

Collaboration is a fighting word in the humanities

Dear Mark,

On Friday May 9, I read this short paper (a love letter to collaboration really) at [The Humanities and Changing Conceptions of Work conference](#), the culminating event to mark three years of Mellon Foundation support for research on the humanities and work at the [University of California Humanities Research Institute](#). I was on a panel chaired by [David Theo Goldberg](#) that also featured [Tobias Warner](#) from UC Davis and [Irena Polic](#), Associate Director of the humanities institute at UC Santa Cruz.

Collaboration is a fighting word in the humanities. It sparks arguments concerning our work; concerning what makes us different from and similar to scientists and social scientists; concerning what “the humanities” contributes to the university, including our ability to “resist” whatever we take to be the dominant. And yet collaboration is neither new to humanists nor all that unusual. Even great and solitary geniuses rely upon librarians, editors, publishers, and, of course, other scholars. While such collaborators often show up in acknowledgements, we habitually exclude them from the humanist author-function. So long as this is the case, collaboration will continue to surprise and threaten us.

For those of us who like surprises, collaborative research is as challenging to get started as it is to sustain. This is one lesson of the research/working group I convened at UCHRI last fall.

The group’s structure encouraged examination of the

relationship between single authored scholarship and more collaborative endeavor. All of us used UCHRI funding to pursue our own projects—which ranged from administrative tasks to dissertation writing to book publication. Concurrently, we researched and wrote together about humanities labor. There was a good deal of experience with collaboration in the group. One of us had done union organizing, another had been in the tech industry, a third was in a dean's office, and so forth. We produced many words about humanities labor, using the platforms on which collaboration in our fields now typically relies (Google Drive and Plus, Zotero, Scalar and WordPress). Much of our writing was single authored, however, and assembling it after the fact is an ongoing work in progress. We will be left with what amounts to an edited anthology, a form of collaborative effort that leaves largely untouched the notion of the humanist as solo practitioner.

In short, we never began collaborating in a manner that one would avow as such. It proved impossible for us to privilege our collective work over the exigencies of existing commitments to projects of individual scholarship and career development. We were too well situated in institutional practices that required us to behave as individual actors to imagine what it might mean for this group to take on a professional life of its own. We were too good at critiquing the contemporary currency of collaboration—as an imposition derived from big science, as neoliberal administrative strategy, as import from Silicon Valley—to truly experiment with it.

It was disheartening to discover midway through the fall that the very first UCHRI residential group in 1988 faced comparable challenges. Its members convened to answer the question, "How Does Collaborative Research Work in the Humanities?" Then as now, "the call for collaboration" appeared "an adaptive response by humanists to a...changing cultural environment," in the words of the 1988 convener,

Riverside philosopher Bernd Magnus. The environment today is different in many respects. In 1988, threats came from "Bennett, Bloom, and Cheney," as Magnus put it, where today humanists feel pressure from STEM and MOOCs and corporate-style administration. The way collaboration figures is comparable, however. It is still seen as a defensive move, a reaction to strange external forces impinging on tradition.

Yet collaboration also entails an abiding sense of novelty and excitement. In December, our group interviewed one of the youngest members of the 1988 UCHRI research project, Eduardo Cadava, who is now Professor of English and Master of Wilson College at Princeton University. Describing his own experiences collaborating led Cadava to pronounce: "Collaboration is a means of being unsettled." Although he argued that there is more room for such interruption in the contemporary academy than in '88, Cadava observed a kind of institutional schizophrenia that complicates thinking about collaboration "as self-reflexively as we might." Departments and disciplines demand that we see ourselves as solo authors, such that our relative merits may be judged. Our institutions assist us in reproducing this vision, and thereby help to pull us apart. These same institutions also push us towards collaboration, however, through centers and institutes as well as through grant programs that favor interdisciplinary projects.

The history of this institutional tendency, which simultaneously fosters and thwarts humanist collaboration, is the focus of the nominally "solo" work that brought me to UCHRI in the first place: a co-authored project with University of South Carolina film scholar Mark Garrett Cooper. In telling the story of the university as a mass media institution, we have chronicled a longstanding dynamic involving problem-solving teams of humanists (who come together to ask questions and conduct research) and organizational entities such as departments and disciplines

(which exist to manage problems, to reproduce them in a way that makes clear the department's continued need to exist). We enjoy Science and Technology Studies scholar Mario Biagioli's evocation of a research model developing recently in science that organizes "practitioners around problems, not disciplines, in clusters that may be too short-lived to be institutionalized into departments or programs or to be given lasting disciplinary labels" (819). Humanists do this too, and particularly around projects related to mass media—think of the Bloomsbury Group, the Frankfurt School, and the Rockefeller Communications Seminar. But the sciences seem well ahead in carving out institutional spaces for reproducing their experiments. They do so through the academic unit called the lab, which "couples" graduate training with faculty research, Biagioli observes, leaving scientists not only with "more time to engage in collaborations" but also with a venue for mobilizing resources, including students, for research.

Humanists do not need labs to do collaborative work, of course (although some humanists enjoy them). And they may refer to the labs they need as "archives" or "libraries." Regardless, Mark and I appreciate how the thought of the lab spurs us to imagine alternatives to our current arrangements, potentially allowing us to steer more deftly between the Scylla of defensive ghettoization and the Charybdis of overloaded service commitment to interdisciplinary programs and centers. It is not the only such model: UCHRI has also experimented with the notion of "the studio," bringing together scholars and journalists to work on projects concerned with Religions in Diaspora. I got to witness these studios in action when they came together for a few days last fall. It was impossible to miss the variation in what counted as a studio project (making a film, running a web site, designing a curriculum), in studio structure (some had one PI, others more diffused authority), and in the audience the studios purported to address (UC students, documentary film goers, on-line consumers of news and commentary).

Labs and studios are potential sites for collaboration, not panaceas. At Davis, I am part of a lab whose members from the humanities, social sciences, and sciences work on video games and are currently reckoning with the limits of grant-funded research. Soft money interrupted our solo work in interesting ways and has helped us start, if not yet finish a number of projects. Even when we can secure it, however, such support comes at considerable labor cost—a lot of us now spend more time writing grants than conducting research. Money in the humanities and social sciences has historically flowed more via student credit hours than grants, which is part of why we have become convinced that we need a pedagogical experiment to complement our research experiments. Whether the lab can function in this respect is not yet clear, but we know that whatever curriculum we establish will need to radically supplement a departmental structure that tends to be inflexible in its relation to discipline. In contrast to the department, with its obligations of tenure, we want the lab to be a place that diverse researchers can be a part of so long as it interests them. Addressing this institutional challenge is, for us, inseparable from coming up with research projects in the first place.

“The Collaborator” can appear as much villain as hero. No one wants to be accused of being the kind of humanist who just goes with the flow, thus abandoning the critical alterity we so often celebrate. Here especially, we need to reconsider our habits, because they are keeping us from identifying potentially interesting allies. Humanities PhD programs have long graduated students who go on to work in institutions far beyond university walls, for instance. Closer to home, the presence of PhD holders who administer and conduct research at humanities centers, in university libraries, and in labs begs us to reconsider the hyperbolic opposition between administration and faculty.

The difficulty humanists have reimagining research practices

not only limits how we act in the university but also makes it more difficult to understand what our university labor can do. If we have tended to think of what makes humanities research cutting edge primarily in terms of its content, there are increasing incentives to emphasize its form. More forcefully, I have become convinced by my experiences at UCHRI, with Mark Cooper, and with the Davis lab that our present moment demands attention to the organization of humanist labor above all else. If we are unwilling to experiment more aggressively with the ways we conduct and disseminate our research, we should anticipate increasingly lonely intellectual lives.