



Dickinson

<http://www.gendersexualityitaly.com>

**g/s/i** is an annual peer-reviewed journal which publishes research on gendered identities and the ways they intersect with and produce Italian politics, culture, and society by way of a variety of cultural productions, discourses, and practices spanning historical, social, and geopolitical boundaries.

**Title:** Collective Writing Projects as Sustainable Ecologies of Collaboration

**Journal Issue:** gender/sexuality/italy, 7 (2020)

**Author:** Paolo Saporito

**Publication date:** February 2021

**Publication info:** gender/sexuality/italy, “Invited Perspectives”

**Permalink:** <https://www.gendersexualityitaly.com/9-collective-writing-projects>

**Author Bio:** Paolo Saporito holds a PhD in Italian Studies from McGill University. His research brings post-humanist and ecocentric approaches to bear on contemporary Italian literature, cinema, and transmedia forms of cultural activism. His recent contributions to these fields include the article “#Renziscappa: the Transmedia Story of a Hashtag between Online and Offline Activism,” forthcoming in *Italian Culture*, and the essay “New Materialism, Female Bodies and Ethics in Antonioni’s *L’avventura*, *La notte* and *L’eclisse*,” published in the collection *Posthumanism in Italian Literature and Film: Boundaries and Identity*.

**Abstract:** What does it mean to engage in collaborative practices? How do these practices ensure the sustainable management of diversity we need in order to counter contemporary forms of discrimination? This paper reflects on these issues and proposes answers to these questions by analysing two case studies: the Italian writing collectives Wu Ming and Joana Karda. The two groups enact collaborative practices that deconstruct conceptual dualisms (i.e. subject/object; self/other) and question hyper-individualised conceptions of subjectivity characterising contemporary neoliberal society. While Joana Karda’s members ground these practices in the availability to yield (“rinunciare”) one’s views and welcoming others, Wu Ming focus on the intensification of their internal diversity and the creation of complex, inclusive solutions able to express the views of all the members. The two case studies ultimately reveal that there are no pre-packaged instructions for the smooth functioning of collaborative practices. These practices and their ethical, social and political potential must be constantly co-sought, co-experimented and co-engendered through a tireless and situated engagement.

**Keywords:** collaborative practices, collective writing, subjectivity, Wu Ming, Joana Karda

### Copyright Information

**g/s/i** is published online and is an open-access journal. All content, including multimedia files, is freely available without charge to the user or his/her institution and is published according to the Creative Commons License, which does not allow commercial use of published work or its manipulation in derivative forms. Content can be downloaded and cited as specified by the author/s. **However, the Editorial Board recommends providing the link to the article (not sharing the PDF) so that the author/s can receive credit for each access to his/her work, which is only published online.**



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/)

## Collective Writing Projects as Sustainable Ecologies of Collaboration

PAOLO SAPORITO

### *Introduction: An Ordinary and Delightful Day in the Consumerist's Life*

In December 2018, as the Consumerist usually does when they travel back to Italy for Christmas, they stepped in their favourite bookstore in Milan and looked for reads that they were craving. Cheap furniture, scratched walls with posters and tags hanging all around, they felt good holding in their hands a copy of *Schischok* (2018), the first book published by Joana Karda, “il primo collettivo in Italia di scrittura meticcica femminile” as the group’s blog states.<sup>1</sup> Impatient to experience the same feeling again, the Consumerist grabbed a curious volume featuring a spaceship in the shape of a communist hammer and sickle on the cover: *Proletkult* (2018). It was written by Wu Ming, the most prolific and long-lasting Italian “band” of writers, performers, activists and bloggers—to name just a few of the labels one may use to define its versatile components. The Consumerist felt good at taking the books, envisioning them as theirs, walking to the cashier and acquiring agency through an economic transaction. The Consumerist left the bookstore ready for sailing towards new lands with their imagination. Somehow, they knew, perhaps unconsciously, that the name of one of the two authors was contributing to that combined feeling. Joana Karda is indeed a character in José Saramago’s novel *A jangada de pedra / The Stone Raft* (1986), where the Iberian Peninsula is imagined to cut off its ties with the Eurasian continent and explore all alone the infinity of the Atlantic Ocean. The association sounded easy and immediate to the Consumerist. They did not think that what sounded as the product of their innermost soul was actually the construction of the encounter between their body, knowledge and the hyper-individualised, competition-based economic system in which the Consumerist was born. The Consumerist could not see how the sensation of empowerment and personal growth sparked by the purchase, sensation that neoliberal society has inculcated in consumerists since the 1980s, contributed to the imaginary equivalence between their feelings and the story of the island. The purchase ultimately inspired the Consumerist’s ideas of freedom and complete autonomy associated with the island and mediated their relation to Joana Karda and Wu Ming, two monads whose creative work the Consumerist once and for all fully owned. The Consumerist’s western background, a dangerous mix of neoliberalism “in salsa italiana” and humanist ideals, was shaping their gaze and the only things they could see were dualisms: subject/object; owner/owned; self/other.

### *Questioning Humanist Dualisms Through Collective Writing Projects: Joana Karda and Wu Ming*

And yet a radically alternative set of ideas and practices was there in the Consumerist’s hands. Waiting for the next metro, the Consumerist opened Wu Ming’s book and almost fainted. Right under the copy-right symbol defending the principle of private property, and therefore the economic agency of any owners or consumerists on this planet, a statement by the collective author was nullifying it: “si consente la riproduzione parziale o totale dell’opera a uso personale dei lettori e la sua diffusione per via telematica, purché non a scopi commerciali e a condizione che a questa dicitura sia riprodotta.” The Consumerist panicked and thought that the confusion between copy-right and the right to copy was a prankster’s fault. Yet, looking again at the statement, the Consumerist realised that what was holding in their hands was not a joke. The statement allowed them to copy, re-write and share the text

---

<sup>1</sup> See <https://joanakardacollettivo.blogspot.com/>.

as they wished, potentially transforming the act of ownership and consumption into one of collaborative creation that was not to be privatized or commercially exploited. Suddenly the Consumerist thought that, although they were the owner of that object made of paper and ink, the text contained within it was a much more fluid entity that nobody could actually fully own. Frightened by the weakness of the feeling of empowerment sparked by the purchase, the Consumerist could not entirely see the alternative conception of the individual, culture and society embedded in Wu Ming's copy-left policies or the history of how *Schischok* was written and Joana Karda came to life. The book is the result of a writing laboratory in which the members of the collective met for the first time and were asked to write together. The laboratory was organised by Eks&Tra, a Bolognese cultural association and the University of Bologna, and conducted by Wu Ming 2, one of Wu Ming's members. The lab was one of many Wu Ming's experiments in organizing collective writing projects whose aim is to promote collaborative practices of creation.<sup>2</sup> The 2012 lab *Intrecci* included only participants with a multi-cultural background, foreign origins or family ties with nationals of different countries. The lab, therefore, programmatically tackled the racist rhetoric raging all across Italy by enacting productive, enriching and positive forms of cooperation between different cultures and national identities through writing.

Wu Ming's engagement in collective projects and the genealogy of Joana Karda constitute significant case studies for understanding how collaborative practices question established concepts (i.e. author, subject, object), deconstruct the dualisms affecting the Consumerist's gaze and constitute an invaluable training in an affirmative conception of difference. First of all, writing collectives programmatically problematize the singular, individual notions of authorship as we and copy-right laws commonly phrase it. These bands reveal that, what we call text (i.e. the object), is all but the result of a collective process of production enacted by an assemblage of multiple actors. The text *is* indeed this process, rather than a mere product, while the author is never alone in the act of writing, all the more today. The act is the result of a complex interplay of agencies, human and nonhuman, affective and material, creative and technological, which not only co-determine the text but even shape the author's subjectivity, meaning their capacity to affect and be affected within specific sets of relations.<sup>3</sup> As I have argued elsewhere, Wu Ming is a paradigmatic example of an authorial subjectivity whose agency is distributed across a network of online platforms, (e-)books and offline initiatives.<sup>4</sup> A humanist interpretation of their subjectivity would maintain that Wu Ming is a rational human subject at the centre and in full control of this network, a subject that exploits its object and masters it thanks to its rational faculty and despite the burden represented by its body, passions and affect. However, this interpretation delivers a distorted account of subjectivity that has been historically exploited to justify white supremacies, colonialist operations and never-ending forms of discrimination against racial, gender and class minorities. In Maurizio Lazzarato's reading of Félix Guattari's philosophy, subjectivity is not equivalent to a once-and-for-all identified subject, but rather a process of production.<sup>5</sup> The production of subjectivity is an ongoing sequence of responses and acts of self-

---

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, the first book published by the collective (*Asce di guerra*, 2000) written in collaboration with Vitaliano Ravagli. Wu Ming's members also collaborated with external authors in several collective writing projects: *Ti chiamerò Russell* (2002), *La ballata del Corazzata* (2003), *Il sorriso del presidente* (2004), *La Potenza di Eymereich* (2004), *La prima volta che ho visto i fascisti* (2005), *Tifiamo asteroide* (2013), *Tifiamo Scaramouche* (2014). Some of Wu Ming's writing lab projects published collections like *GODImenti* (2014), *Meccanoscritto* (2017) and, in collaboration with the association Eks&Tra, *Intrecci* (2012), *Un passo dopo* (2014), *Mari & Muri* (2015) and *Dall'altra parte del mare* (2018).

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of the multiplicity of agencies participating in the writing act, see Hayles, *Writing Machines*, 23-4, while you will find a detailed definition of subjectivity in Guattari, *Chaosmosis*, 9.

<sup>4</sup> Saporito, "Wu Ming." For more details, see also the "About" page of their blog: <https://www.wumingfoundation.com/giap/che-cose-la-wu-ming-foundation/>.

<sup>5</sup> Lazzarato, *Signs and Machines*.

positioning that each “subject-in-the-making” carries out within their environmental, social and affective ecologies. In other words, subjectivity is in itself a collaborative process of creation where human and nonhuman agencies, as Karen Barad would put it, are constantly entangled and reciprocally determine their agencies.<sup>6</sup> Writing collectives, be it Wu Ming or Joana Karda, engage in practices bringing forth this process and enacting an alternative, collaborative conception of the individual.

While Wu Ming and Joana Karda share a self-aware approach to the potential of collaborative practices, the former with much more experience and a clearer activist attitude than the latter, one must consider their differences. Wu Ming’s members are all Italian, white and male, while Joana Karda’s components are all female and coming from international backgrounds. However, belittling Wu Ming’s potential to bring about change in our conception of subjectivity and praising Joana Karda’s because of these differences would be dull and flawed by the same humanist and essentialist approach their practices criticize. As a vast amount of literature on the concept of performativity demonstrated, one’s gender, identity and subjectivity is enacted by a series of actions that situate our being in and contribute to constructing specific discursive and material ecologies (i.e. sets of relations).<sup>7</sup> These performances may collide with the status quo (i.e. a patriarchal society) or rather fight for a more sustainable management of diversity in different contexts. Joana Karda’s own experience in the lab results problematic from this point of view. Answering a question of Wu Ming 2 in an interview at the 2018 Lunatico Festival, Joana Karda revealed that one of the components of the group initially was not willing to give up her views and instead strenuously held her subjective perspective, therefore reinstating an individualist approach and hindering the cooperation.<sup>8</sup> This component did not conceive of the group’s performance as a complex “ecological field whose intensive and defining relationality is internal as much as it is directed toward the norms it may challenge,” but rather as the manifestation of singular, immutable identities corresponding to unbreakable dualisms and separations.<sup>9</sup> The alternative management of alterity associated with collaborative practices does not simply lie in belonging to a minority, but rather in the performance of complex, beside ecologies. These ecologies dismantle hierarchies and the separation of the almighty self from the inferior other, therefore tackling conceptions of relationality responsible for Eurocentric and patriarchal approaches. Although, opening one’s individuality to a sustainable management of diversity is definitely not easy and, in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s words, “does not... depend on a fantasy of metonymically egalitarian or even pacific relations.”<sup>10</sup> In order to do so we must *stay with the trouble*, as Donna Haraway would put it, and deal with the conflict between our singular standpoints.<sup>11</sup> In all their collective endeavours, Wu Ming’s strategy and goal is to find what they call “una mediazione al rialzo”—a unanimous agreement that must not be a conciliatory compromise—but, rather, the product of their creative leap that resolves the arguments at a higher level.<sup>12</sup> For this process to happen, differences and extremisms are fundamental. They oblige the group to negotiate and mediate the conflict between different perspectives and find, as in a band, a higher result than the sum of its parts.<sup>13</sup> As Wu Ming 1 explains in an interview for the blog *20lines*:

---

<sup>6</sup> Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*.

<sup>7</sup> See, for instance, Butler, *Gender Trouble*, *Bodies That Matter*, and *Excitable Speech*; Sedgwick *Touching Feeling* and Barad “Posthumanist Performativity.”

<sup>8</sup> The video of the interview is available on Joana Karda’s Facebook page and it was published on July 21, 2018.

<sup>9</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 9.

<sup>10</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 8.

<sup>11</sup> Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*.

<sup>12</sup> Smargiassi, “Scriviamo in quattro,” 60.

<sup>13</sup> De Pascale, *Wu Ming*, 79.

Bisogna saper leggere il conflitto. Il più delle volte, la divergenza di vedute non è causata da *opposti estremismi*, ma, al contrario, da una mancanza di radicalità: non siamo d'accordo perché non abbiamo osato abbastanza. Se avessimo osato, sicuramente avremmo trovato una soluzione che convince tutto il gruppo .... Il conflitto è un sintomo, e col sintomo bisogna saperci fare.<sup>14</sup>

Difference is therefore the energy boosting Wu Ming members' creativity and their capacity to envision proposals with which they all agree. Difference shall be augmented, rather than contained, and amplified in order to find a solution as radical as required by the singular components of the collective. Wu Ming's "mediazione al rialzo" is therefore the result of a creative, empathetic effort in which each singularity envisions viable paths able to sustain plural and diverse ideas. This emphasis on amplification and radicalization sounds in sharp contrast with Joana Karda's experience. In the aforementioned interview at the Lunatico Festival, one of its members argued that, despite the initial difficulties, the collaborative creation of *Schischok* was an invaluable training in yielding ("rinunciare") one's ideas of what a character, scene or the whole story should look like. Joana Karda's different attitude illuminates a problematic aspect of Wu Ming's approach: the idea of a creative boost indeed recalls the figure of the individual genius whose mind is able to solve the world's problems. Nevertheless, Joana Karda's argument may dangerously lead to the conclusion that collaborative endeavours are conditional upon the limitation of one's singularity.

Let me take a short theoretical detour and see what we can learn from this *conflict*. In Gilles Deleuze's reading of Spinoza, subjectivities thrive by engaging in increasing sets of affective relations.<sup>15</sup> The more these relations are ramified, complex and rhizomatic, the greater the affirmative power (*potentia*) of each subjectivity. However, both Sedgwick and Barad remind us that the complexity of these relations is not infinite and each act of self-positioning in the production of subjectivity enacts a "cut," a selection co-determining the specificity of one's singular being and, consequently, the ecology in which it is.<sup>16</sup> I find this combination of complexity and selection extremely useful for understanding the difference between Joana Karda and Wu Ming's approaches, as the former seems to emphasise the process by which these cuts are created, while the latter the intensification of the complexity characterising each proposal and its role in collective ecologies. By engaging in collaborative practices, each component of Joana Karda does not yield her singularity, but rather the belief of being the carrier of an immutable identity that must be defended from the contamination of others. They give up the need to prevail, impose one's view and see an eventual success in this imposition as a form of personal growth. Yielding here means choosing to grow together, think of one's identity as a performative process that needs others' contributions in order to thrive. In other words, yielding entails acknowledging the finite relationality characterising the collective and making space for one's proposal. This is valued and welcomed in the selected set of relations furthering a specific, situated and collective production of subjectivity. Wu Ming's "mediazione al rialzo" works differently, because the internal complexity of the group's finite ecology is not achieved by simply welcoming one's proposal and yielding others, but rather pushing each member to make his own proposal as complex and inclusive as possible. Wu Ming ensure that this finite space welcomes all members' views by intensifying it, making it denser and more and more internally articulated. Nevertheless, this articulation is far from being the exclusive product of an ethereal genius that illuminates humankind from His ivory tower, as the complexity of one's proposal is however

---

<sup>14</sup> 20lines, "6 domande."

<sup>15</sup> See both Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy* and Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*.

<sup>16</sup> See Sedgwick *Touching Feeling*, 8; and Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 139-40. The latter is also the reference for the concept of "cut" expressed in this passage.

dependant on the ethical availability to acknowledge it as a solution for the whole group. The solution is the result of a collaborative action striving to increase the internal complexity of the group's finite ecology by bounding creative efforts to an open, empathetic attitude. Therefore, Joana Karda and Wu Ming's management of diversity go in different directions that are not identical and need not to be necessarily reconciled. The members of the two collectives build specific relationalities undermining the distinction between self and other by taking two different routes, either by yielding or radicalizing one's proposal. These routes are co-determined by the members' situated positions, bodies, affects and their difference ultimately suggests that there is no pre-established set of instructions for the smooth functioning of collaborative practices.

Furthermore, Wu Ming's labs and Joana Karda's experience meaningfully ground the production of subjectivity in affective, and not exclusively rational or discursive, domains. The *Intrecci* lab steers the process in transcultural directions, valuing diverse cultural backgrounds inscribed in the participants' bodies, feelings and personal life. These bodies do not act as mere supports of the writers' "collective intelligence," but constitute relays of trans-corporeal fluxes that through the participants' affects co-determine the collaborative creations.<sup>17</sup> Other Wu Ming's labs have brought this affective co-creation to bear on projects centred on class struggle and environmental issues. The participants in the lab *Metalmente* (2015) were all factory workers co-reflecting on the meaning of labour and collective mobilization in contemporary individualist society. The lab *Scrittura fluviale* (2017) included a walking trip along the bank of the Adda River and its historical industrial sites. The interaction between the participants' bodies and the environment programmatically grounded their collaborative projects in a material confrontation within (non)human ecologies, widening the horizon of the encounter with others, the ethical potential of these experiences and their cognitive impact on the participants' understanding of alterity.

### *Conclusion: An Island Is Not an Island*

Looking at the pseudonym printed on the cover of *Schischok*, the Consumerist is now wondering whether its relation to Saramago's novel is meant to lead them to an alternative conclusion. Floating all alone in the Atlantic Ocean, the Iberian ex-peninsula perhaps does not really stand for freedom, autonomy and a purported independence, but is perhaps looking for alternative ecologies to the Eurocentric one in which she did not feel really at ease. This new-born island is only apparently a monad: her geological roots go deep down in the ocean and are inter-connected with the crust and magma shaping the entire terrestrial globe. These roots, however, are not established and determined once and for all. Energy keeps flowing through matter. The island's acts of self-positioning in this energetic and materially-grounded network co-determine new relations in which the potential for alternative ecologies is inscribed. It will take time, yet she knows she will find new lands, create new ties and live in more sustainable beside spaces. These spaces will not emerge by themselves, but must be co-envisioned, co-enacted and co-experienced through a constant and tireless engagement in collaborative practices.

---

<sup>17</sup> For the concept of "collective intelligence," see Lévy, *Collective Intelligence*. I am taking the definition of trans-corporeality from Alaimo, "Trans-corporeal Feminism."

*Works Cited*

- 20lines. “6 domande a Wu Ming 1.” *Blog 20lines*. <http://blog.20lin.es/post/55673429067/6-domande-a-wu-ming-1>, 2013. Accessed February 13, 2020.
- Alaimo, Stacy. “Trans-Corporeal Feminism and the Ethical Space of Nature”. In *Material Feminisms*, edited by Stacy Alaimo and Susan J. Hekman, 237-64. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008.
- Barad, Karen. *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007.
- \_\_\_\_\_. “Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter.” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28 (3): 801-31, 2003.
- Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “sex.”* New York: Routledge, 1993.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*. New York: Routledge, 1997.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990.
- De Pascale, Gaia. *Wu Ming: non soltanto una band di scrittori.* Genoa, Il melangolo, 2009.
- Deleuze, Gilles. *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*. New York: Zone Books, 1990.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987.
- Guattari, Félix. *Chaosmosis: An Ethico-Aesthetic Paradigm*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995.
- Haraway, Donna J. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2016.
- Hayles, Katherine. *Writing Machines*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2002.
- Karda, Joana. *Schischok*. Leonforte: Euno edizioni, 2018.
- Lazzarato, Maurizio. *Signs and Machines: Capitalism and the Production of Subjectivity*. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2014.
- Lévy, Pierre. *Collective Intelligence: Mankind's Emerging World in Cyberspace*. New York: Plenum Trade, 1997.
- Saporito, Paolo. “Wu Ming: Boundaries of Human and Posthuman Collaborations.” In *Interdisciplinary Italy*, May 2, <http://www.interdisciplinaryitaly.org/wu-ming-boundaries-human-posthuman-collaborations/>, 2019. Accessed August 9, 2020.
- Saramago, José. *A jangada de pedra*. Alfragide: Editorial Caminho, 1986.
- Sedgwick, Eve K. *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003.
- Smargiassi, Michele. “Scriviamo in quattro come una band: da *Q* ad *Altai* ecco come sono stati realizzati i romanzi del collettivo di autori.” *la Repubblica*, December 16: 60, 2009.