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# Critical injuries: Collaborative Indigenous life writing and the ethics of criticism

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RESEARCH ONLINE

For Life Writing and the Public Sphere:

# CRITICAL INJURIES: COLLABORATIVE INDIGENOUS LIFE WRITING AND THE ETHICS OF CRITICISM

> Publishing one's life renders it public property, and those who do so cannot (or should not) expect that their representation of themselves, and especially of others, will meet with universal approval.
> G. Thomas Couser, *Vulnerable Subjects: Ethics and Life Writing* (199)

> Is there harm in life writing?
> Paul John Eakin, *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves* (159)

For well over a decade the imbrication of ethics and literature has been the focus of substantial scholarly interest with particular attention paid to how literature intersects with public life.[1] Paul John Eakin's question regarding harm in life writing signals a similar turn in the critical reading of life writing towards this consideration of ethics. As autobiographical theory has shifted from models dependent upon notions of autonomy to understandings that foreground relational constructions, analysis of life writing such as Eakin's is beginning to take into account the ethical issues embedded in the representation of relational lives. Indeed, in his latest publication Eakin goes further, suggesting that he has come "to think of ethics as the deep subject of autobiographical discourse" (*The Ethics of Life Writing*, 6).

In the reading of collaborative Indigenous life writing, the question of harm has long been a core concern. Critical attention has tended to focus on the issue of power relations, asking how power has been distributed or activated in the production of the collaborative work and what traces of power differentials remain inscribed in the published text. Underlying these discussions of power is the inferred critical objective of discerning instances or aspects of collaboration in which benefit or harm may be detected, either in outcomes such as copyrights and royalties, or in terms of the textualisation of Indigenous lives and their potential subordination to non-Indigenous discursive control. Publication of collaborative texts rightly places both the text and its conditions of production under

[1] Amongst the numerous works dealing with the intersection of ethics and literature see: Booth; Nussbaum; Adamson, Freadman, and Parker; Rainsford and Woods; and Davis and Womack.

public scrutiny and such scrutiny evokes ethical claims. Critics intent upon tracking the circulation of power within cross-cultural collaboration are engaged, whether they admit it or not, in ethical criticism. The question I would like to ask in this article, then, pertains to the engagement that takes place between collaborative Indigenous life writing and its critics. While recognising that harm can certainly result from collaborative life writing encounters, I also wish to ask whether harm may be occasioned through the criticism of collaborative Indigenous life writing, and to consider the implications of such harm, if it exists, for literary theory.

## Ethical Criticism

Eakin's interest in the ethics of life writing stems from his critical attention to the relational features of identity formation and representation. In his chapter devoted to ethics and life writing in *How Our Lives Become Stories* (1999), Eakin discusses the ethical concerns raised in the acknowledgement that all biographical and autobiographical representation involves an infringement upon the lives of others. Setting the need and respect for privacy and autonomy beside texts from diverse aspects of life writing, Eakin asks: "What is right and fair for me to write about someone else? What is right and fair for someone else to write about me?" (160). He explores these questions through biography, ethnographic autobiography and collaborative autobiography and in doing so touches upon issues of ownership and copyright as well as privacy, appropriation and ventriloquism, concerns that anyone acquainted with the enormous body of Indigenous life writing produced in collaboration with non-Indigenous writers and editors will find familiar. In the texts Eakin reads, however, answers do not come readily when the implications of relational lives are taken seriously: that the boundaries between self and other are porous and shifting and that narratives of self and other are necessarily co-dependent. Eakin argues that a rift has opened between representational practices based upon multiplicity of voice, subject and textual production and the retention in the culture of individualism of "existing models of privacy, personhood, and ethics" (186). While suggesting that such models may have to be revised, Eakin also maintains that moral responsibilities continue to adhere to the act of writing with or about

another because of the harm incipient in the process of textualisation. A life once written and published "is accessible to harm. One can strike at a textual body" (172). Although elsewhere in his chapter Eakin tends to focus on the potential for harm within life writing – constituted through the decisions, the revelations, the inclusions or occlusions made by the life writer(s) – here, significantly, he admits to the exposure to harm from without, which by implication would include harm resulting from the criticism of life writing.

"One can strike at a textual body" is an acknowledgement that in life writing there is vulnerability. This recognition of vulnerability is the basis of G. Thomas Couser's latest work, *Vulnerable Subjects* (2004), which investigates the ethics of life writing undertaken on the behalf of another. Whether through severe disability, radical cultural difference, illiteracy or the ultimate silence of death, the subjects of the texts Couser reads are vulnerable to exploitation and violation because of their extreme dependency upon others for their representation. In such cases, he argues, "(e)thical scrutiny is most urgent" (15).

Couser sets up two theoretical frames that assist in his discussion of ethics and life writing. The first draws upon the ethical guidelines of biomedicine and anthropology, as the majority of the texts Couser reads in this study fall somewhere within or between the spheres of biomedical and ethnographic representation. The concept of fiduciary relationships, paralleling those between patient and doctor, facilitate critical understanding of the forms of collaborative writing studied. Such relationships are defined by the interdependence of trust and vulnerability, where the benefit to the subject – in terms of treatment or, in life writing, representation – is (potentially) maximized by placing that subject in a position of trust that is (potentially) open to exploitation or abuse (17). Qualifying and protecting this fiduciary relationship are the four principles of biomedicine: respect for autonomy, nonmaleficence, beneficence, and justice. For Couser the first three are especially salient in life writing. The principle of autonomy is based upon respect for the integrity of the person. Here the Kantian edict, common in much ethical criticism, is evoked: that a person should not be treated simply as a means but as an end; as an autonomous being with motives, goals and rationales that call for engagement and respect. In life writing this would mean a respect for "the ideals of

agency, responsibility, accountability, and intentionality" (18) rather than an outmoded concern with an atomistic self and in this light autonomy can be seen as a quality that persists in relationships of interdependency such as those which generate collaborative life writing. Further, the biomedical principles of nonmaleficence and beneficence entail "obligations to prevent harm or evil, to remove harm or evil, and to do or promote good" (27), conditions that Couser sees as useful in approaching life writing ethics as well. He admits that it may be difficult or impossible to measure the good resulting from life writing, but on the other hand, "it may be proper to expect that writers at least do no harm to consenting vulnerable subjects" (28). Avoidance of harm is encoded as a primary ethical principle in anthropological statements of ethics as well, and along with concerns for consent, disclosure, privacy and reciprocity, bring the two spheres into meaningful correspondence. Moreover, anthropology acknowledges that harm can be done to communities as well as individuals and Couser is attentive to the implications of this for his study of narratives produced in collaboration with marginalised, disabled, or disenfranchised subjects whose identity or narratives may not be detachable from the community in which they are located. The concern for identifying potential harm resultant from engagement in life writing corresponds significantly to the questions raised by Eakin and, as we shall see, opens the inquiry, albeit with some reluctance, to questions of critical harm.

The second theoretical frame for Couser's discussion of ethics in life writing is taken from Wayne Booth's *The Company We Keep* (1988). In his chapter titled "Making, Taking, and Faking Lives: Voice and Vulnerability in Collaborative Life Writing," Couser extracts from Booth's investigation of ethics in fiction a set of key questions that are equally or perhaps more compelling when applied to life writing: "What are the author's responsibilities to those whose lives are used as 'material'? What are the author's responsibilities to others whose labor is exploited to make the work of art possible? What are the responsibilities of the author to truth?" (*Vulnerable Subjects*, 34). In terms of collaborative life writing these three questions allow Couser's discussion of ethical obligations to range across issues including property – the copyright and

ownership concerns resulting from the making of texts; narrative appropriation – taking another's story as one's own; and ventriloquy – faking the voice of another.

Focusing on the ethical obligations of the author or writer of collaborative works seems to apportion a greater share of power towards the maker of the text, but Couser is careful to distinguish situations in which this may be the case from collaborations where power may in fact reside with the narrating subject. Couser proposes, therefore, a continuum based on power-recognition. At one end would be located ethnographic life histories, in which he sees the subject holding little power or control over textual production. At the other end would be ghost-written or as-told-to celebrity autobiographies in which the high commodity value of the subjects' story results in their exercising greater power. In the middle may be found collaborations in which partners are more or less equal in terms of their influence over the text, as might be the situation in co-authored narratives of intimate or familial relationships (40). Ethical issues exist in each, though the critic's focus will be different depending upon at which end of the spectrum the text falls. According to Couser:

> In cases, especially ethnographic ones, in which the model or source is taken advantage of by the writer, the ethical duty of the critic may be to defend the disenfranchised subject; in the case of celebrity autobiography, the ethical duty of the critic may be to protect the historical record (46).

In Couser's comments on the duties of the critic, the focus again is on identifying harm: harm to the subject of the narrative, or falsification of the historical record. Although Couser ends his chapter with the cautionary words that "we must be attentive to the benefits as well as the liabilities of collaboration" (55), his point earlier that benefits may be difficult to define or impossible to measure means that critical attention by default seems to concentrate on the occasions of harm resulting from collaboration.

This critical enthusiasm for identifying harm, derived from the ethical concerns of biomedicine and anthropology already discussed, is also inherent in Booth's set of questions regarding author and reader responsibilities. Couser draws his three key questions from Booth's list of nine questions pertaining to the author's obligations.

However, Booth also asks a corresponding series of questions regarding the role of the reader, and although Couser makes no reference to this it is reasonable to assume that these readerly obligations would relate to the ethical duties of the critic. Interestingly, the questions Couser selects regarding the author are collapsed into one in the comments Booth directs towards readerly duties. After considering the reader's responsibilities to the writer, the work of art, to other readers and to society, Booth dispenses with those duties that would relate most directly to collaboration thus: "The remaining responsibilities of the reader – to those whose lives are used or abused by the author, or to truth – can both be put in the form of a responsibility to point out authors' successes and failures in meeting *their* responsibilities" (*The Company We Keep,* 137).

This displacement of obligations is carried over into the recent critical work on life writing and ethics. Both Couser and Eakin offer readings that are for the most part attentive to the motives, goals and rationales of the multiple participants of collaborative life writing. Yet the critical concern for harm and the relative ease with which harm may be demonstrated compared to the difficulties of ascertaining benefit mean that the weight of critical comment tends to fall upon the textual choices made by the writer, compiler or editor of collaborative works. Couser in particular employs the critical strategy of seeking out occasions in which the subjectivity of the vulnerable collaborator has been over-written by the decisions of his or her partner in textual construction. In creating "a plausible simulacrum of the subject's voice" (49), the writing partner may produce a form of representation which actually elides the conditions of disadvantage experienced by the vulnerable other and which have necessitated the collaboration in the first place. Thus the questions of responsibility to the historical record and to those whose lives are the focus of the narratives tend to be answered by taking the writer's decisions to task. Defending the vulnerable, then, is achieved primarily through engagement with the collaborator perceived as most responsible for textual construction.

To be fair, in many of the collaborative works he reads Couser takes his cue for the analysis of harm from assertions of betrayal made either by one of those involved in collaboration or by informed others. In his opening chapter he examines betrayal

occurring, on the one hand, between a journalist and a convicted murderer in the telling of the latter's life story, and on the other hand, in a daughter's writing of her mother's condition of epilepsy. In each case, betrayal is expressed by one of the parties at the published outcome. In another chapter Couser reads the memoir of a man's experience of raising an adopted son impaired by fetal alcohol syndrome and while betrayal is not expressed by the participants in this collaboration, Couser cites a number of Native American critics who respond with anger to the book's representation of the son who is Lakota and to the author's racial politics (208, n5&n8).

In other cases, however, Couser chooses to read for harm where calls of betrayal are absent. In his chapter on life writing and euthanasia he defends his critique of representations of "good" deaths by advocating an oppositional reading (126). While he admits that "(r)eading against the grain may be particularly uncomfortable" in such texts, he regards this reading as an obligation: the critic "may reach different conclusions from those of the individuals represented" and in publishing his views the critic is not only responding to the text but also contributing to the public debate over euthanasia (126-127). Couser makes it clear that in offering such readings he is "evaluating … public representation" not discussing the living or once living participants or their actual decisions. His work, he maintains, involves the analysis of "textual figures, not their historical counterparts" (127).

This combination of critical maneuvers, directing critical engagement to those perceived as holding power and control over textual construction and insisting upon the incommensurable distinction between textual figure and historical counterpart, returns us to Eakin's remark that "one can strike at a textual body," and opens up the possibility of critical harm, for to strike is also to risk inflicting injury. I have given extensive consideration to the work of Eakin and Couser as their critiques of life writing and ethics in important respects parallel critical work that has focused on collaborative Indigenous life writing: reading power primarily in the hands of writers and editors; reading the Indigenous life narratives as texts separate from their historical producers; and reading

for harm and betrayal occasioned by collaborative writing. This combination, I believe, entails considerable risk which has not been addressed in the literature on critical ethics.[2]

## Critical Harm

Risk begins with publication. Both in life writing and in criticism, textual construction invites scrutiny and prompts dialogue in the form of public debate and published replies. Dialogue is contingent, however, upon the possibility of exchange. It is an exchange of views, readings and interpretations among all those involved and interested in the issue being discussed. Yet in the case of collaborative life writing and its critics it seems this dialogue is skewed to exclude the participation of those the critics insist they have greatest concern for: "those who are customarily on the receiving end of life writing, those who get represented by others, often without their permission" (*Vulnerable Subjects*, 198). This, in my view, is the most serious form of injury resulting from much of the criticism being trained on collaborative Indigenous life writing: the failure to accord the Indigenous producers of the collaborative texts full status as ethical partners and interlocutors in the public debates generated by their work.

This potential for harm can be found in the criticism of cross-cultural collaboration in Australian Aboriginal life writing production where it has been an element of some of the earliest responses to the genre. Among these, the most important in terms of establishing critical direction is the work of Colin Johnson. Although recently Johnson's right to claim Aboriginal identity has been contested, his articles in the 1980s provided what was then read as an Aboriginal critic's response to non-Indigenous involvement in Aboriginal literary production and his work continues to be influential.[3]

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[2] In the most recent collection of critical essays edited by Eakin, this preponderance of attention to harm has shifted to include a number of articles investigating the good of life writing. In criticism of cross-cultural collaboration in Indigenous life writing, identifying harm without consideration of potential good, or consultation with those involved, remains a critical strategy apparently unaware of its repercussions, as the following sections will argue.

[3] See Anita M. Heiss's comments in *Dhuuluu- Yala To Talk Straight: Publishing Indigenous Literature* (3-8). Heiss acknowledges the impact Johnson has made on Aboriginal studies in Australia and decides to include citations to his work in her study of Indigenous publishing, the uncertainty of his identity claims notwithstanding.

In “White forms, Aboriginal content” Johnson takes issue with the manner in which Aboriginal life stories were contained within non-Indigenous discursive systems. Surveying a number of early collaboratively produced Aboriginal life stories, Johnson objects to editorial intrusions which traded “authenticity” for readability. He dismisses *Lamilami Speaks* (1975), the life story of Reverend Lazarus Lamilami of the Goulburn Islands of Australia’s Northern Territory, published in 1974 through the involvement of anthropologists Roland and Catherine Berndt, as readable but lacking in a personal style identifiable as Aboriginal.

In “Captured Discourse, Captured Lives,” Johnson criticises *Reading the Country* (1984), by Krim Benterrak, Stephen Mueke and Paddy Roe for its subjugation of Aboriginal discourse to non-Indigenous systems of representation. Unlike Roe and Muecke’s *Gularabulu* (1983) in which non-Indigenous commentary is minimal, in *Reading the Country* Paddy Roe’s Aboriginal narratives are accompanied by Muecke’s theoretical passages and graphics by Benterrak. While others have praised the work as dialogic, Johnson sees the text as indicative of

> the position of the Aborigine in modern Australia. Aboriginal discourse is captured. Paddy Roe the storyteller becomes discourse segments imprisoned within the standard English text of Stephen Muecke, and his country suffers the same fate in being captured within the graphics of Krim Benterrak (27).

Johnson objects to Muecke’s expanded claim upon textual space, his editorial prerogative “to share the body of the text” paralleling “the reality of Aboriginal communities being penetrated and manipulated by European advisors” (27). Muecke’s textual intrusions are read as part and parcel of the colonial structures dominating the production of Aboriginal literary representation and Johnson goes on to situate Muecke and Row’s texts within the body of collaborative work published at that time, including the life stories collected and edited by anthropologist Bruce Shaw with Aboriginal stockmen Grant Ngabidj and Jack Sullivan.[4] Here, Johnson takes exception to editorial intrusion and the assimilation of Aboriginal discourse into Standard English as, unlike Roe’s narratives, those of Ngabidj

[4] See Ngabidj and Shaw; and Sullivan and Shaw.

and Sullivan underwent considerable translation from their original Kriol. To Johnson, such collaborative work at best results in “dubious productions” and “compromised volumes” (29) in which Aboriginal discourse is reconstructed to become more palatable to its mainstream non-Indigenous readership. As well, according to Johnson, these narratives are notable for “the absence of critical and political comment on the part of the subject” (30). He contrasts these colonial collaborations with Bropho’s *Fringedweller* (1980) and Elsie Roughsey’s *An Aboriginal mother tells of the old and the new* (1984), which both display in their published texts features of their oral origins and an awareness of their colonial conditions; thus they retain for Johnson their “authenticity.” Johnson closes his article with reference to the covers of these publications, there again reading non-Aboriginality in the Krim, Muecke and Row text as in Shaw’s books with Ngabidj and Sullivan, with the implied view that the Aboriginal participant had no input into design issues, reinforcing his argument that Aboriginal discourse is contained.

In his later work, Johnson (publishing in the 1990s as Mudrooroo Narogin, then Mudrooroo) continued his critique of non-Indigenous involvement in Aboriginal life writing, taking to task Margaret Somerville’s collaboration with Patsy Cohen in the production of *Ingelba and the Five Black Matriarchs* (1990). The book is the life story of Patsy Cohen as well as a community narrative bringing together the recollections of elders who had lived on the Aboriginal reserve of Ingelba in Anaiwan country in northern New South Wales. In *Indigenous Literature of Australia: Milli Milli Wangka* (1997), Mudrooroo fixes upon the disagreement between Somerville and Cohen regarding the textual presentation of the recorded oral narratives. Whereas in commentary on previous texts, Mudrooroo had praised those that display their oral origins and dismissed those which transformed Aboriginal discourse into standard English, with regard to *Ingelba* he reverses his stand, as Patsy Cohen had objected to a literal transcription of her sections of narrative, preferring a more standardised version. Although authenticity – as Johnson had previously defined it – would have been thus forfeited, the Aboriginal co-author’s wishes should have been respected and the fact that Cohen ultimately acquiesced to Somerville’s priorities meant that decision making had been taken away from the Aboriginal author (186). Mudrooroo also objects to Somerville’s heightened visibility in the text, repeating

in a way his criticism of Muecke's presence in *Reading the Country* marking the white editor's reluctance to surrender textual space.

It should be clear that throughout Johnson/Mudrooroo's work is the implied view that the Aboriginal participants in the life writing projects he criticises are vulnerable subjects who have surrendered control of their narratives to the non-Indigenous editors who then commodify and transform Aboriginal stories to meet their own ends. To this extent he seems to be practicing what Couser refers to as the defense of the disenfranchised subject. Certainly in the case of Patsy Cohen his criticism is justified to the extent that her dissatisfaction over the representation of her spoken discourse was made public through Somerville's subsequently published commentary on the collaboration.[5] This disagreement over representation, however, has not been sufficient cause for Cohen herself to disown the book, which she continues to value and which her family and her community continue to read.[6] In this regard, one wonders what Aboriginal readers in the Kimberley make of Shaw's work with Ngabidj and Sullivan, or Maung readers of Lamilami's life story and whether they would share Johnson's view that these collaborative works are "dubious productions." Shaw responded to Johnson's criticisms by insisting upon the recognition of the involvement and agency of his Aboriginal collaborators throughout the production of their life stories: their control over the oral performances, their vetting of the transformed English versions of their stories, their understanding of their situation within the framework of colonisation, their decision-making regarding the book titles and their contributions to the book covers. Johnson's comments upon these earlier collaborative exchanges give little thought to the Aboriginal involvement and investment in the texts and in directing comment and criticism towards the non-Indigenous editor, the Aboriginal collaborators are in effect spoken over, as if their participation in the work, their interest in its circulation, or their response to its publication are not matters of critical concern.

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[5] See Cohen and Somerville, "Reflections on *Ingelba*;" and Somerville, "Life (Hi)story Writing: The Relationship Between Talk and Text."

[6] I base this comment on telephone interviews with both Patsy Cohen and Margaret Somerville conducted during the course of research for my PhD thesis, "Cross Talk: Collaborative Indigenous Life Writing in Australia and Canada." Patsy Cohen interview, February 12, 2003; Margaret Somerville interview, December 11, 2002.

The criticisms raised in Mudrooroo's work have been reformulated recently by Michele Grossman in her article "Bad Aboriginal Writing: Editing, Aboriginality, Textuality." Grossman's argument is directed towards the reluctance of some non-Indigenous editors of Aboriginal life writing to forego the performance of "overseer" status, not only controlling the construction of Aboriginal representations but also textualising their performance and thereby diminishing Aboriginal authority over these particular life narratives. Most often this performance of control appears in the introductory material which frames the Indigenous narrative. Grossman is concerned that editorial discussions of the terms of collaboration in some Aboriginal life writing texts – and she locates *Ingelba and the Five Black Matriarchs* among them – emphasise an abdication on the part of the Indigenous narrator of responsibility for textual construction that she claims is disingenuous. According to Somerville, Cohen was reluctant to become involved in the writing process. Somerville explains: "she wanted me to write the book and she was reluctant to read material for editing. Patsy always preferred to talk about the material and took greater pleasure in listening to the tapes than in reading the written form" (*Ingelba*, xv). Grossman, however, reads Cohen's lack of interest as resulting not from disinclination but from possible frustration following disagreement with Somerville over presentation of the oral narrative. In subsequently published articles, Somerville admits that upon seeing the transcripts Cohen was concerned by the appearance on the page of her Aboriginal English but eventually acquiesced to the textualised version which accurately reflected the spoken words of the contributors. Grossman argues, however, that this outcome results in "denying Patsy Cohen textual agency in relation to the representation of her own words…" (164), making *Ingelba*, through inference from the title of Grossman's critique, bad Aboriginal writing.

Grossman's objections closely parallel those of Johnson/Mudrooroo: Somerville's insistence on literal transcriptions despite Cohen's reluctance to see her contributions to the narrative published in a form that she felt would bring her shame; and Somerville's

textual presence, her performance of her status as text-builder.[7] The same criticisms appear in Gillian Whitlock's *The Intimate Empire: Reading Women's Autobiography*, where she argues in her brief discussion of *Ingelba* that Cohen is "doubly silenced" in Somerville's work (165). All three critics have been prompted to this line of criticism by Somerville's reporting upon the collaborative process, both in the introduction to *Ingelba* and in subsequent publications. Patsy Cohen's dissatisfaction with seeing her speech rendered literally is an important aspect of their collaboration and Somerville rightly relays this to their reading public. Their disagreement and its outcome do give a vital perspective on the power relations between the two women. Yet the direction of critical comment outlined above indicates that this disagreement is being read as the one feature of the text worth commenting upon. The critical insistence upon this as the most significant feature of the text, and in consequence the critical dismissal of the book as being compromised by its perceived failure to overcome its colonial foundations, is precisely the sort of criticism that itself may occasion harm. In identifying harm through an abuse of power, in writing to defend an Aboriginal woman perceived as vulnerable, critics are again writing over and thus devaluing the Aboriginal contribution to the text.

The impact of published critical responses to life writing on those whose lives and labour have contributed to the text is a matter that critics tend to treat lightly. Couser, for example, argues that critics' "actual influence is often not very substantial. For better or worse, such critics are hardly in a position to suppress writers who reach audiences quite independently of academic sanction" (199). Elsewhere, however, Couser admits that the ethical criticism of life writing is both retrospective and prospective: that critical attention to potential ethical violations in life writing has bearing upon both previously published texts and future collaborative projects (55). If this is the case, then certainly critical comment could have some influence, however "indirect and diffuse" (55), upon issues such as a publisher's decision to reprint a text that has come to be widely read as violating the intentions of its Indigenous participants. This is especially relevant in the context of Australian publishing where both mainstream publishers and smaller presses

[7] For a discussion of shame in the context of Indigenous life writing see Rosamund Dalziell's *Shameful Autobiographies: Shame in Contemporary Australian Autobiographies*, 113-173.

alike are increasingly sensitive to the politics of representation. The fact that *Ingelba* has never been reprinted may not be attributable to the dismissive treatment of its critics, but this fact nonetheless has direct consequences upon local Indigenous readers who have not been able to buy the book for more than a decade and so cannot replace copies that have become worn, damaged, or lost.[8] Given that the purpose of the book for many of its Aboriginal contributors in the Armidale region was that of a keeping place for memory and narrative, it is surely a major disappointment that *Ingelba* is no longer available for purchase.

My point, again, is that critical responses focusing on perceived harm and abuse in the collaborative processes do so often without proper engagement with the participants deemed to have been exploited. Stephen Connors sees voice as being key to the possibility of ethical engagement. Voice "marks the limit of the ethical," he writes. "That which has no voice, or which utters inarticulately, has no place in or positive bearing upon ethics" (232). His remarks are especially pertinent to criticism which claims to defend vulnerable subjects, and in the present discussion, that which focuses upon collaborative Indigenous life writing. For if through textual analysis the critic decides that the vulnerable subject has been over-written, her preferences for textual representation not respected, or her subject position trapped within discursive folds beyond her control, then voice in such texts must be read as missing. Grossman concludes just this in the case of *Ingelba* when she writes that "if we want to locate Patsy Cohen through her own words and choices as a textual subject, we will have to look and to read elsewhere" (164). In criticism which is rigorous in its insistence that its target is the text and that textual figures are sundered through publication from their historical counterparts, the disposition to read for compromise and harm, for occasions of over-writing, or for instances of the silencing of the Indigenous subject has the ironic result of removing the

[8] According to Somerville, there were never enough copies available to meet local demand even when the book was first released and as copies have been lost or damaged in the intervening years the issue of access to the book by those whose lives or whose families contributed to its making is becoming difficult. Despite the fact that *Ingelba* is on reading lists for university courses across the country, the publisher, Allen & Unwin, will not consider reprinting the text. For local readers, including Patsy Cohen, this is a source of ongoing disappointment. In interview, Somerville said that at one point there was some possibility of Aboriginal Studies Press obtaining permission to reprint the book, but this has not eventuated. (Telephone interview with Margaret Somerville, December 11, 2002)

Indigenous participants of collaboration from the field of critical engagement. Eakin commenting on ethnographic life writing writes that "obviously such works are published to serve the purposes of the ethnographer who signs as author" and the Indigenous subject distanced by language, class or culture "can have little or no conception of these purposes" (*How Our Lives*,174). Although Eakin is not commenting directly on Australian Aboriginal life writing, his remark is relevant because the view he expresses is one that can be recognised as operating unacknowledged in critical work from diverse fields, including the critiques of collaborative writing offered by Johnson and retained as undercurrent in critiques of collaborative Indigenous life writing still on offer today. Perceived as lacking control or conception of what has become of their narratives, the views and potential responses of Indigenous collaborators are thus discounted in critical commentary addressed towards the decisions of the non-Indigenous writer or the wider constraining mechanisms of non-Indigenous discourse production. In such critical responses to collaboration, the Indigenous subject has indeed been doubly silenced.

"To give voice, or be capable of giving voice, it is necessary to have been given voice. To count as an ethical partner, one must be a potential interlocutor," writes Connor (233). With this in mind, it is worthwhile asking whether critics of collaborative life writing consider the vulnerable subjects whose textual formations they analyse as potential interlocutors, that is, as potential readers of critical work. For Couser, the answer would be no, as most of the texts with which he is concerned involve death or such severe disability as to negate the possibility of response. In the case of collaborative Indigenous life writing, however, this clearly is not the case. In many situations, the Indigenous producers of collaborative texts may be quite capable of reading academic treatments of their work and if the producers of the life narrative text are not themselves readers, then their children and grandchildren most certainly are. Illiteracy therefore is less of an excuse today than in previous decades for the critical disregard for the vulnerable subject as reader. Nor is the fact that much of the critical commentary on collaborative life writing is published in academic journals of limited readership an excuse for overlooking the potential for engagement with Indigenous producers of collaborative texts. Digital access to many journals means that once a critic's views are published – made public –

they circulate along potentially unforeseen channels and it is incumbent upon those who are privileged through education and career to be able to write about others' lives and others' texts to consider those others as readers and as interlocutors.

## Critical Collaboration

Is it not the case that in defending the vulnerable the critic is in effect speaking for another perceived as being unable to speak for herself? Linda Alcoff makes the point that speaking about others or about the textual representations of others often seeps over into speaking for them, making it difficult to disentangle the two practices. In both speaking for and speaking about others, the critic is "engaging in the act of representing the other's needs, goals, situation, and in fact, *who they are*" (9), Alcoff writes. Such representations, she insists, have consequences. "Even if someone never hears of the discursive self I present of them they may be affected by the decisions others make after hearing it" (10). This is precisely the issue I alluded to above in discussing the impacts of criticism on channels of publication and dissemination. While certainly diffuse and indirect and therefore difficult to trace, the pathways opened by critical commentary do return to those commented upon in one form or another. And if this is the case, it may be appropriate for critics to reflect upon their authority and upon the possibility of consultation with those being spoken over. Alcoff sees this as an unlikely scenario as "(i)ntellectual work has certainly not been guided by the mandate to get permission from those whom one is speaking for and about" (11). Yet in the academic landscape that has emerged through the 1990s and into the present decade, consultation with Indigenous subjects whose work is the focus of one's research and scholarly comment is not such a fanciful suggestion. Given the postcolonial turn that has marked both literary studies and anthropology with a heightened attentiveness to the imbrications of knowledge-generation and processes of subjugation/domination active in both disciplines, consultation has in some situations become a prerequisite.

Although the compound issue of representation and consultation has radically changed the practice of anthropology over the past two decades, literary studies seems to have

fixed upon the first of these terms while largely ignoring the second. But just as anthropology's crisis of authority began with the recognition of the rhetorical basis of its knowledge production and from this moved to a reflection upon the partiality of its representations which in conjunction with the increased politicisation of the peoples once studied resulted in demands from both within and without the discipline for greater consultation and ethical engagement with its subjects, so too may literary studies move towards such engagement and, I would argue, a more ethical practice. Especially when literary criticism involves the work of non-Indigenous scholars commenting upon Indigenous representations, engagement becomes crucial.

On the other hand, there is, of course, a key distinction between the methodologies of the two disciplines that problematise such a shift in literary criticism. Anthropology's reliance on fieldwork for its source material means that it is forced to negotiate with those whose narratives, knowledge systems and material and representational practices supply the discipline with its subject matter and has led in recent practice to the recognition of reciprocity and the need for the return of benefits to those whose labour/knowledge has been treated as resource. Literary theory thus far has been exempt from such lived and embodied entanglements. The textual basis of its source material means that knowledge can be constructed without regard for the persons whose representational practices, because they are published, have entered the public domain and become available for all to make of what they will. "There is nothing outside the text" (158), Derrida exhorts and although his point is not that extra-textual concerns such as politics and historical process are somehow split off from what happens in any given text – on the contrary, deconstruction aims toward the understanding that politics, history, and social change are all thoroughly textual and thus are woven into the fabric of other texts – his words are too often taken by textual critics to support a methodology of disengagement. It is this text-based foundation which excuses the distanced work of the literary critic who finds within the stacks of the university library and its document delivery service all the material needed for knowledge creation.

Anthropologist Jeremy Beckett has lamented that although his discipline has been radically reshaped by theoretical insights imported from the fields of philosophy, history, and literary and cultural criticism, it seems that the traffic is mostly one-way, and that critical thought in other disciplines rarely draws upon the advances made in anthropology. He implies that changes in the dynamics of fieldwork and the recognition of reciprocity and consultation are aspects that other disciplines could learn from. As Couser's work on ethics in life writing draws on the ethical guidelines active in anthropological study, it is not unreasonable to suggest that literary theory might also benefit from attention to consultation and the return of research to community.

## The Vulnerable Critic

Critical responsibility to the collaborative text and the lives through which the text is composed begins with recognising that collaboration is suffused with vulnerability. The subject of collaborative life writing is often extremely vulnerable, as Couser argues, but so too may the writing or editing partner experience vulnerability, while the collaborative text they produce is clearly vulnerable, offering a soft target to critics intent on demonstrating the traces of disjunction within collaborative writing.[9] I would suggest that vulnerability also extends, or should extend, to the readers and critics of collaborative Indigenous writing.

As an exchange that exists not solely between a teller and a listener, or co-writers, or a writer and an editor, but continues through the channels of dissemination and is activated in each reading event, collaboration extends its condition of vulnerability to all who enter its sphere. Commenting upon the risks posed to writer, reader and text in postmodern reading exchanges, Mark Ledbetter argues:

> The writer's risk is that no longer is s/he the caretaker of the story, but, rather, the narrative is 'set loose' upon the world with limitless possibilities. The reader's risk is the loss of her/his personal story, in the light of a newly existing story that imposes itself on a pre-existing narrative. And the text runs

[9] Regarding the vulnerability of the non-Indigenous ethnographer, see Watson, "Experiences in the Field: Negotiating between Selves."

> the risk of not being read/heard at all, but rather forced into already existing stories of convenience and authority (144).

In the context of collaboration, membership in this exchange increases while the risks to each member remain undiminished. The multiple producers of the collaborative text all face the certainty of relinquishing control over the narrative they have assisted in shaping. "The meanings of an ethnographic account are uncontrollable," writes James Clifford. "Neither the author's intention, nor disciplinary training, nor the rules of genre can limit the readings of a text that will emerge with new historical, scientific, or political projects" (120). This relates significantly, though inversely, to the risk that Ledbetter sees facing the text: that of not being read or heard because of pre-existing discursive patterns or strategies that calcify around the text. Whereas Clifford gestures towards the proliferation of meanings, future readers taking the text out of the hands and control of its makers, Ledbetter cautions that readings may fossilise under the pressures of discursive habits that overrun the particularities to be encountered in the text, again with the similar consequence of by-passing the intentions of the producers. This is the vulnerability that adheres to collaborative Indigenous texts: that their specifics will be passed over by majority critics whose readings for strategies of containment accentuate the fashioning of the text and its accommodation to the discursive demands of the dominant culture at the cost of slighting the Indigenous narratives and their narrators – slighting in the sense of treating slightly, dismissively. On the other hand, Ledbetter's middle term – the reader's risk – offers more hope for the collaborative context. His understanding of the task of reading involves an embrace of vulnerability, an acceptance that one's own personal narrative may be over-written in the encounter with another. "I offer myself to become an *other*," he writes,

> to read and be read by metaphors other than those of my own making and, in turn, to risk the literal destruction of my world – my personal story – as *I* have constructed it. I may be scarred by the other's story and discover that I can only tell my story by reference to the other's (147).

In terms of the reading of Indigenous narratives, Ledbetter's view may be aligned to the suggestion by Whitlock that the autobiographical and testimonial discourse of Indigenous

Australians has triggered a sense of crisis among non-Indigenous Australian intellectuals ("Strategic Remembering," 163). The dissemination of Indigenous testimony through various channels has prompted numerous non-Indigenous Australian historians to reconsider their sense of belonging and reflect upon the moral anxiety that clings to race relations and to narratives of nationhood. Whitlock singles out the *Bringing Them Home* report as catalyst but positions this work alongside the many Indigenous autobiographical narratives published in recent years. A similar claim could be made for identity discourse in Canada following the *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* and sustained by the numerous First Nations autobiographical texts entering the public domain. In each country, non-Indigenous readers who acknowledge their vulnerability before the story of another have found their own narratives deeply transformed.

In the specific context of collaborative Indigenous life writing, an acceptance of critical vulnerability, I suggest, involves two interrelated procedures. The first of these is openness to dialogue. This is the starting point for an ethics of critical practice, a willingness to engage with those concerned with the same texts and issues and thus a willingness to surrender the distanced stance and authority common to textual study. In the reading of collaborative Indigenous life writing in Canada, openness to dialogue and the critical expression of vulnerability are issues raised by Susanna Egan's reading of *Stolen Life: The Journey of a Cree Woman* (1998), by Rudy Wiebe and Yvonne Johnson. Wiebe and Johnson's book tells the story of how Johnson came to be the only Native woman in Canada serving a twenty-five-year sentence for first degree murder. The narrative of her involvement, with three others, in the murder of Leonard Skwarok is entangled with narrative of the trauma Johnson experienced from early childhood as she recalls repeated sexual abuse from both family members and strangers. Unable to voice her trauma, in part due to the cleft palate with which she was born and which impeded her ability to speak, Johnson was drawn into a cycle of substance abuse in her early teenage years that continued until the time of the murder. The book comprises both extensive first-person narration, taken from interviews with Wiebe and journals Johnson wrote in prison, and a framing narrative provided by Wiebe who tells the story of his involvement with Johnson and his gradual uncovering of her story, through their

correspondence, meetings in prison and telephone conversations and also drawing on police and court records, newspaper reports, and interviews with family members. Egan begins her article "Telling Trauma: Generic Dissonance in the Production on *Stolen Life*" by acknowledging the disturbance she has experienced in reading Wiebe and Johnson's book, implying the sort of vulnerability that Ledbetter suggests is required of the reader, a willingness to be scarred by another's story. "I find my own disturbance begins with Yvonne's appalling story (no child, ever, anywhere, should suffer as she describes herself suffering)," Egan writes, "but concludes with what I perceive as a generic dissonance in the narration of her experience" (10-11). Her article then proceeds to analyse and document that dissonance by reading Wiebe's framing narrative and focusing on features such as the book-cover design without seriously returning to the disturbance created by Johnson's description of her experiences of suffering, or to Johnson's own narrative in terms of its rhetorical intent. Egan's emphasis on the framing strategies and her reluctance to acknowledge Johnson's participation in textual construction is consistent with her overall thesis, that the Indigenous narrator and subject of *Stolen Life* has been enclosed by discursive systems beyond her control. Her analysis rehearses the claim that the Indigenous collaborator is over-written; her subject position determined by the strategies of her co-writer, Wiebe, who, according to Egan, "becomes a ventriloquist for Yvonne" (22). The analysis, however, is again a case of critical disregard for the contribution and agency of the Indigenous participant in collaborative life writing. Indeed, although she opens with the disclaimer that her comments are offered "(w)ith serious respect for the courage and integrity of both narrators" (11), her article ends by asserting "I have been reading *Stolen Life* with every respect for Rudy Wiebe's intentions, and with no ability to separate myself from them" (26). It is significant that in closing Egan no longer claims to be reading with respect for Yvonne Johnson's intentions. Her private reading experience may have maintained this respect and engagement with the Indigenous co-producer of the text but her public, published response choses not to pursue this reading strategy; Egan directs her comments to Wiebe and foregoes the opportunity for dialogue with Johnson.

It is interesting to compare Egan's critical stance in this article with that of Heather Hodgson, Cree writer and academic, whose review of *Stolen Life* appeared in the same issue of *Canadian Literature* as Egan's. Although in her review she too is critical of Wiebe's editorial intervention and the possibility of appropriation, she also raises the crucial issue of consultation. "I was not able to speak with Yvonne at the Ohci Okimaw Healing Lodge, as she did not respond to my letter requesting a visit," Hodgson writes (156), and although they did not meet and exchange views, the point is that for Hodgson an effort in this direction was deemed necessary. As an academic, Hodgson is empowered to publish her reading of Johnson and Wiebe's book but before doing so she attempted to consult with the Indigenous producer of the text. Egan makes no such claim. And while it is possible that Egan also attempted to contact Johnson and, like Hodgson, received no reply, my point is that her published reading – with its unwavering concern for the mechanisms of editorial constraint and its neglect of Johnson's involvement in textual construction and design – does not consider the Indigenous collaborator as a potential interlocutor and in effect forecloses the possibility of their engagement in a manner that Hodgson's review does not.[10]

Consultation and visiting between a literary scholar and the producers of a collaborative text result in a trust based relationship and an acknowledgement of vulnerability on all sides. Consultation and dialogue of this nature are certainly rare but not unprecedented. It is, in fact, the extent of consultation and engagement undertaken in preparation for Egan's published reading of another collaborative work that makes their absence from "Telling Trauma" so telling. In her work co-authored with Gabriela Helms, "The Many Tongues of *Mothertalk: Life Stories of Mary Kiyoshi Kiyooka*," the surviving producers of the collaborative text were interviewed, family members met and, with their permission, manuscripts consulted. "Both the manuscripts and these interviews implicate us as readers," Egan and Helms write, "drawing us into the ongoing interpretive process and the earlier community of collaborators; they are crucial to the discussion that

[10] Egan's critique, I would argue, could not have taken its published form if consultation with Johnson (or with Wiebe for that matter) had eventuated. Consultation, with its regard for the intentionality of collaboration, results in a relational approach to reading and critique. As my next point demonstrates, Egan is keenly aware that consultation alters critique in this manner.

follows" (49). The implications of consultation are referred to in several places in Egan and Helms' analysis and commentary, as they recognise the dilemma it poses for critics. They ask rhetorically: "And is it our task to pass judgement on each collaborator's contributions and decisions, to determine what is a loss or gain?" (67). Their answer is a rejection of "such absolute decisions and evaluations," opting rather to demonstrate the various interventions and their implications as the text they read is passed through the hands of several collaborators in a process Egan and Helms call "serial collaboration" (67). Their refusal to offer absolute judgement on the text in favour of a tracing of textual transformations, made possible through dialogue with the producers, exemplifies this first aspect of critical vulnerability involving a concession of critical authority in exchange for privileged entry and insight into the processes of collaboration. It is a critical strategy that could move the study and reading of collaborative Indigenous life writing to new perspectives and new areas of debate, a move and a risk worth taking.

The second aspect of critical vulnerability flows from the first. If the critic's vulnerability is related to a relinquishment of authority in recognition of the producers of collaborative texts as potential interlocutors and ethical partners, then, in the case of Indigenous life writing, the critic becomes engaged in procedures that move towards the negotiation of Indigenous protocols and permissions. Any non-Indigenous academic working and publishing within the field of Indigenous studies must be aware of the many calls from Indigenous writers, intellectuals and researchers for acknowledgement of the dual obligations of consultation and consent. Consultation is the first item on Jackie Huggins' checklist for ethical dealings between non-Aboriginal writers and Aboriginal people (86). In terms of commenting upon or teaching Indigenous texts in Canada, Patricia Monture Angus notes that before using Maria Campbell's book *Stories of the Road Allowance People* (1995) in her classes, she sought permission and offered a gift in honour of Indigenous protocols (43, n28). Bruce Pascoe underscores the importance of consultation and consent in all aspects of Indigenous cultural production: "Writers, artists, musicians and historians from the indigenous community must consult with the community every step of the way in a manner which white artists would consider anti-art" (84). Although non-Indigenous literary critics might also consider consultation to be anti-critique, I argue

that to do so would be a refusal to move beyond established bounds of disciplinary authority and reading procedures and a reluctance to accommodate critique to postcolonial relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous subjects and their representations. Negotiating protocols with the producers of Indigenous texts would mean accepting the vulnerability associated with learning new rules of engagement, new patterns of knowledge construction, and new relationships.

Together consultation and respect for Indigenous protocols open up the possibility of a renewed reading practice in the field of collaborative Indigenous life writing. It suggests a reading strategy that acknowledges and investigates the mediating procedures that shape Indigenous narratives constructed in collaboration with others while maintaining an openness to the contributions of all participants and a willingness to be scarred by the claims of narrative. It also suggests the opening of a discursive space in which the critic can meet the subjects of reading as partners in the construction of meaning, and as potential readers of each other's work. Such an ethics would involve serious consideration of the exchange of discourse and the issue of return – the fact that all discourse circulates and penetrates and passes through texts into lives and communities.

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