Composing the Anthology: An Exercise in Patchwriting

by Christopher Leary

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Rebecca Moore Howard defines "patchwriting" as a method of composing in which writers take the words of other authors and patch them together with few or no changes (233).[*] Although associated with plagiarism, it is an extremely useful writing strategy with a very long and noble tradition, and I hope that, by the end of this essay, you will be convinced that the opportunities (great writing) far outweigh the risks (accusations of dishonesty). With that as my goal, I'll start by telling you the story of how I worked through my own fears and uncertainties about plagiarism and patchwriting.

Nowadays, I consider myself to be a frequent practitioner of patchwriting, especially early in my writing process. I also happen to really *enjoy* it—for one thing, it gets me past the stage of staring at a blank white page. Likewise, my students report that (in addition to being frustrating and time-consuming) patchwriting is "fun," "confidence-building," and "extremely interesting." I consider us to be the latest in a long-running line of writers[1] spanning centuries who view this type of work as crucial to their identities as writers.

Patchwriting was a mode I gravitated toward while studying for a degree in English at Long Island University in Brooklyn. Underem-

ployed, single, without the kind of budget that would allow me to really partake in New York's "nightlife," without any cable TV or Internet access, I had, during much of this time, nothing to entertain myself in my bare apartment except for a bookshelf full of books.

During one notable phase of this period, I went one-by-one through each of my books, copying out short sentences until I had three or four pages worth of lines. Since the books were from different countries, times, genres, and personalities, I anticipated a sharp contrast in styles. "If I put tens of sentences from different times and eras and places all on the same page," my thinking went, "I'll be able to witness these eras bumping up against each other and rubbing elbows." In much the same way I find it interesting to view, say, automobiles from different times and places all in the same room.

After copying them into one Microsoft Word document, I started moving the sentences around, hoping to find sentences that *play weirdly* against each other. I was looking for that jarring effect, not expecting the exercise to go any further than that.

But once these lines were in the same document, I found that some were attracted to each other and others repelled. I dragged some over here, and some over there, deleting a lot, pruning a lot. The lines grouped themselves into stanzas, puzzlingly falling into place. For the most part, intuition told me where to move them, how to group them together, and which ones to delete. Much to my surprise, the lines that I had copied from the books in my bookshelf started to take a shape resembling the shape of a poem. And out of the original mess of lines, a scenario or situation—if not a story—started to emerge. (If you are getting visions of Ouija boards, I don't blame you.) I ended up spending a whole month on this project that was really meant to kill time one night.

Here is a small excerpt from the poem. I compiled it from work by Chinua Achebe, Milan Kundera, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, a lost source, and Henry James respectively.

> Then something had given way inside him.
> What about the hero who keeps his mouth shut?
> The intoxication of power began to break apart under the waves
>   of discomfort.
> "I can't help dreaming what I dream," he thought.
> Yet even as he afresh made this out, he felt how strange it all was.

This odd project got stickier when I decided I wanted to submit a few of the "poems" to my school's literary magazine, *Downtown Brooklyn*. I was held back by a concern and a strong feeling of guilt about authorship. I had to really wrestle with the question, "Am I the author of these texts?" When I got to the stage where I wanted to submit them as my own and put my name as the author, something felt very wrong and even dastardly. It didn't strike me as at all appropriate to put my own name as the author because I could not have written them "from scratch," by any means. The phrasings and language outstrip my capabilities.

I felt like a cheater. I worried I'd be accused of plagiarism or academic dishonesty. Ungenerous readers could fairly accuse me of trying to pass myself off as a better writer than I really am by stealing the language of established greats. Worse, my classmates and teachers could dismiss me as a parasite who, being completely unable to write his own poems, leeches off the work of others instead. The Dane Cook of poetry, so to speak.

At the same time, I recognized that, even if I didn't exactly write the things, I did sort of *make* them . . . and that ought to count for something.

My unshakeable moral dilemma propelled me to seek advice from a few knowledgeable poets whom I trust.

Conveniently, I shared a cubicle in the English Department during that time with someone I consider a "real" poet, a friend named Valerie. She's always blunt and I knew she'd give it to me straight. As the submission deadline approached, I found her in our graduate assistant cubicle. She was deep in thought, responding to a pile of work submitted by her undergraduate students. I plunked my shady texts on the top of her pile and peppered her with my doubts.

"Are these poems?" I asked Valerie. "Can I call them mine? Does it seem at all ethical to submit them to *Downtown Brooklyn*?"

She started off by saying that she did not particularly like what I'd shown her. ("That's not what I asked," I replied.) Yet she affirmed, technically speaking, they *are* poems and there was no reason not to submit them. She explained that what I was doing has a name— "found poetry"—and that it is a pretty conventional poetic strategy. She even found an old quote from her notebook and read it aloud: "The spider's web is no whit the better because it spins it from its own

entrails; and my text no whit the worse because, as does the bee, I gather its components from other authors' flowers."

"Case closed," she said, slapping the quotebook shut and returning to her work.

Still, I wanted a second opinion, so I visited a faculty member and resident poet at LIU, Professor Moss, to ask him whether the work could legitimately be called mine and submitted to *Downtown Brooklyn* under my name. He agreed with Valerie that, yes, the poem is not very strong, and that, yes, it is in the tradition of "found poetry." He brought up another term, "the cento": it is a method of constructing poems (or even prose) out of quotations that are displaced and relocated. It's an ancient form that is still used today. One example my professor showed me was written by council members at the Academy of American Poets. They used lines from Charles Wright, Marie Ponsot, Emily Dickinson, Sylvia Plath, and Samuel Beckett, respectively, to compose the following:

> In the Kingdom of the Past, the Brown-Eyed Man is King
> Brute. Spy. I trusted you. Now you reel & brawl.
> After great pain, a formal feeling comes—
> A vulturous boredom pinned me in this tree
> Day after day, I become of less use to myself,
> The hours after you are gone are so leaden.

For a prose version, Professor Moss referred me to the essayist Walter Benjamin. Benjamin created a huge book, entitled *The Arcades Project*, consisting mostly of other people's writing about malls in Paris. Paradoxically, the book is "by" Benjamin, but there is not that much of his own writing in it. It's more like he just selects and arranges the writing of others. Below is a selection from *The Arcades Project*, with Benjamin's writing in bold, and other people's writing in italics:

> **In reference to Hausmann's success with the water supply and the drainage of Paris:** *"The poets would say that Hausmann was more inspired by the divinities below than by the gods above."* **Metro.** *"A great many of the stations have been given absurd names. The worst seems to belong to the one at the corner of the Rue Breguet and the Rue Saint-Sabin, which ultimately joined together, in the abbreviation 'Breguet-Sabin,' the name*

> *of a watchmaker and the name of a saint."* **June Insur-**
> **rection.** *"Most of the prisoners were transferred via the*
> *quarries and subterranean passages which are located*
> *under the forts of Paris and, which are so extensive that*
> *most of half the population of the city could be contained*
> *there. The cold in these underground corridors is so in-*
> *tense that many had to run continually or move their*
> *arms about to keep from freezing, and no one dared lie*
> *down on the cold stones . . . The prisoners gave all the*
> *passages names of Paris streets, and whenever they met*
> *one another, they exchanged addresses."* (89)

Benjamin goes on like this—arranging the quotes of other writers—for around a thousand extraordinary pages.

In the end, after we look at these examples together, and as we wrap up our conversation, Professor Moss encouraged me in the exercises I was doing but pointedly stated: "you must also mine your *own* writing, not just other people's, for language that you like."

I point to my experience drafting and publishing those so-called poems in *Downtown Brooklyn* because it played a pretty big role in my own education in writing and language. One of the things you come to realize as a patchwriter is that the shifting boundaries between writing, editing, and cheating are not problems you need to resolve, but rather opportunities you can exploit.

Anthologizing in the Composition Classroom

One of the most obvious contemporary examples of patchwriting is the anthology. This essay, for example, is part of an anthology called *Writing Spaces*. The editors, Charles Lowe and Pavel Zemliansky, didn't write the book, but they played a huge role in its construction. In fact, if you have ever made a portfolio of your work, then you already pretty much understand anthologizing. The only difference is that anthologies are collections mostly of *other* people's writing, instead of your own. And it turns out that many of the goals of portfolio work equally apply to anthologizing in the classroom:

- Anthologizing and portfolio creation require you to move large chunks of texts around in relation to each other, almost as if you were rearranging a bookshelf.

- These practices help you to realize that texts, no matter the size, derive their meaning from the relationships of the parts that make it up.
- Each is an exercise in coherence. As Alan Schrift mentions, "For an anthology to work, the pieces must hang together, they must build on each other and if not articulate a thesis, at least give voice to several related theses" (192).
- In both portfolios and anthologies, you can inflect the pieces by placing them in different contexts, and you will begin to understand "how ideas fluctuate in specific types of spaces and contexts" (Rice 131).
- The anthologist and the portfolio manager have to manage what Ann Moss calls a "peculiar property": their "inherent capacity to balance unity and multiplicity" (430).

As convincing as this list might be to me, students don't always immediately warm to patchwriting as a brand of composition. For example, on the first day of class last year, during a break, Lorraina caught up with me in the hallway. "I am probably going to switch to a different section," she said. Drops are normal, I thought to myself, but not necessarily after the first hour of the first class.

"Are you concerned about the amount of work?" I said.

"Not the amount so much . . . more the type of work. I don't see how this so-called anthologizing is going to help me. We're going to be editing other people's work and writing introductory prefaces but none of that is what I need to do in my job."

"What is your job?"

"I work 9 to 5 all week for an insurance company, writing letters to customers," she said. "I want to get better at that, and I don't see how this type of work is going to help me."

Another student, Lisa, was on the brink of quitting as well. She was listening in on the hallway conversation, but, unlike Lorraina, decided to stick around. Months later, as the semester was finishing up, Lisa told me, "I thought I was going to drop this class after day one. I wanted to run when I heard about the anthologizing." She added, "But I'm glad I didn't."

Not to say there wouldn't be a lot more drops by other students throughout this particular semester. I can't say whether it was students fleeing from the odd Sunday morning hours, the pockets of swine

flu that kept flaring up in our region of Queens, or the challenging coursework. Many students, I realized more and more as the semester progresses, plainly didn't have time to do all of the work that I asked them to do. They had full-time jobs, families to take care of, and a heavy course load of other classes. And, quite frankly, successful patchwriting requires a ton of reading.

What Is Reading Like for an Anthologist?

Creating an anthology with twenty-five texts in it doesn't mean you only have to read twenty-five texts. It's like photography—if a magazine photographer knows she is going to publish around ten photos in next month's issue, she won't take only ten photographs when she gets out in the field. A filmmaker creating a two-hour movie would be unwise to shoot only two hours of footage. As far as visual art goes, Winston Smith says, in an interview with SF Live, that for each collage that he composes, "I go through literally thousands of images looking for ones that are the right size and position for juxtaposing" (Stentz).

The same principle applies to patchwriters. In the midst of editing her anthology on family morality, Gail, a Queensborough Community College student, writes, "I am starting off working on the Internet reading different types of sources. This includes memoirs, court cases, newspaper articles, impact statements from those families affected. I am also working with poems and possibly works of art. After I gather a wide variety of work, I am going to narrow them down to the ones that have the greatest to do with my topic and help to tell my story." You might notice from Gail's writing that anthologists consider a slightly different set of questions than other readers. In other circumstances, when she doesn't have her editing cap on, Gail might read for plot, to see what happens, or to be able to say that she's read it. Or she might read for theme, main ideas, musicality, or pleasure.

However, during the anthologizing process, Gail reads for these reasons and a few others. It doesn't always matter so much what she learns from a piece, nor whether she agrees or disagrees with the author, nor whether she can identify the main points in it. It's more about what she can do with the text, how she can utilize it . . . how she can put it to work. It's a different kind of reading, and anthologists ask different kinds of questions as they make their way through a text, sometimes skimming, sometimes reading more closely. A stu-

dent named Iga writes, "As I read, I am thinking about how one piece might fit with the others in the section. I am also thinking about how it is 'different' from the others (to create variety). Also, I look at the style of writing to make sure it is not just some sloppy work but something worthwhile." Iga's reading is very opportunistic. How, she asks, can I exploit this text that I am reading so that it increases the power and overall richness of my anthology?

While anthologists read, they think very strategically, trying to figure out where in the anthology a piece might go, if it will make it into the anthology at all, and what section or subsection it will go into. Gail puts the matter succinctly, saying that anthologists "view the texts not only on a personal level but also from the point of view of the audience it is intended for."

Unlike Lorraina, the insurance agent who dropped the class, I view the considerable time spent working on patchwriting to be well spent. It is a great experience in an underappreciated kind of composition, a kind that requires "working with information on higher levels of organization, pulling together the efforts of others into a multilayered multireferential whole which is much more than the sum of its parts" (Von Seggern).

However, for all of my confidence (and as much as I would like to convince you to try patchwriting), I'll end by admitting that some questions remain. For example, I think Lorraina was right to question how our anthological work would improve the letters she writes to customers. How would all of this have helped her at her job? The question of scale plays a big role here. Does improvement at one scale of writing (portfolio management) translate into improvement at other scales (letter writing)? Will your spelling improve as you arrange the books in a library? Will your experiments in patchwriting help you to improve your "grammar"?

Discussion

1. What are some other situations where you organize the work of other people?

2. How might you reorganize the table of contents of the Writing Spaces collection that this article is a part of?

Note

[1] For example, the German-Hebrew writer Micha Berdyczewski wrote that compiling religious texts is a "poetic" (Kagan 223) practice that shines "new light" (Kagan 219) on them. This was puzzling to his friends, who viewed compiling the work of others to be a mundane, non-intellectual task. Also, the twenty-first century writer Jerome Rothenburg talks fondly of his textual assembly as "a pulling together of poems & people & ideas about poetry & much else in the words of others and in our own" (Golding). And the sixteenth century essayist and patchwriter Michel Montaigne says of his own work, "I have here only made a nosegay of culled flowers, and have brought nothing of my own but the thread that ties them together."

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