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Collaboration and Creativity in Southern California: An Offering

Gizem Karaali and Ami Radunskaya, Pomona College

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In a cocoa shop
Is'lated fingerpainter
Sand her medium

Urban: deficient
Deplorable monotone
Infinite in space

Mistletoe matrix
Passionate kernel of truth
Closed and yet open

Imposter comes in
Chaotic transformation
Null identity

Invertible love
Bifurcation of the heart
Asking math or art?¹

WiMSoCal (Women in Math in Southern California) is a regional conference in its ninth incarnation. The conference is the result of the efforts of Professor Cymra Haskell (USC) to create a supportive local community for women mathematicians. At our first meeting in 2007, a confluence of Ami's EDGE regional cluster and Cymra's WISE group at USC, we socialized, got to know each other and brainstormed about what we, as a group, would like to see happen. It was clear that our younger colleagues wanted to meet as mathematicians, sharing intellectual ideas as well as anecdotes from the trenches.

The first WiMSoCal Symposium took place in April, 2009 at Loyola Marymount University, with 51 participants. Alissa Crans (LMU) was the local host, and she has continued to help organize future events. Since then, it has been hosted

¹ Ashley Simons, Anton Varvak, Fei Xie, Gizem Karaali, at WiMSoCal2015



Creative Collaboration

at USC, Pomona College, UC San Diego and UC Riverside (see <http://www.pomona.edu/events/wimsocal-2015> for schedules and abstracts of past symposia). The most recent symposium had over 120 registrants, including undergraduates, graduate students, mathematicians from industry, and women teaching mathematics at a range of institutions. There is a positive energy at these one-day conferences, and participants enjoy networking, talking about mathematics and current issues, and getting feedback and new ideas for future projects.

One great thing about running a grass-roots conference like this is the flexibility that it allows. Every year, we ask for feedback from participants, and we take what they say to heart. The main focus of the symposium is to promote and support women mathematicians at all stages of their careers. Research talks are standard fare, but how can we build community in a short time period? We have had career panels, breakout sessions that allow people to meet others in their field, provocative prompts to promote discussion, hikes around campus, wine and cheese socials, and

collaborative problem solving. A key ingredient to the success of WiMSoCal is a conscious effort to vertically integrate the participants: undergraduates should meet graduate students and postdocs, new PhDs should connect with senior women. In this note, we will describe our latest effort: collaborative creativity.

Infinite space calls
Lexicographic surveys;
A ring of planets.

Mentor speaking some
Jargon driving heroes mad
Juicy sandy dreams.

In every gathering where most participants do not know most of the others, the organizers resort to various warmup-and-mingle activities. Get in small groups and tell each other your name, the eye color of your first-grade crush, the most outrageous dish you have ever consumed, etc. Even if one is excited to meet new people, after a while, these kinds of things get a bit tiresome. To keep things fresh or relevant, organizers tend to up the stakes by asking more and more ridiculous questions: the first person you punched, your favorite way to reduce your carbon footprint, the thirteenth prime number you can think of, etc. At the WiMSoCal 2015 meeting, we decided to do something totally different.

Since 2011, Gizem Karaali, through her work with the *Journal of Humanistic Mathematics*, has been organizing poetry readings at the Joint Mathematics Meetings. She finds the notion of mathematical poetry an exciting braid woven out of three seemingly remote strands: mathematics, poetry, and fun. Those of us who are into at least one of the two former strands will know that the third is often a part



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of the team, but even those who like all three do not readily view the full trio as a cohesive group. And yet mathematical poetry offers a lot to those who might be willing to venture into it: pure playful fun, emotional release, intellectual challenge.

After the morning talks right before lunch, there was a mingling session (“Active Socializing with Coffee” according to the program). The next time slot was designated in the program as “Breakout Sessions,” but we were thinking of it more as a “Collaborative Creativity/Creative Collaboration” session. Participants were split into small groups, consisting of at least one undergraduate woman, at least one woman at the graduate or postdoctoral level, and at least one “senior” woman, which mostly meant someone who was tenured or advanced on the tenure track. These groups were assigned the task to create a poem using the structure of the English haiku

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WiMSoCal 2015

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as its formal basis. Each poem was to be composed of stanzas that were haikus in isolation, three lines of 5-7-5 syllabic form. Participants were provided a list of words and were told to use these in their poetry.

Many of the women walked into the activity with some trepidation or at least some reluctance. Some thought they were not artistic at all, that they were the rational type and poetry was beyond their reach. Some thought this was a terribly goofy idea (and maybe they were right, but what is wrong with goofy every now and then?). Some were poetry gourmets and did not recognize the allure of mathematical poetry, and yes, they too had a point, most of the time it is not really very high-brow. But letting go and unleashing creative juices is always fun. Still, all were good natured about it and went along with the plan.

The result was unexpected, at least for those who have never tried this kind of thing before. Letting down one's guard and unleashing creative juices is often surprisingly fun, and almost always stimulating. Pretty soon people were deep in discussion; the excitement in the air was of a child who is solving a jigsaw puzzle on her own (or with a couple good friends) for the first time.

The activity also turned out to be a great way for people to ease into other kinds of conversations. The conspiring organizers had intentionally inserted certain key words in the list (isolated, victim, outlier, mentor, and so on) that made some conversations naturally bubble up.

We leave you with some of the neat and eclectic poetry these women created.

Blá, an outlier
Isolated in a ring
Continuity

Begrudgingly She
Feels closed in chaotic sand
wants Transformation

Seeks connected graph
Iterating to stable
Equilibrium

She generates a
Fundamental network of
Passionate mentors

Notes:

1. Tips on how to host a regional conference will be posted on the AWM webpage. For more information, contact Cymra Haskell at chaskell@usc.edu.
2. Unfortunately, we do not have authors for all of the math-ku presented here. We thank the 2015 WiMSoCal participants for sharing their contributions.
3. The *Journal of Humanistic Mathematics* is a welcoming outlet for poetry. See <http://scholarship.claremont.edu/jhm/>.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

AWM at USASEF

The AWM will be part of the fourth USA Science and Engineering Festival Exposition, April 16–17, 2016, at the Walter E. Washington Convention Center, Washington, DC. This year's AWM booth activity is called "Euler-gami." Visitors will use origami to explore some math invariants, in particular, the Euler characteristic and a special class of shapes with Euler characteristic two. Please join us for the challenge!

At each of the previous three festivals, the AWM booth had over 3,500 visitors. We need your help engaging this year's math-curious crowds! The AWM is currently seeking enthusiastic volunteers to help staff the booth. If you're in the DC area and interested in participating, please email Tai Melcher at melcher@virginia.edu or Katy Ott at kott@bates.edu.

NSF-CBMS Regional Research Conferences in the Mathematical Sciences

The National Science Foundation has announced support for two NSF-CBMS Regional Research Conferences to be held during 2016. These two bring to 358 the total number of such conferences since the NSF-CBMS Regional Research Conference Series began in 1969.

These conferences are intended to stimulate interest and activity in mathematical research. Each five day conference features a distinguished lecturer who delivers ten lectures on a topic of important current research in one sharply focused area of the mathematical sciences. The lecturer subsequently prepares an expository monograph based upon these lectures, which is normally published as a part of a regional conference series. Depending upon the conference topic,