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A seethe of poets: creativity and community

Abstract:

This article explores the social and cultural status of contemporary poetry, with reference to the enduring myth of the lone genius. Drawing on a corpus of research interviews with poets and on creativity literature, we analyse the validity of isolated poetic genius, comparing the narratives of the solitary life with the material evidence of lives spent in connection with others. Indications in previous studies of creativity suggest the importance of community and networks in building creative thought and capacity, and we examine transcripts from our interviews with 76 contemporary poets to compare their experience with that of other communities. Our findings indicate the importance of social and community networks among poets of high repute.

Biographical notes:

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Introduction: the myth of isolation

The portrait of the isolated creative genius who toils towards excellence from the depths of solitude is a familiar one. The poet in particular is prey to such an account: a creative identity, such as the poet's, is seen as both rare and highly individual, and this notion pervades the literature of creativity, and the highly creative individual genius. Psychologist Anthony Storr writes, in *Solitude: a return to the self* (1989), that 'the gifts which enable a person to become a writer can be set in motion by loss and isolation'; and that in any event 'creative people are used to solitude' (1989: 120, 129). Scientist and science fiction writer Isaac Asimov (2014) similarly observes, 'My feeling is that as far as creativity is concerned, isolation is required', because 'The presence of others can only inhibit' creative work. Philosopher Martha Nussbaum too insists on the importance of solitude, arguing that the value of being 'fully social' is that it affords the individual the capacity to be 'more fully capable of being alone—therefore of the exhilaration of solitary contemplation' (Nussbaum 2001: 149). Isolation, or at least solitude, are posited thus as preconditions for creative success.

Many writers agree: Virginia Woolf (1989 [1929]) invoked the value of 'a room of one's own';[1] Susan Sontag claimed that 'One can never be alone enough to write' (2012: 424);[2] and Nietzsche observed that the 'higher' sort of person—a Goethe, a Beethoven—needs and seeks solitude (see Nietzsche 1968 [1901]; 1966 [1886]). Poets too enthusiastically endorse isolation's contribution to creativity, as is evident in the writings of the Romantics (Wordsworth's solitary rambles, for example) and the Transcendentalists (Thoreau's 'silken web' solitude; see Thoreau 1961 [1927]: 173),[3] and in more recent examples. In 'Danse Russe', for example—William Carlos Williams' (1966 [1917]: 3) poem about (temporary) solitude—the mood is celebratory, while in Adrienne Rich's 'Song', aloneness is affirmed as a mode of freedom (1973: 20).

For contemporary writers, the condition of solitude is coupled with the discourse that privileges identification as a discrete individual. This individual tends to be the privileged and accepted mode of being for highly creative agents, as Michel Foucault observed in his famous essay, 'What is an author?' Here he outlines a genealogy of the writing process, which identifies 'the coming into being of the notion of "author"' as a 'privileged moment of individualization in the history of ideas, knowledge, literature, philosophy, and the sciences' (1984: 141). To be a modern creative writer is to be an *individual*; and from there it is a short step into the domain of the isolated genius.

Philosopher PZ Brand (2015) writes against this view of creative excellence, arguing that to tie creativity to the notion that originality is based on individual mental processes simply replicates the cultural bias towards the individual artist and solitary genius. Her views are supported by the record of the long history of human interaction, which shows a continual tension between two creative social states or creative identities; invariably there exists, alongside the creative individual, a creative collective. So, writes Glaveanu, 'Creativity is never a solitary affair' (2011: 61); while for Gerhardt Fischer and his colleagues, 'artistic innovations emerge from joint thinking, passionate conversations and shared struggles among different people, emphasizing the importance of the social dimension of creativity' (2005: 483).[4] These and similar studies point to the importance of connectedness and community, rather than isolation, in galvanising creativity.

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Certainly most sections of the writing community are properly named 'community', since their members enjoy reasonably interconnected practices that involve co-authorship and other forms of collaboration. The myth of the isolated author is, we would argue, just a myth (Webb and Melrose 2015). However, when it comes to poets, the story is more complicated. There are some famous collaborations—the one between TS Eliot and Ezra Pound, say, or between Eliot and Vivienne Haigh-Wood Eliot. But these were based on editorial input rather than genuine co-production: Pound, for example, is never named as a co-author of *The Wasteland*: though he was very involved in providing editorial advice, the idea and the realisation were Eliot's alone. And, while there are many examples of novelists, screenwriters and journalists co-authoring texts, an extensive examination of the literature has turned up only a handful of poetic collaborations. One is the nineteenth-century poet 'Michael Field', the pen name for Katherine Harris Bradley and her niece Edith Cooper, who produced poetry in a collaboration so all-encompassing that they 'claimed that they often could not tell each other's lines apart' (Poetry Foundation 2015; see also Laird 2000). Denise Duhamel and Maureen Seaton too have published collections of co-authored poems, and the generative mechanism for their writing is a process that uses established collaborative forms: the surrealist Exquisite Corpse game, for example, or the Japanese renga tradition (Duhamel and Seaton 2013). While they celebrate their shared practice, they acknowledge that collaborative poetry is rarely found outside the framework of experimental collectives such as the surrealists, Beat poets, or the 1970s feminist writers; and that it is even more rarely published (Duhamel, Seaton and Trinidad 2007).
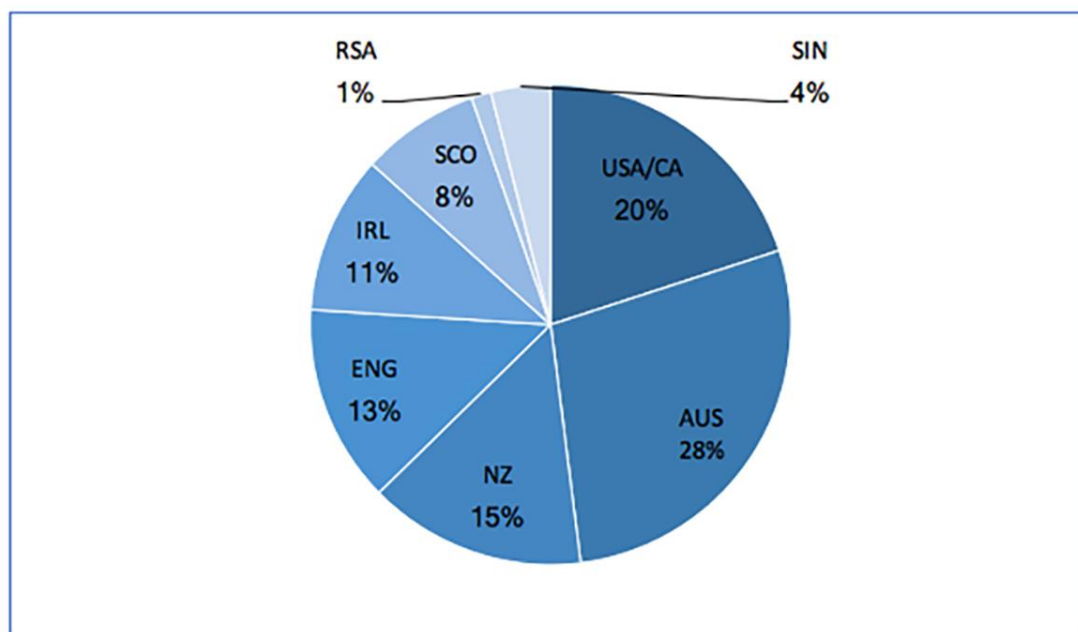

Figure 1: Poets by nation of residence; n=76

Given this context, can there be said to be a community, as such, of poets? And, in the absence of a professional status named 'poet', or formally instituted schools of poetry, how might such a group might be identified? This paper reports on one aspect of a recent research project involving interviews with 76 poets in nine different nations (see Fig 1, below),[5] and asks: what role does community play in the life and work of highly creative individuals?

Interestingly, across the nations, and among all 76 poets we interviewed, only one described a practice of co-authorship: Edinburgh's Ken Cockburn, who collaborates and co-authors with Alec Finlay. Their shared practice has extended over many years and many projects, and includes co-editing and publishing, producing commissioned public art, and more recently a major collaboration, *The Road North* (Finlay and Cockburn 2014). This work channels Matsuo Bashō's great *Narrow Road to the Deep North*, and the journey he and Kawai Sora made across Japan in 1689. Finlay and Cockburn relocated the concept to Scotland and, during 2010–11, similarly traced cultural nodes points in the landscape, producing a book-length poem along with photographs and artwork.[6]

One poet out of 76 identifying as a collaborator: these are not very good odds for anyone betting that poets are as collaborative and community-oriented as other creative groups. But the experts do not agree that poets are necessarily isolates: Martha Woodmansee writes that the notion of the solitary poet is both specious and of fairly recent origin. She dates it from Wordsworth's 1815 'Essay, supplement to the Preface', and argues that Wordsworth introduced in this work a component of 'mystification' (1994: 16) and hence individuation, overturning the much more established 'corporate attitude' toward poetry (1994: 24). Ivor Indyk suggests that poets may seem more isolated and individual than do novelists, but that this is a matter of perception only: a perception based on the fact that poets are largely invisible in the contemporary literary market (Indyk 2015). Following their lead, we decided to dig more deeply into the transcripts of the interviews with the 76 poets, and try to evaluate to what extent they really are solitary; and to consider the tension between isolation and sociability in light of the mounting evidence about the relationship between collaboration and creativity.

Visible and invisible

Poetry is one of the earliest forms of writing and modes of communication. While the origins of writing in Mesopotamia seem to be related to recording-keeping, administration and law (Driver 1948; Goody, 1987; Powell 2009), the Greek contributions to writing are, almost from the start, focused on self-expression and poetry (Senner 1989). However, though millennia of study have been devoted to poetry, in the contemporary era the producers of this material—the poets themselves—are far less often the focus of consideration. Perhaps this is because, in many ways, poets do not fit comfortably within the logic of production. Their practice is located, for the most part, well outside the norms of entertainment or economic exchange. Neither collectable nor exhibitable (as is visual art), and rarely if ever capable of summoning large audiences or selling product (as does film, or popular fiction), poetry must operate alongside, rather than within, the dominant culture.

It is not the only art form that exists on the margins; jazz music, for example, is equally outside the mainstream and, like poetry, tends to be offered in small venues or festivals, and as live performances. Other forms of musical practice have publicly funded networks and institutions at state and national level (opera; symphonies), or can earn a reasonable income and/or enjoy significant space on radio networks (rock music; popular contemporary music). Jazz and poetry also have similarities in their membership, with the number of high-level jazz musicians, like high-level poets, being small in number. However, there is a significant difference between the social and economic status of jazz and poetry in that, although jazz is a much younger form,

in Australia in least it receives significant public support, with a dedicated 24-hour-a-day publicly funded radio channel. Poetry's only national radio presence, the show *Poetica* (which ran for an hour, once a week, from 1997 to 2014, produced by Mike Ladd), was cancelled by the Australian Broadcasting Authority as part of a cost-cutting move, leaving poetry with no public place. Poetry therefore tends to operate as a pop-up, disrupting the space of café or bookshop or bar, and then disappearing again. Not surprising, poetry has a miniscule economic footprint: almost no major publishing houses sign contemporary poets; across all publishing houses, poetry print runs are remarkably small; few newspapers or other publishers arrange reviews of poetry, particularly compared with the rate of review for prose publications; and it tends to be the poor cousin at literary festivals. Whether as cause or consequence of this, poetry has a small population of confirmed readers—people who choose to read a wide range of poetry on a regular basis—and very few of the people who write poetry achieve professional publication of their work, maintain their writing practice across decades, or earn more than pin money for their efforts.

Despite this gloomy picture, poetry remains part of the culture, due perhaps to what Rachel Blau DuPlessis calls 'the universalizing, taming, humanizing claims of poetry and the silvery aura around the word "poetic"' (DuPlessis 2012: 53). Certainly people—even those who would never normally seek out poetry—will reach for it at moments of heightened emotion, and expect to find comfort or encouragement in its lines. And though poets report the lack of material presence, the lack of social recognition, and the general social awkwardness that comes with membership of this community, still they remain deeply invested in it, and conscious of the scope and scale of the community of which they are part—a community that extends back to Sappho and the Psalmists, and looks forward to poetic practices not yet imagined.

But is 'community' an appropriate term for this congeries of individuals? Our analysis of the interview transcripts suggests it is one worth using; and suggests too that involvement in this community is a core characteristic of highly successful poets, and therefore, perhaps, a feature of high level creativity more generally. To consider this, we look to the work of sociologist Randall Collins and his study of the community of philosophers, which he describes as a 'creative intellectual field' (Collins 1987: 47). Like poets, philosophers use the major language for what are generally small audiences and minor compensation; like poets, philosophers frequently rely on collective enunciation while claiming discrete individual authorship. The ways in which both poets and philosophers occupy their social locations and perform their social and intellectual functions may therefore offer insights into how it is possible to generate high quality creative work without the promise of economic or, indeed, any extrinsic rewards.

Collins' investigation of the sociology of philosophers shows that the vast majority of highly influential creative or intellectual practitioners have been embedded members of a community, and the most eminent are those who have chains of connection across the field: vertical ties, which is to say generational connections, especially of the master-pupil sort; and horizontal ties, which is to say contemporary connections, with their colleagues and rivals (Collins 1998: 68). Indeed, he found almost no eminent individuals who were isolated, either from contemporary networks or from the master-pupil chain.

Collins identifies three central factors of this characteristic of connectedness that may be generative of high quality work. The first he attributes to 'the passing of cultural

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capital'—or knowledge of how to think and make—between members of the group; the second is 'the transfer of emotional energy', because as they spark against each other, all the participants are galvanised; and the third factor he attributes to rivalry, because as they compete with one another, they increase activity and hence the chances of developing genuine innovations (Collins 1998: 71).

At the heart of Collins' project, therefore, is his theory of social causes (1989: 108). He acknowledges the role of individuals and their experiences, and the role of political, cultural and economic contexts, in intellectual production and intellectual development. But of more importance in his analysis is the structure of *communities* of philosophers, because it is within this broader context of intellectual communities that networks, relationships and patterns of engagement consistently appear, regardless of temporal or geographic contexts. We too have identified, in our analysis, key structural elements and patterns that parallel those described by Collins; and though our initial analysis of the data shows some deviations from Collins' findings, it nonetheless confirms the structural conditions of creativity as outlined in his study: 'conditions that determine long-term patterns of intellectual production' (Collins 1989: 107).

Poets vs philosophers

Of course our study does not replicate Collins', and the first difference between his study and ours is scale. The former is a very large project including hundreds of philosophers across millennia, and located in cultures as disparate as Vedic India, Ming Dynasty China, ancient Greece, and medieval Islam. Our project is more modest, located in a single temporal moment, covering only English-language poets (though the nine nations they represent have very distinctive cultural differences), and including fewer than a hundred subjects. Because our cohort is considerably smaller, and because we focus only on living poets, we cannot reach findings based on the long-term influences of dominant members of the community, or guess how individuals in our study will be regarded in generations to come.

A second difference is classificatory. Collins divides his subjects into dominant, major, secondary, and minor philosophers (1989: 117). Dominant philosophers are those highly influential individuals deeply embedded in networks of eminence— similar to Foucault's 'founders of discursivity' (1984: 114). Major philosophers are widely cited in the literature and well connected to other important scholars; hence are influential in intellectual developments. Secondary philosophers have some profile, and some connections to dominant scholars, but are not as embedded in the community; and minor philosophers are the least connected to influential networks. We too divide our cohort of poets into categories: in our case, international, regional, and local/emerging. The first group includes those who have a very significant international profile, are cited widely both within and beyond the community of poetry, have won national, regional and international honours, been widely translated, and hence have significant influence across the literary community. The second group includes those with very high regional or national standing: winners of major state and federal awards, poets who are widely published, anthologised and translated, and who are identified by others as leaders in the field. The third group is comprised of poets who are emerging, occasional, or otherwise of lower profile: they may produce poems of high quality, but they have not achieved high visibility and hence influence over how poetry is understood, not only within the community, but beyond it.
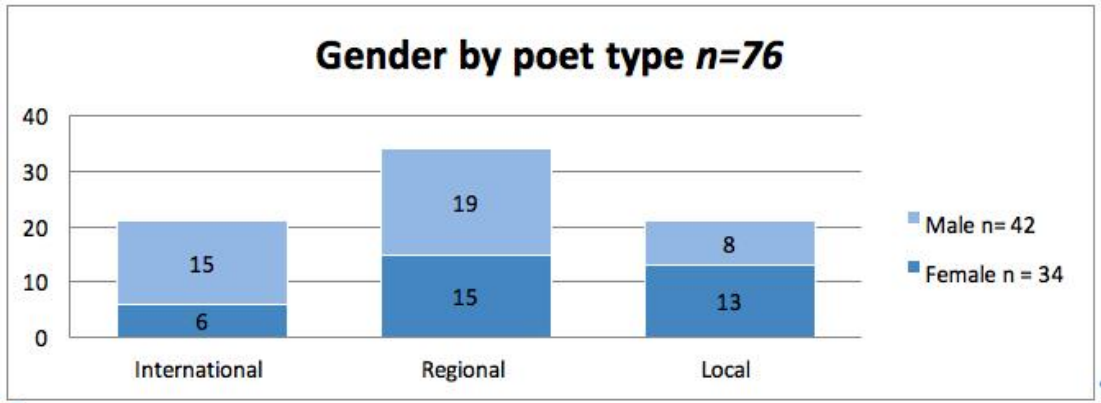
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Figure 2: Categories of poet by number and gender

A further distinction between Collins' findings and ours is that, in his study, local and geographical contexts do not emerge as influences in the intellectual life of the philosophers. In fact, he observes that there is no correlation between a specific society and the patterns of the philosophical community: between, for example, the social or economic patterns of classical Greek society and the focus of classical Greek philosophy (1989: 108). Our findings suggest the opposite: that geography and place are key influences in a poet's life. This is evident in our respondents' reports of the other poets they read and have read, where they publish their own work, and how they draw on language and materials for their inspiration and for the content of their poetry, all of which are geographically quite distinct. As Figure 3 below shows, North American poets speak more often, and more extensively, about other North American poets (both living and dead) than about poets from other nations (only two of the North American poets in the study referenced more non-American poets than poets from their regional context); and the same was evident in poets living in other nations.
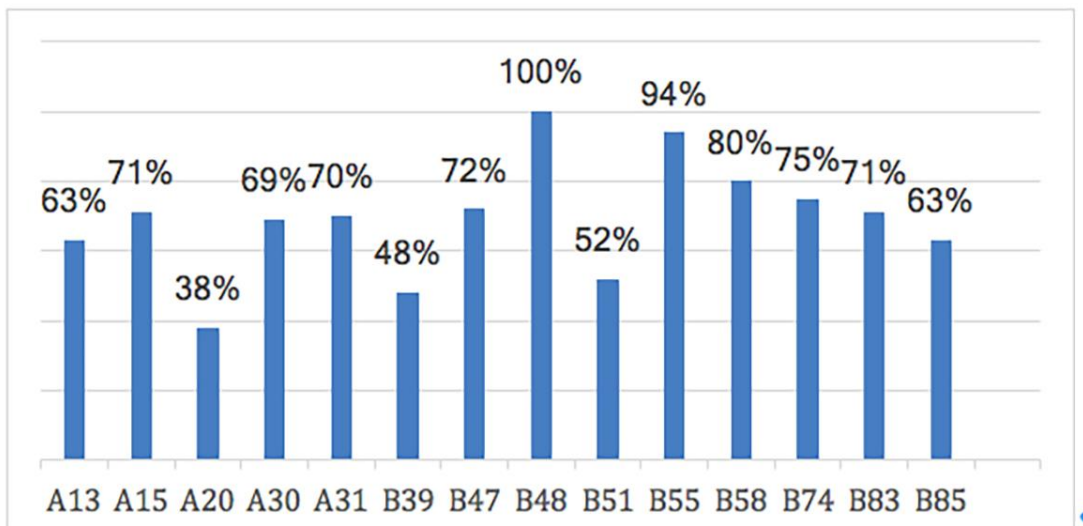

Figure 3: The proportion of poets from North America name-checked by individual North American poets in the study

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Related to this, a surprising number of the poets identify themselves by their national, regional or geographic location—as a 'Singaporean poet', or a 'poet of the mid-West', or even as a '21st century poet', rather than seeing themselves as transnational and transhistorical. So, although the poets in the study express similar passions and concerns, deploy the same sets of tools and techniques, and have a common language, geographical and temporal contexts seem to be more generative of poetic creativity than, as Collins found, they are for intellectual creativity.

A final point of distinction is the role, in these two creative communities, of what Collins calls 'master-pupil chains': the relationships that both initiate new practice in the discipline, and ensure continuity of that discipline across generations (1989: 108, 110). The most eminent philosophers, he found, also have the most relationships in terms of links back to their predecessors (whether to their own teachers or to more ancient experts in the field), links to their contemporaries (generally, to their status peers rather than simply to other philosophers who happen to be alive at the same time), and future-oriented links—connections with their own pupils, and evidence that they are linked to those yet to come: the later philosophers who read them, cite them, and thus keep their work alive.

Poets are certainly influenced by their predecessors and, once their own status is established, often act as 'masters' to emerging poets. However, they tend not to characterise these relationships as that of 'master-pupil'; rather, they use terms like 'elder-initiate' in describing such links, or speak of 'apprenticeships', or 'mentor relationships'. Where Collins identifies 'dominance' as a significant feature of individual and community relationships, the relationships in poetry are less about dominance and more about philanthropy and generosity. A surprising number of the poets we interviewed described both more senior poets and their peers as 'generous'. The world of poetry is perceived, it seems, less as a prize to be won through struggle than was the case for philosophers, in Collins' study.

It is not easy to come up with a data-based explanation for this difference, but an understanding of the field of cultural production might offer some insights. Pierre Bourdieu's account of the creative field (Bourdieu 1993) presents a model of the domain of creative practice that is bifurcated, split between commercially-oriented work and that which has no market: autonomous, or 'art for art's sake' practice. This is where the majority of contemporary poetry is located;[7] and, in a subfield committed almost entirely to autonomous production, there is no need for a defined master-pupil relationship because there are no jobs as such for which the pupil might be prepared, and nor can 'good pupils' of poetry learn an established line of argument in order to generate new intellectual product. New poets are therefore, overall, in considerably less need of 'schooling' than are philosophers; but they do need mentorship, direction, support, and feedback as they learn to develop their unique voice, and learn how to generate and evaluate new creative product. This may be provided by an actual or by an imagined elder-initiate relationship: the latter being where a poet connects with the 'ancestors' rather than the (living) 'elders'. WH Auden encourages this approach for emerging poets; once they have passed the beginning stage, he writes:

> The next stage for the young poet is to get a transference upon some particular poet, with whom he feels an affinity ... In imitating his Master, the young poet learns that, no matter how he finds it, there is only one word or rhythm or form that is the right one. (Auden 1995: 191)

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Certainly many of the poets in our study referenced ancestors—those they could never have met—as influences on their own practice, especially in their early days. And most of the poets in the study, particularly those of international or regional repute, describe themselves as valuing their predecessors, whether in the ancient or recent past; and also valuing those who were/are part of their own local culture. A New Zealand poet, for instance, describes the 'relief' of discovering that there was a local history of poetry: 'there were actually men who wrote poetry in New Zealand, and it wasn't just something that came from brilliant minds overseas'. Their existence provided him both models for poetic practice, and a sense of legitimacy as a New Zealand poet. Many other poets in our project describe themselves as wanting to have contact with the living elders, as well as their peers. A poet from the USA stressed the importance of such horizontal and vertical connections, saying 'There really is kind of a community of poets. I don't know if it's because poetry is such a sort of marginalized art these days, and so poets network a lot'. An Australian poet also identified the mentoring aspect, and its role in the individual poet's creative development: 'People challenge you to go into a new space and it's a very creative challenge … that can unlock people'.

Poets and philosophers

While there are these clear distinctions between poets and philosophers, or between the findings of our study and of Collins', the findings of the two studies are well aligned in the area of the generative effects of rivalry. Despite the mutuality and generosity described by so many poets in our study, it is a field riven with conflict. There are deep and profound differences between poets who operate in different modes or forms: between lyric and language poets, for example. There are also, at times, very public squabbles between poets and schools of poetry. These may be the result of different aesthetic values, as was the case for the Poetry Wars of the 1970s in the UK, fought between conservatives and radicals (Barry 2006). They may be battles over the right to map the field, as seen in the 2012 dispute in Australia, with Geoffrey Lehmann and Robert Gray in one corner, and Peter Minter and John Tranter on the other, struggling over the former pair's selections for an anthology of Australian poetry (Roberts 2012). Other conflicts seem more aligned with the modes of field-based dominance Collins describes, than with poetry per se: another Australian battle, this time with Anthony Lawrence and Robert Adamson on one side and John Kinsella on the other, which was parlayed at least partly in verse and ended with restraining orders and threats of defamation suits, is another example of disharmony and rivalry in the community (Bennie 2012); and again in 2012—clearly a bad year for Australian poetry—there was a major upset between the director and the board members of Australian Poetry Ltd (Crook 2012).

While these battles tend to be treated as light comedy in the media, they signal the personal investments in the field, and the effort to demonstrate, and be acknowledged for, significant knowledge about poetry and its traditions. Every poet we interviewed mentioned the names of other poets, with Eliot, Yeats, Auden, Pound, Frost, Heaney and Shakespeare most commonly name-checked (38 per cent of the poets in the study mentioned and/or quoted Eliot; see Figure 4 below).
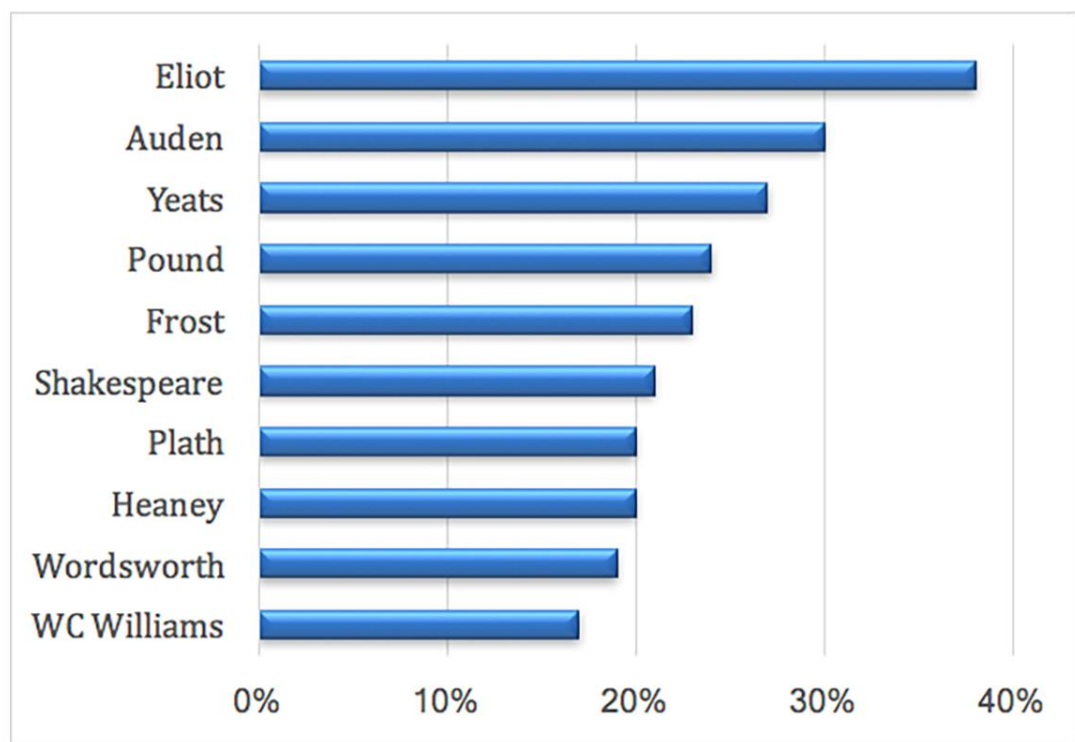
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Figure 4: Antecedent poets 'name-checked'

This list, which we draw from all 76 poets in the study, includes the best-known, and most widely-known, poets in English: so naming these poets does not signal the possession of specialist knowledge. A more powerful 'rivalry'—or display of knowledge—is evident when we examine the name-checking of poets by those participants we categorised as the first group: those who have acquired an international reputation. While they too make reference to the stars of poetry, they have broader and deeper knowledge which they displayed in our research conversations: on average the poets in this group mentioned 4.2 important but obscure poets; while poets in the other two categories mentioned, on average, only 1.5 important but obscure poets.

Community and creativity

While the consistent and frequent references to other poets may be a flexing of poetic muscle, it does point to the high degree of sharing, overlap and communion between the participants of our project and the poetry community with which they identify, and to the existence of chains of personal contact that run along both the vertical and the horizontal axes. For Collins, the value of these chains is that they enable the transmission of knowledge, or 'intellectual capital' (1998: 71), across the community. He makes the point, convincingly, that while knowledge is communicated through publications, it is personal connections that form the foundation of the intellectual community, and that individuals seek out personal engagement because this affords both 'a transmission of emotional energy', and the personal competition that drives practice (1998: 74). What we found particularly interesting, in reading the transcripts, was the extent to which contemporary poets speak of those who came before them— those who died long before they were born—as though there were a relationship

between them. This, which we characterise as 'imagined relationships', seem to have a profound effect on the poets in our study; though they could not have met these antecedents, could not have become either disciples or rivals, yet they speak of them as though they are personally acquainted. Using NVivo, we analysed the transcripts for instances of expression where a deeply personal relationship was figured, and then clustered those instances to find where the relationship was with someone who died long before the speaker's own birth. Figure 5 below provides an example from just one poet, diagramming the 'imagined relationships' this person has with the ancestors.
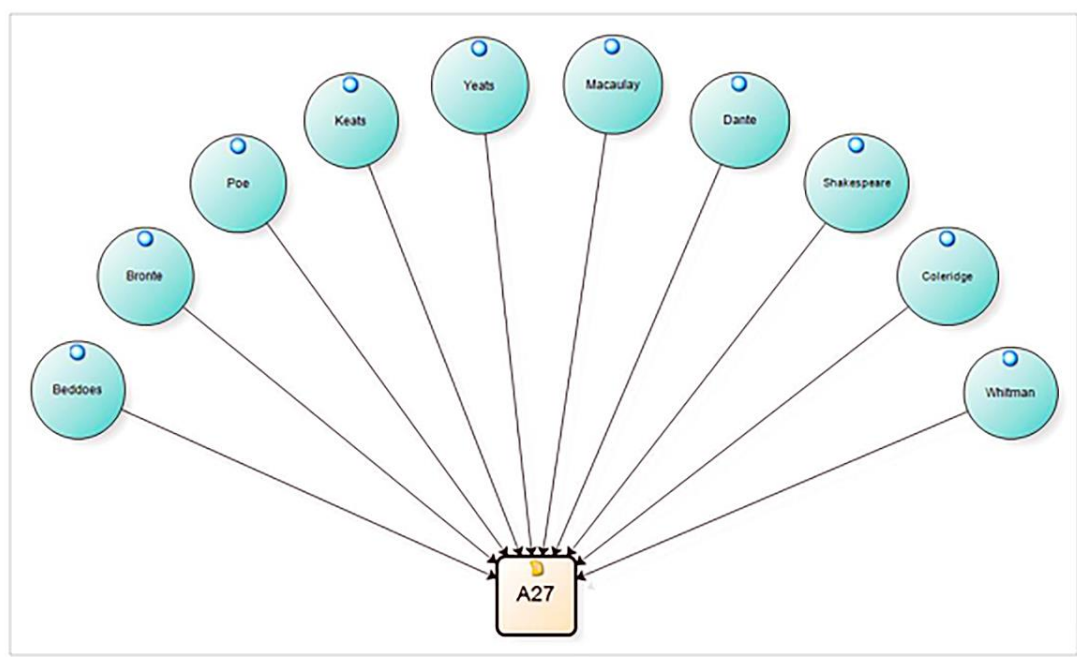

Figure 5: Poet A27, born 1933: 'Imagined' relationships

Equally significant to our consideration of isolation vs community is the extent to which the poets in our study are connected with other living poets: their contemporaries and their peers (see Figure 6 below). No poet in the category of internationally or regionally renowned described her or himself as a loner, solitary, alone or having no other poet in their lives: such isolation was only reported by poets in the local and emerging category. And, interestingly, no internationally renowned poet is a recent member of a writing group, though many of them either were members of such a group, or have a longterm relationship with a group. A number of poets in this category commented that regular attendance at a group is something they simply no longer need: a UK-based poet said, for example, 'I think it reaches a point where, you know, you've learned as much as you are going to learn' from a group; while a US-based poet who used to seek confirmation or clarification of her work, some years ago, now says, 'I tend to feel that even when I don't know what I'm doing, the guidance is going to come from the inside at this point in my life rather from that' ('that' being a writing group or other mentoring relationship). This is not to say that poets in this category work in isolation: typically they show drafts to one or a handful of longterm trusted friends and colleagues. A senior Canadian poet says this is because of 'That feeling you're so thrown into your work, you can't locate it; you don't know where the hell you are'; and a US poet acknowledges, 'I never consider a poem done until a friend has seen it and put that extra glare of light on it'. These

examples do not point to teaching, or mentoring relationships, and nor are they about being affirmed; rather, they are about engaging in relationships of professional trust. And these tend to be relationships that are sustained attachments to a few writing friends, other makers of poetry who, they report, have provided mutual support, and galvanised each other's practice over the course of many years. 'Poets need each other', says one of the US poets; 'Writing is solitary. Poets understand each other.'
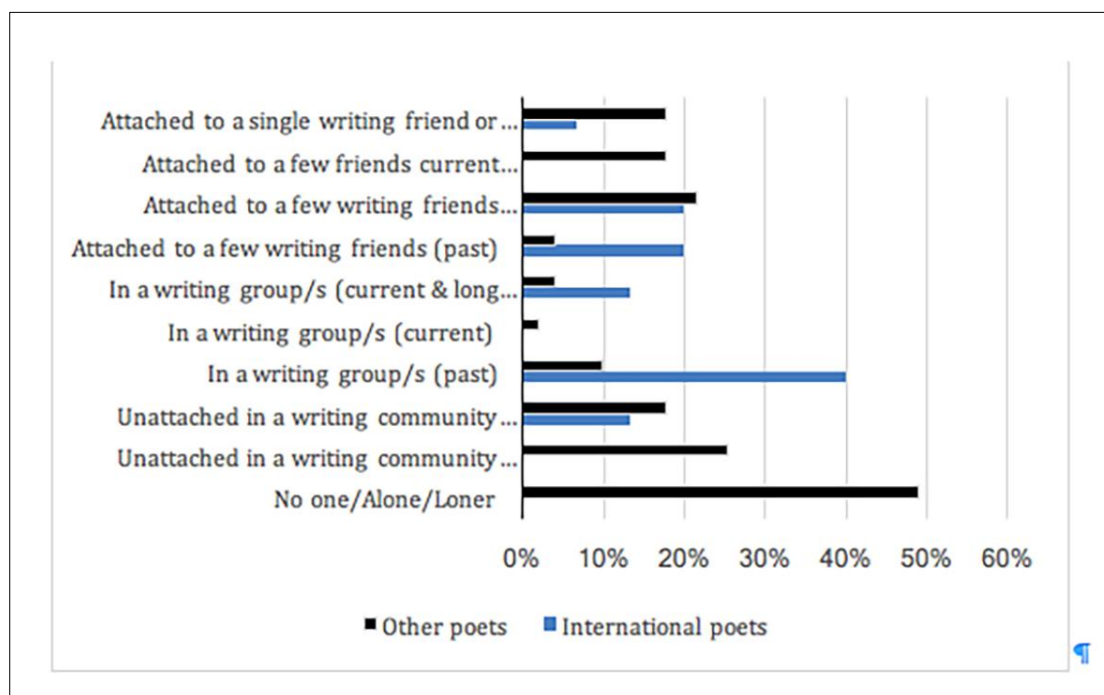

Figure 6: Comparison of categories by status of source

This supports Collins' thesis that notable members of a creative community are not organisational isolates. They are members of elder / initiate chains, and also members of circles of contemporary poets. To achieve 'success' in the field—if by success we count the achievement of external recognition along with the affirmation of publication by esteemed publishing houses—it is important not only to know other people, but also to know and be connected with other high profile individuals. It is also important to have, and be able to demonstrate, elder / initiate relationships running in both directions; into the past and into the future. This comprises a form of social and cultural capital that is as much inherited as it is earned. And, finally, what this suggests is that the conditions for creative excellence are characterised not by the possession of individual genius, but by effective nurturing, and use, of the chains of connection available to members within a community. 'It is the chain itself, and the social conditions that make it possible', writes Collins, 'that elevates particular individuals into the status of the creative geniuses that we separate out for special treatment in our intellectual histories' (1989: 120).

Conclusion

Let us finish by returning to TS Eliot and Ezra Pound, collaborators who were not co-authors but who, like the internationally renowned poets of our study, relied on one

another to interrupt the snowblindness of the writer with that 'extra glare' of the other's vision. Jack Stillinger, writing about the question of the 'solitary genius', discusses the Eliot / Pound relationship in his attempt to build understandings of what he calls 'multiple authorship': work that is the product of social interactions, inter-relationships, joint practice, composite activities, and/or intertextuality. He writes, 'In the case of *The Waste Land,* it took one poetic genius to create those 434 lines in the first place, and another to get rid of the several hundred inferior lines surrounding and obscuring them' (Stillinger 1991: 128). That the work is attributed solely to Eliot, and that the actual joint production in this and other works is typically ignored is, he suggests, primarily because the contemporary market requires it to be ignored. But the market does not alter the workings of the field, or the structures, factors and relationships that provide the affordances for genuinely creative development. Though the narrative of isolated genius continues to hold sway in some scholarly and practice circles, the evidence of social roles and performances offers, we suggest, a more powerful and more convincing account. Because, after all, 'however abstract they seem structures of human community shape the world of the living' (Kelen 2009: 13).

Endnotes

[1] Virginia Woolf's desire for isolation is as much tied to the difficulty she perceived women faced in trying to achieve their own identity, their own ambition, as to a view of an association between isolation and genius.

[2] This often-quoted line comes from an entry in her journal, and is part of her reflections on the end of a relationship, so it is more likely to be self-consolatory than genuine insights into what is required in order to write. Still, she returned often in her writings to the problem of the contradictory forces, for a writer, between isolation and community: for example, 'loneliness is painful. But when I move into the world it feels like a moral fall' (2012: 277).

[3] Evident in many of William Wordsworth's poems, and exemplified in his 1798 lyric 'Daffodils' or 'I wandered lonely as a cloud'. Thoreau wrote: 'in my solitude I have woven for myself a silken web or chrysalis, and, nymph-like, shall ere long burst forth a more perfect creature, fitted for a higher society' (1961: 173).

[4] Much the same point is found in the literature of the creative industries, which points to the centrality of networks rather than individuals. See, for e.g., Garnham 2000; Caves 2000; Hesmondhalgh 2008.

[5] Australia, Canada, England, Ireland, New Zealand, Scotland, Singapore, South Africa, United States of America.

[6] The collaboration website, with blog entries, links to audio material and images, and to individual poetry elements, is available at http://www.theroadnorth.co.uk/

[7] While some traditional and established poets occupy the areas of high consecration, and more popular or community-specific modes—bush poetry, rhyming or sentimental verse, or comic verse—may have a presence at the heteronomous (or commercial) pole, poetry is typically located in the autonomous (art for art's sake) area of the field.

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