praxis of two subjectivities, two subjectivities that metamorphose into a third; it is from this collusion that a new author emerges, an *absent third person, invisible and beyond grasp*, decoding the silence. (Lemaire, 1978, as cited in Bolton, 2014, p. 34)

While notably expanding understandings of collaborative writing, a large portion of the scholarship still focuses on or assumes a person-to-person relationship or interaction – or more specifically, a human-writer-to-human-writer relationship or interaction. While on its surface we can claim that humancentric approaches to collaborative writing can be contradictory or limiting, often the ideas proposed to challenge the myth of the isolated individual writer can be further extended to non-human interactions.

Take, for example, Brien and Brady's article "Collaborative Practices" (2003), which formalises 12 different categories of collaborative writing. These categories – while acknowledged as fluid – cover a diverse range of collaborations, such as the sharing and building of writing concepts, working separately towards a unified object, creating a collated collection (like an anthology), ghost-writing, writing with or as a mentor, or writing a text that is so seamless, there are no clear parts written by a single writer (pp. 2–4). It is not contentious to claim that each of these categories assume a human-to-human collaboration. There are, however, two categories that gesture towards a potential opening and seem to be working on a slightly different plane than the other ten. The first is "Posthumous Collaboration", which is when "works by the dead are completed by other (living) writers/artists" (p. 2). This collaboration recognises that living humans can work with the memory, imagined being or remnants of a dead human, troubling the assumption that all writers need to be living and materially present to collaborate. The second category is labelled "Hidden Collaboration", which refers to the often-unrecognised (if not stolen) work done by a writer's companions. An example shared by Brien and Brady is the late recognition of Vivien Eliot's contribution to T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Other feminist scholars, like Juliana Dresvina (2021) and Karen Christensen (2019), and online movements such as #ThanksForTyping, have also sought to unearth the many women behind famous male writers who contributed as their typists, researchers, editors, translators, proofreaders, managers, muses, caregivers and domestic workers.

The inclusion of "Posthumous Collaboration" and "Hidden Collaboration" in Brien and Brady's article aligns with the above-mentioned capability of collaborative writing to subvert dominant Western solipsistic understandings of authorship. But these categories also contain a further subversive quality by including collaborators that are not recognised within Western intelligibilities, such as writers who are no longer living or those unrecognised women who contributed to the works of famous male writers. Brien and Brady's assertion that one can be a collaborator without necessarily physically writing opens up the potential to unearth other/ed persons, beings, and ecosystems as potential collaborators.

There are practitioners and scholars who have similarly sought to expand our understand of collaborative writing, drawing on post-humanist theories to explore subjectivity and collaboration within – what Rosi Braidotti calls – "a web of relations with human and non-human others" (pp. 33–34). One example is from Svenlin and Jusslin (2023) who argue that the relationship between writers and material elements, such as paper, pens, and computers, can also be understood as collaborative writing. Drawing on the works of Deleuze and Guattari, they adopt a "rhizomatic re-thinking of [collaborative writing] ... decentering the human and instead considering human-and-more-than-human relations in an assemblage" (p. 3). In a collaborative project creating a speculative fiction world, Sarah K. Stice and Mark D. McCarthy (2024) adopt a similar lens to Svenlin and Jusslin (2023), acknowledging the "technologies that enable our collaboration, stories that intertextually influence us" (p. 3).

Other practitioners and researchers, especially outside of Western traditions, have explored collaborative writing with animals and land, avoiding a distinct binary separation between human and non-human. In a chapter of *Beyond the Human-Animal Divide* (2017), Alex Lockwood thinks through the idea of "creaturely writing" and how to write (with) animals. As part of this practice, Lockwood collaborates with Anton (a pig saved from slaughter), writing that "creaturely writing is a practice of embodied and felt collaboration (with the land, with spirit guides) that leads to 'asking better questions' of the non-human experience and the human-animal relation" (p. 185).

Another example is an article titled "Telling Stories in, through and with Country" (2012) by Wright et al., which not only *draws* on Aboriginal Australian concepts of Country to explore storytelling between humans and non-humans, but it also lists Bawaka Country as one of the authors of the article. In a similar project by Somerville et al. (2023), a group of First Nations Australians and non-Indigenous Australians collaborated on a year-long project of "creative practice of storying and sharing knowledge" (p. 339), drawing on Country as a "guide" (p. 345) and "participant" (p. 339). Academic, arts critic, and member of the Apalech Clan, Tyson Yunkaporta, further expands on related ideas around storytelling and a "non-centralised knowledge economy" (p. 20) in his book *Right Story, Wrong Story: Adventures in Indigenous Thinking* (2023). He writes about his *kinuw* story of making a canoe and the concept of "right story", which:

> is not about objective truth, but the metaphors and relations and narratives of interconnected communities, living in complex contexts of knowledge and economy, aligned with the patterns of land and creation. Right story never comes from individuals, but from groups living in right relation with each other and with the land. Wrong story, wrong way – this means unilateral or unbalanced ritual, word and thought. (p. 20)

While Yunkaporta isn't explicitly discussing collaborative (creative) writing, his work addresses Aboriginal knowledge systems that contrast with Western solipsistic and humancentric frameworks, or "wrong story". As will be further discussed in Part 3, I argue that these examples of Aboriginal ontologies and epistemologies, as well as the previous examples of non-material collaborators in Western discourse, unsettle prevailing understandings of collaborative writing informed by Western secularisation (among other hegemonies that will be discussed). The contemporary Western privileging of secularisation forces the relationships between the material and non-material to be minimised, rationalised, psychopathologised and/or colonised. Cornelis Martin Renes (2022) addresses this in his analysis of Alexis Wright's writing, claiming that her novels go "against a universalizing Enlightenment conception of scientific rationality and verifiable reality" (p. 9) and instead urge readers to "let go of a privileged European standpoint and open up to O/other epistemological, spiritual and material presences" (p. 9).

Avoiding hierarchies and teleological pathways, it is worth recapping here the different efforts made to expand Western humancentric understandings of collaborative writing in order to show that the inclusion of non-material beings as collaborators is not so extreme. Firstly,

collaborative writing projects or processes shared between two or more human writers seek to expand or challenge the privileged image of the solipsistic lone writer genius, often coded as male, white and cisgender. Going further, some have attempted to show that intimate partners should also be recognised as collaborators, regardless of whether they are physically writing and/or contributing to concepts. Then there is the recognition of more-than-human beings and systems, such as writing implements, animals, ecosystems and land. And then we skim along the metaphysical as a form of haunting – an attempt to recognise the memories and remnants of those who have passed as potential collaborators.

With each (non-hierarchical) "step" away from the Western view of author, this outwardly moving chain of recognising others as writing collaborators can be seen to challenge what Linda K. Karell states is our "deeply held belief" of a "self-evident, natural, and inevitable 'truth' about authors and their relation to creativity" (2002, p. 20). That is, to be an author is to be singular, stable, human, real, and autonomous. This is arguably why Colasanti in the interview with Lispector was hesitant about Lispector's unstable sense of authorial Self and her attributing of autonomy to an imagined character – they go against the naturalised "truth" of what an author and character should be. But more so, as I will later address, each effort to expand the meaning of collaborator is an ethical attempt to open up the authorial "self" by including others into its orbit and to question the very categories that partition self from other, inside from outside, singular from collective. While it may seem appropriate to continue this "outwardly-moving chain" to include non-material beings, there are some counterarguments unique to these collaborative relationships that need to be addressed.

Part 3: Counterarguments and (within?) the metaphysics of substance

It is not a radical leap to continue the feminist, decolonial and post-humanist chain of recognised collaborators to then include physical and metaphysical collaborations, i.e. human writers and non-material beings. But there are a few hypothetical counterarguments that need to be addressed:

1. The first counterargument is *rhetoric*. Maybe these examples of writers talking about non-material influences should be understood as metaphor, or possibly a psychological condition or quality, like hearing one's own inner voice. Is it meant to be taken literally?
2. The second counterargument is *materiality*. Surely collaborations with transcendental beings (ghosts, spirits, demons, fictional characters) cannot be compared to collaboration with material entities (humans, animals, writing instruments, land) or even metaphysical beings/systems within First Nations' cultures that are embedded in Country? Do non-material beings have the same real-world impacts on writing?
3. And the third counterargument is *power*. Even if there is some sort of communication between the physical and metaphysical, many of the examples listed are of non-material beings influencing or controlling the writer. Can this still be understood as collaborative writing?

I will address the third counterargument first, as it sits separately to the previous two. While I agree that different contributors of the writing process should not be homogenised, I am not the first to discuss the different *degrees* of collaboration, and how the borders between collaboration, influence and muse often blur. This is especially true when we recognise that the sharing and contributing of ideas counts as a collaboration, which Brien and Brady (2003) include in their list under "Conceptual Collaboration". Regarding writers describing their non-material beings as controlling, while this is an intriguing and peculiar pattern, I would argue that collaborative writing between humans can also be fraught with unequal relationships, as many practitioners and scholars know all too well. Brien and Brady acknowledge this too, stating that collaboration does not necessarily need to be between equals, and that equality can be hard to measure across gendered, racialised and socio-economic lines (p. 5). This is not to say that consent and equality among collaborators is not the goal or part of the collaborative process, but it is not a requirement for collaboration. Elizabeth Ellison and Craig Batty (2020) recognise this, stating (and please note the humancentric assumption within the following as well):

> Above all, while working and writing collaboratively has many career benefits for all involved, human experiences and emotions are brought to bear on these practices. While evident in all collaborations, all collaborators must be aware of how power assumptions and dynamics affect people, especially when working across hierarchical boundaries. (p. 12)

Regarding the first two counterarguments, my response draws upon a concept called the *metaphysics of substance*, which I have borrowed from Butler's earlier works. The metaphysics of substance, according to Butler (2006), refers to the commitment to and privileging of a "prior ontological reality of substance and attribute" (p. 28); one that presupposes that there is a doer behind the deed, as Butler draws from Nietzsche (p. 34). The metaphysics of substance is also reinforced by grammatical structures, namely that the formation of subject and predicate presumes a prior being/substance/"doer" (p. 28). This can be explained by Michel Haar's (1977) interpretation of Nietzsche's theories of substance, which Butler quotes as well:

> It was grammar (the structure of subject and predicate) that inspired Descartes' certainty that "I" is the subject of "think", whereas it is rather the thoughts that come to "me": at bottom, faith in grammar simply conveys the will to be the "cause" of one's thoughts. The subject, the self, the individual, are just so many false concepts, since they transform into substances fictitious unities [sic] having at the start only a linguistic reality. (pp. 17–18)

In Butler's case, gender is the "substance" critiqued: "within the inherited discourse of the metaphysics of substance, gender proves to be performative – that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be" (p. 34). In our case, I argue that the metaphysics of substance also dominates Western notions of authorship. It reinforces the logical and naturalised assumption that there needs to be a writing subject prior to and behind the act of writing. This is not only in grammatical formations ("I write", "I create") and in physically embodied acts (the person wielding the hand/pen/keyboard/voice-recorder/etc.) but also in who (and what) is attributed substance by hegemonic systems (the capability to write).

The first and second counterarguments rely heavily on the metaphysics of substance where there needs to be a logical and grounded attribution of a text to a human writer. They also clearly reinforce a capitalist understanding of authorship with the attempt to tie writing to quantifiable material property. Scott Rettberg, a professor of digital culture, further explains this connection:

> The myth of the solitary author, toiling in isolation on the great work, is largely a convenience to simplify the complex collaboration involved in making and distributing books; the idea of authorship is driven more fundamentally by legal and market concerns than by artistic ones. (2011, p. 187)

The idea that non-material beings can collaborate on the writing processes or that the human writing self is not as stable, singular and pre-discursive as the metaphysics of substance allows us to believe, does not fit within fundamental capitalist understandings of authorship.

The first two counterarguments indirectly reinforce hegemonies that attempt to demystify, colonise and psychopathologise elements that cannot be fully explained or measured within contemporary Western epistemologies. And this is odd, not only because there is a rich history of Western writers (among others) drawing on non-rationalist and mystical creative practices, but also because writers are deeply enmeshed with imagination, fantasy, fiction, and dream. Even some posthumanist works on collaborative writing, like Ken Gale and Jonathan Wyatt's article "Working at the Wonder" (2017), limit their radical conception of collaboration to the "material". While this could be justified by seeing non-material collaborators as ultimately siloed to the individual, acting as a second but still solipsistic voice of the writer, this is only true if the argument is predicated on a secular and rationalist ideology that forecloses the recognition of agency in non-material beings or even the deep connection many individuals and cultures have to the mythical and transcendental. Hennessy, Cothren and Matthews (2024) recognise the dangers of drudging within individual capitalist approaches to, say, climate fiction writing, instead encouraging a movement "toward collective imaginings which might offer hope – or, at the very least, less misery – and to foster kinship, to foreground the sharedness of our experience of living through climate change/disaster" (p. 135). Pertinent to my argument that secularism, rationalism and capitalism instrumentalise and limit understands of collaboration, Hennessy, Cothren and Matthews (2024) quote a very relevant passage from Roland Barthes:

> The author is a modern figure, a product of our society insofar as, emerging from the Middle Ages with English empiricism, French rationalism and the personal faith of the Reformation, it discovered the prestige of the individual, of, as it is more nobly put, the "human person". It is thus logical that in literature it should be this positivism, the epitome and culmination of capitalist ideology, which has attached the greatest importance to the "person" of the author. (1995, cited in Hennessy, Cothren & Matthews, 2024, p. 136)

The metaphysics of substance, alongside capitalism, rationalism and secularism, makes it hard to imagine non-material beings as collaborators within a Western tradition. But as Jacques

Derrida reminds us in *Paper Machine* (2005), paper and its whiteness carry a history, and the sheet of paper has "thickness" and "resistance" (pp. 62–63):

> There is no need to trust blindly in all the discourses that reduce paper to the function or *topos* of an inert surface laid out beneath some markings, a substratum meant for sustaining them, for ensuring their survival or subsistence. On this commonsense view, paper would be a body-subject or a body-substance, an immobile and impassible surface underlying the traces that may come along and affect it from the outside, superficially, as events, or accidents, or qualities. (p. 42)

Following Derrida's logic, what if we question the (gendered? racialised?) discourses that frame the paper as passive to the active mark of the pen? Could we not argue that in order for the pen to work, the paper needs to push back against it? In a similar vein, is it so hard to imagine these non-material beings metaphysically pushing back against the physical? Pushing back against us, as writers?

Conclusion: Love and lenses

Regardless of what collaborative relationship is discussed – with humans, animals, utensils, land, systems, non-material beings, and so on – we can see such relationships as containing the ethical potential to recognise and open up to Others and otherness (including the Other within oneself). For there to be a wider acceptance of what constitutes collaborative writing, there needs to be a more expansive and ever-growing acceptance of different relationships. This relates closely to Eades's (2022) concept of collaboration-as-love:

> If we think collaboration-as-love we can consider the ways we write with others as acts of love. If we say yes to the offer, or we make the invitation ourselves, we are saying yes to the im/possibility of being in love. (p. 40)

In other words, collaboration should be understood as an opening up to something new, a change, a vulnerability. If so, what is the limit of such openings? For one, collaboration-as-love is not transcendent or universal. As Eades elaborates, "As soon as the word 'love' is written and then read, we are smothered by what we and our world/s bring to this word" (p. 40). Butler (2002) shares a similar sentiment:

> Love is not a state, a feeling, a disposition, but an exchange, uneven, fraught with history, with ghosts, with longings that are more or less legible to those who try to see one another with their own faulty vision. (p. 65)

While I am aware that human relationships with non-material beings can be strange, unequal, shift between hegemonic or fringe epistemologies depending on the time, place and culture, the process of recognising non-material beings as collaborators troubles normative understandings of love and creativity, particularly within Western, capitalist, secular, colonial and patriarchal systems. To recognise and validate different collaborations and collaborators is to question normative creative processes as well as normative relationships.

This brings me to my last point, which at first might read like a contradiction to the rest of the paper: collaborative writing does not bring us in contact with others. Although it feels as though collaborative spaces can be created and "I's" can be shifted to "we's" during, what may be called, collaborative projects, this still assumes a prior space or being that begins in isolation and singularity. Rather, I argue that active engagements with collaborative writing allow us to remember that writing in isolation is an illusion that conceals the already present Others and otherness within a writer's world, practices and sense of self. There needs to be a rethinking of what collaborative writing is. Is it as mode in which one willingly enters and leaves? Should collaborative writing be seen as, say, *moments* of working with another person, my pet dog, the land I am on, the demons that haunt me? I would suggest that these understandings inadvertently reinforce and possibly centralise writing as an originally solipsistic human practice. Instead, is it more useful (within a creative writing ethics) to see collaborative writing as a *lens* or *framework* in which writers and researchers use to help unearth or emphasise the collaborations already present, even if some are more easily recognisable than others? Rather than claiming that "I am now entering a collaborative space" or that "talking about collaborative writing is pointless because everything is collaboration", I would suggest that collaboration should be understood as a creative and methodological lens, placed over our practices, projects and relationships in order to draw attention to the connections we have with (non-binary) material and non-material worlds, and the mechanisms that limit or ease such engagements.

The aim of this paper was not necessarily to convince readers to accept non-material beings as collaborators, although, their presence within the discourse and parallels to other collaborators are hard to ignore. Rather, I am more interested in using the idea of non-material collaborations as a way to expose, push against or open up assumed knowledges about creative writing and the limits of recognising and loving others. In crossing the divide between the physical and metaphysical, personal and transcendent, self and other, our engagement with non-material beings may help to illuminate the very mechanisms that conceal and devalue their ghostly presence. Lispector knew this. We can see it in her posthumous novel *A Breath of Life*, which entirely consists of a dialogue between an unnamed author and his character called Angela. The author asks (and Lispector writers): "Is Angela my edge? Or am I the edge of Angela? Is Angela my mistake? Is Angela my variation?" (2014, p. 41).

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