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This special edition of Limina is a selection of papers originally presented at our 7th Annual Conference, held at the University of Western Australia (UWA) on the 7th of June 2012. Four papers were subsequently rewritten and refereed for publication. The conference was organised around the theme of ‘Humanising Collaboration’ and the papers presented truly pushed that notion to its limits. In recent times collaboration has become quite the buzzword, especially in academic circles. As the pressure to publish on individual researchers grows, joint initiatives are catching on, even in hitherto more individual-based disciplines in the Humanities. In this atmosphere we thought it would be interesting to examine the nature and multiple resonances of the term, and the responses to our call for papers spanned a remarkable range of possibilities. Among the notions interrogated were questions like: What is the nature of collaboration? Where is it possible? Is it always ethical? Can university structures be changed to facilitate it? All the papers prompted vibrant discussion that was culturally and historically nuanced while remaining extremely relevant to the current debates about the changing nature of academia and its function in society.

The first panel was entitled ‘Australian Stories’ and dealt with the multiple meaning of the term in a national context. In “Collaboration: When Place Matters”, Robert Hoskin (Australian Catholic University) tracked an expedition in which members of the Mowanjum Aboriginal community in the Kimberley reconnected with their traditional lands in collaboration with non-Indigenous support. Emily Sneath (Griffith University) in her paper, “Indigenous Expressions in The Sunday Times 1900-1910” traced the depiction of certain historical aboriginal figures in the popular press, while in a more contemporary turn, Della Robinson (UWA) examined the nature of collaboration in the manufacture of modern literary celebrity in “Cultural Icons, Novel Forms and Brand New Relations: Exploring Convergence Culture in Australian Literary Celebrity.”

The second panel, ‘Between Texts’, ranged quite spectacularly both in terms of subject, historical location and discipline. Between Charmaine Fernandez's (UWA) exploration of modes of nostalgia evoked in the summer blockbuster, The Avengers, in “‘Déjà New’ in Joss Whedon’s The Avengers” and Tara Morin's (UWA) illuminating study of the nature of the glossed manuscript in “The Medieval Glossed Bible: Collaboration Across the Centuries” the wide range of interpretation possible within the conference's theme could be seen. Gabrielle Everall (UWA) in turn brought attention to the fact that the term collaboration has not always carried positive associations, in her paper, “Is ‘Humanizing Collaboration’ possible between Gertrude Stein and Vichy France.”

In the third panel, ‘ Cultures of Collaboration’, the presenters brought yet another lens to the discussion, the idea of communities building techniques of collaboration amongst themselves, using, being shaped and in turn shaping, multiple models of communication, modes of technology, consumer models and even educational institutions. In ““Cya IRL’*: Researching Digital Communities Online and Offline (*Internet Lingo for ‘See You in Real Life’)” Crystal Abidin (UWA) examined the intensity of collaborative methodologies within and without virtual communities in her examination of commercial blogging in Singapore. Finally in a remarkable example of collaboration on multiple levels, Vanessa Caparas, Lara McKenzie, Kara Salter and Danau Tanu
(UWA) tracked the process of building postgraduate support networks in a modern university structure in “Surviving University, Inc.: Re-humanising the Postgraduate Experience of Neo-liberal Education through Collaboration”.

The conference was also lucky to have its keynote presented by Winthrop Professor Susan Broomhall, who gave a current take on the theme, in “Collaboration is Not a Dirty Word”. Drawing on her own experience with academic collaboration during a productive research career, Professor Broomhall gave a balanced overview of the advantages and pitfalls of academic collaboration. By including not only co-authored papers but also team-based research projects she also broadened the scope of collaboration in the context of university structures, pointing out that everyone in academia must and does engage in collaboration, to greater or lesser extents. The question then is not whether to collaborate but how to collaborate. She went on to analyse the advantages and disadvantages of different kinds of collaboration, its strengths and weaknesses for varied humanities approaches, and its strategic value in career building. Not taking a purely celebratory approach, she also pointed out the pitfalls of collaboration, from technical challenges like different geographical locations (and how technology is making this less of a challenge) to inevitable differences of opinion prompted both by differences in outlook discipline-specific quirks. She concluded with the exhortation that, “Collaboration is no easy path but its challenges are an important part of understanding your particular research endeavour, and its rewards can be rich indeed.”

The papers selected for publication in this special edition of Limina represent some of the perspectives outlined above. Drawing from popular culture studies, anthropology, digital humanities research and literary studies, this collection is a reflection of the diversity encompassed in the theme and we are proud that our call for papers prompted such a range of responses.

Robert Hoskin in “When Place Matters” examines a “site of collaboration” that took place as families from the Mowanjum Aboriginal community in the Kimberley travelled back to their traditional lands in collaboration with non-Indigenous support. The paper examines how different cultural modes of thinking challenge any simple assignation of meaning to concepts like collaboration, and further how relationships built in those modes are inevitably affected by historical conditions and current realities. Hoskin explores how issues of place and hospitality were negotiated in the interaction between the two groups on the expedition, as well as how the different members of the Aboriginal community interfaced with both the land they were attempting to return to, and each other in differing ways reflecting their own unique perspectives. The paper is also a collaboration on a more literal level, with Hoskin having incorporated the perspectives on certain Aboriginal members of the expedition as well, in order to further nuance the modes in which these interchanges can be recorded and represented.

In “Cultural Icons, Novel Forms and Brand New Relations: Exploring Convergence Culture in Australian Literary Celebrity,” Della Robinson delves into the phenomenon of the “literary celebrity”. Her paper examines whether modern consumer and convergence culture has made authors more prone to engage in explicit media performance in order to relate better to contemporary audiences. While the realms of the “popular” and the “literary” have never been completely separate spheres, Robinson points to the increasing unease in literary circles around the perceived hijacking of the “artistic” aesthetic by one that is driven by “entertainment”. The paper explores some of the ideological contestations and current ambivalences surrounding the Australian literary celebrity, and asks: exactly what are the new roles and social functions of celebrity authors? Robinson investigates the development of participatory culture, and the evolution of the mediagenic author as they complicate the narratives that position “literary authorship” and “celebrity culture” as oppositional
forces in the contemporary Australian literary landscape.

Crystal Abidin describes her article, “Cya IRL”*: Researching Digital Communities Online and Offline (*Internet Lingo for ‘See You in Real Life’),” as a “reflexive account of an ethnographer’s foray into digital anthropology, necessitating the formulation of collaborative research strategies.” Abidin has collated data from a year of fieldwork among Singaporean blogshop owners and commercial bloggers to provide insight into a remarkable convergence of consumer and collaborative cultures in cyberspace. While the data presented here will be developed further into a doctoral thesis, the main thrust of the article is to outline the definitive features of the community. Abidin defines these as the observance of an ambiguous transference of intimacy, the verbalization of cyber lingo, and the role of online media in face-to-face communication. Medium certainly matters here as Abidin places notions of collaboration in a cyber-cultural context as central to her theorization. This work is especially interesting in light of the possibilities for new research that are opening up in the sphere of digital humanities and sheds light on newer ways of approaching notions of community not bound by face-to-face interaction, as well as redefining the notion of the private and public spheres.

Turning from the realm of cyber-culture to that of the popular, Charmaine Fernandez explores the use of the “nostalgia mode” as defined by Jameson in her article “‘Déjà New’ in Joss Whedon’s The Avengers.” Fernandez argues that the “current cultural context is characterised by an unrelenting onslaught of post-industrial practices. These include, naming but a few, the penetration of media and advertising, rapid cycles of consumption, the decentralising effects of urbanisation and technological advancements in transport. According to Jameson, these disorienting and inexorable practices have since produced a series of ‘perpetual presents’ that enforce historical amnesia. The postmodern subject is unable to adequately represent the present and takes refuge in the production of cultural products in ‘the nostalgia mode’.” The article further identifies the outcome on this to be the experience of anxiety, both personal and collective. Taking Marvel’s The Avengers as its main text, the article reads the film as a therapeutic intervention that attempts to contain this traumatic loss of time and history by staging a superheroic collaboration. Each hero is further seen as symbolising a fragment of a longed-for cultural past. Fernandez’s contention is that while the movie attempts to produce a pastiche with the aim of amalgamating these fragments of history into a coherent whole, this fantasy is ultimately denied. Instead, it is argued that in its portrayal of the team’s conflictual dynamics and the collateral damage caused by the superheroic collaboration, the film ironically performs nostalgia’s palliative function through the innovative subversion of ‘the nostalgia mode’.

The four papers together form a kind of collaboration between markedly different disciplines, methodologies and focuses to illuminate the many issues raised by the central theme of the conference. Throughout the day the common thread that seemed to be continually focussed upon was both the assertion that collaboration is already a feature of our lives, whether academic, in cyberspace or within our own disciplines and also an awareness of how charged the term is at the same time, potentially also setting up exclusionary and harmful consequences. Professor Broomhall’s keynote also echoed the same themes, welcoming new formulations and technologies facilitating collaboration, be it across postgraduate or other communities, or in terms of research initiatives, but driven by a strong sense of the self, of ethics and of building more inclusive and flexible institutions to facilitate its finest aspects.