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“Spitting the Dummy: Collaborative Life Writing and Ventriloquism”

Submission for *New Literatures Review*

“As the old joke has it, ventriloquism is for dummies.” So Steven Connor remarks a little more than midway through his book *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism* (2000, 249). Connor is directing his readers’ attention to the appearance in the nineteenth century of the mannequin or puppet which today’s public commonly associates with the performance of ventriloquism. “Ask anyone to visualize a ventriloquist and the image forms instantly of a single figure, usually male, in colloquy with a single dummy perched, sometimes on a stand, most typically on the performer’s knee”(402), Connor writes. As public entertainment, ventriloquism has become passé, a quirky stage act that few people today have witnessed first-hand. Yet the binary figure of the ventriloquist and dummy persists in popular consciousness, a vaguely unsettling pair that embodies the phenomenon of a voice cast from a subject who speaks to one who is otherwise perceived as voiceless.

Connor’s study provides a useful point of reference for current speculation regarding the production of voice in collaborative life writing as he emphasises throughout his work the connections between the projection of voice and networks of power. His book traces the historical manifestations of ventriloquism: from the Delphic oracle, through medieval cases of exorcism in which the voices of demons sounded from the mouths of those possessed, through nineteenth century fascination with the casting of voice in theatrical entertainments, to modern inflections via recording and telecommunications of the disembodied voice. Throughout its many forms, ventriloquism has engaged its participants, both producers and audience, in the simulation of voice dissociated from its source. That dissociation evokes awe and mystery, power and mastery, yet also implies an acknowledgement of its inherent deceit and its own impossibility.

It is not surprising that the metaphor of ventriloquism has become a key component in a strand of literary analysis focusing upon collaboratively produced life writing. Dissociation of voice from its source is seen by a number of literary analysts as the

defining trait of first-person narratives produced with the assistance of another or others. This dissociation of voice opens the collaborative life writing text to readings which perceive a discordance between the discursive timbre of the narrator, or narrators, and that of the editorial participants, a disjunction of voice that tends to be identified as textual deceit, or as the contamination of narratorial contribution by editorial manipulation and control. Read in these terms, collaborative life writing, like ventriloquism, is both simulation and dissimulation.

Assisted life writing has through the centuries of its production been both appealing and appalling in fairly equal measure and the metaphor of ventriloquism neatly captures the simultaneity of fascination and distaste readers experience in the consumption of the collaborative voice. Its earliest forms in seventeenth-century England, the confessions of condemned criminals, transcribed, edited and published as broadsides for distribution at the scene of execution, played upon the public's desire for sensationalised alterity while contributing to the state's spectacle of discipline and punishment. North American captivity narratives which circulated in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were often collaborative texts; the trials and tribulations of the captive's sojourn amongst Native American communities dealt in imagery of cannibalism and racial violence. Afro-American autobiographical narratives of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as well, were frequently published through the efforts of an amanuensis and slave narratives, appearing under the auspices of abolitionist societies, captured the public's imagination and altered public opinion regarding slavery as no amount of expostulation had succeeded in doing. Into the twentieth century, the publication of the anthropological life histories of Indigenous peoples around the globe continued this trend of textualising alterity, underpinned by the motivation of giving 'voice to the voiceless'.¹

My own engagement with collaborative life writing relates to my research into Indigenous life writing in Australia and Canada, as many of the Indigenous texts published over the past four decades have been produced within a collaborative framework. Among the first articles I encountered in the theoretical work surrounding collaborative writing was G. Thomas Couser's "Making, Taking, and Faking Lives: The Ethics of Collaborative Life Writing"(1998), a particularly helpful overview which comments upon the ethical considerations involved in the production of both

contemporary collaborative life writing and its historical antecedents. His article guided my early reading and prompted me to seek out other studies of seemingly distant collaborative contexts, for example, castaway narratives from the nineteenth-century European colonisation of the Pacific, or the convict narratives of early Australian settlement.²

It was also in this article that I first encountered the metaphor of ventriloquism employed in the context of collaborative writing. “Collaborative autobiography is inherently ventriloquistic”, Couser asserts, explaining that in ethnographic autobiography, “the danger tends to be that of attributing to the subject a voice and a narrative not originating with him or her” (1998, 344). He argues that this same danger exists in celebrity autobiographies, which are often ghost-written or as-told-to publications, as celebrity subjects in some cases may not even have read, let alone written, their published first-person narratives. Certainly the examples Couser provides support the claim that collaborative writing can in some instances produce a textual voice and subject that owes substantially more to the efforts of the collaborator primarily responsible for the act of writing than to its putative source, the one whose life experiences the text relates. Yet over the course of my research I was to encounter the metaphor of ventriloquism time and again used in relation to examples of collaborative writing from diverse historical contexts and geographic regions and with diverse patterns and outcomes. What my article aims to do, then, is trace the deployment of the metaphor of ventriloquism in collaborative life writing, highlight the frequency with which it is utilised, and to suggest that its application in critical reading may have outrun its usefulness. If I am spitting the dummy it is not so much in a rant, I hope, as in a wilful abjection of a critical position which is beginning to appear as orthodoxy, a pattern of thinking and reading which can occlude the multivalent processes that constitute collaborative life writing.

An early essay in which the association between ventriloquism and life writing has been identified is Paul de Man’s “Autobiography as De-facement” (1979), an important critique of reference in autobiography. It is here that de Man singles out *prosopopoeia* as the defining trope of autobiography. As Timothy Dow Adams, drawing on de Man, has argued, it is through this rhetorical figure that ventriloquism in life writing is best

understood. Adams uses de Man to amplify his reading of Paul Aster's *The Invention of Solitude* (1998), a text which itself employs the metaphor of ventriloquism to illustrate the textual relationship between Aster, his father and his son (14). Aster's autobiographical narrator works to reconstruct his relationship with his deceased father and with his son, whose voice, the narrator says, is reduced by pneumonia to sounding "as though he were a ventriloquist's dummy" (1998, 15). Adams insightfully links Aster's references to ventriloquism to de Man's definition of "the figure of prosopopeia," that is, "the fiction of an apostrophe to an absent, deceased or voiceless entity, which posits the possibility of the latter's reply and confers upon it the power of speech" (1998, 14). Adam's comment on de Man, however, is brief and it is worthwhile returning to his seminal essay to revisit the beginnings of this connection between life writing and ventriloquism.

Prosopopeia is the rhetorical figure which personifies another, usually non-human, entity as alive and capable of both hearing and speech. De Man's essay, in its interrogation of the theoretical foundations of autobiographical representation, comments upon William Wordsworth's *Essays upon Epitaphs* (1810) and identifies "the *speaking stone*" of the tombstone as a component in "the figure of prosopopeia" (1989, 926). To read an epitaph as the voice of one deceased is to participate, de Man claims, in "the fiction of the voice-from-beyond-the-grave" (927), and insofar as all language is figure, "not the thing itself but the representation" (930), then autobiography too participates in a similar fiction. In de Man's reading of Wordsworth, the voice of the one departed can not speak through the epitaph upon the tombstone; the words are an illusion of voice conjured there in ventriloquial fashion and the first-person voice of autobiography, in de Man's view, participates in a similar textual deceit.

De Man's article is part of the larger poststructuralist critique of referentiality, exemplified in the work of Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes. Among Barthes' contributions to the critique of reference, that which is most relevant here is his articulation of the breach between the narrating I and the I narrated. This I is identified as a shifter, whose referent, lacking fixity or stability, is entirely contingent upon context. "When a narrator recounts what has happened to him," Barthes writes, "the *I* who recounts is no longer the same *I* as the one that is recounted. In other words ... the *I* of

discourse can no longer be a place where a previously stored-up person is innocently restored” (1972, 140). For autobiographical discourse, this lack of pronominal contiguity casts serious doubt upon the genre. Autobiography’s claims to re-present the past experiences of an authoring self are rendered illusory, as there is neither a unified self to be represented nor the means of presenting a past in any form other than one that is fictive. For poststructuralists, then, reference in autobiography is illusory. The voice in the text is the voice of an absence, a dissociated voice, the voice of an impossibility.

This fictive quality of the autobiographical voice should be doubly apparent in collaborative works and, in fact, the connection was made in the year following the publication of de Man’s essay. Philippe Lejeune’s essay, “The Autobiography of Those Who Do Not Write,” published in French in 1980, takes up the problem of collaborative life writing and its implications for autobiographical theory. In his opening, Lejeune suggests that the imitative nature of collaborative life writing casts suspicion not only upon itself, but upon standard autobiography as well. “On a certain number of points, autobiography by people who do not write throws light on autobiography written by those who do: the imitation reveals the secrets of fabrication and functioning of the ‘natural’ product” (1989, 186). He is particularly concerned with the autobiographies of the French working class, written with the assistance of journalists or ethnographers. His analysis focuses on the constraints inherent in collaborations spanning social classes: the power of the one responsible for writing the life, his or her institutional allegiances, the ethnological paradigm of observer and observed, and the scripting effect of genre which delimits the very manner in which the speaking subject recounts a life story. For Lejeune, the power imbalance facing the narrator is insurmountable. “He is a creature of his ethnographer” (196).

The narrating subject as “creature” of the collaborator who writes returns us directly to the issue of ventriloquism as it evokes the classic relationship between ventriloquist and dummy and at the same time alludes to the appropriative nature of the collaborative process. The speaking subject is absorbed, his or her voice fabricated in the transformation from speech to writing. Connor locates this particular characteristic of ventriloquism as coinciding with the beginning of Romanticism, a period marked by “the

individual, appetitive poetic self” longing to disperse into the lives and voices of many (2000, 297).

It is at this period that the words ‘ventriloquism’ and ‘ventriloquise’ first begin to be represented not as a dangerous or malicious act, but as a violence towards the one that is ventriloquized, or reduced to the condition of a dummy. The danger of ventriloquism was now no longer that it could allow the unscrupulous to exploit and delude the credulous, but that it might involve reducing others to the condition of objects, by stealing or annihilating their voices (297).

This is the claim that begins to be made regarding collaboration by criticism published through the 1980s and 1990s: that collaboration is inherently appropriative, that voice in collaborative texts is at best fabricated, at worst, stolen [problem? I chose ‘stolen’ to resonate with the quotation above. Worst case scenarios have, in fact, been a form of theft, in terms of copyrights and royalties].

An example of Couser’s work from this period illustrates this tendency. It is in his book *Altered Egos: Authority in American Autobiography* (1989) that Couser first raises the issue of ventriloquism. The chapter “*Black Elk Speaks* With Forked Tongue” sets out to establish the extent to which the published autobiographical narrative of *Black Elk Speaks* reflects the concerns and cultural assumptions of its writer rather than its narrator. The book was a collaboration between Black Elk, a Lakota Elder and holy man, and John G. Neihardt, an American poet. Couser makes the point that among Indian autobiographies, *Black Elk Speaks* was until recently read as a paradigm of respectful cross-cultural collaboration. For many Native Americans (as for example?), the book was an authoritative account of Lakota spirituality. For Euramerican critics (as for example?), [I am summarising Couser here and I feel that recycling his examples would be borrowing from his article somewhat too heavily. Interested readers would surely seek out Couser’s article itself for details. If you are uneasy about this you can delete these two sentences without injury to the argument] the book stood apart from other anthropological life histories of Native Americans because of its literary merit. According to Couser, the book’s popularity is to a great measure due to “its stylistic distinction: it sounds the way most readers believe a Lakota holy man would, or should, sound in translation” (1989, 191). Yet this translation process involves multiple levels of mediation. Black Elk spoke in Lakota; his words were translated into ‘Indian English’ by

his son; these were then rendered into Standard English by Neihardt dictating to his daughter, who recorded the translation stenographically, producing a transcript which Neihardt later edited; thus, there is no possibility of comparing the narrative to an original or 'authentic' Lakota version. Couser, however, argues convincingly that the book is "an act of bicultural ventriloquism" (203), its phrasings and, in fact, its opening and closing passages identified as inventions of the writing partner. Further, Couser extends the metaphor to include all collaboratively produced life writing:

Neihardt's narrative speaks with a forked tongue in several senses.... It speaks with a cloven tongue in the way that all collaborative autobiography does because it conflates two consciousnesses (and in this case languages and cultures) in one undifferentiated voice. It also misleads by not fully acknowledging the extent and tendencies of its editing. The book also falsifies because of the contradictory senses in which it *contains* the tensions between Wasichus and Lakotas.... (T)he editing is clearly implicated in – and thus encodes – cultural imperialism (208).

For Couser, this undifferentiated voice, spoken "through the mask of Black Elk" (203), is primarily that of its writer, Neihardt.

At the same time that Couser was beginning to use the metaphor of ventriloquism in the context of *Black Elk Speaks*, anthropologist Clifford Geertz was employing a similar terminology in reference to one of several authorial strategies which he identified in ethnographic writing. "There are a number of these pretensions," Geertz writes, "but they all tend to come down in one way or another to an attempt to get round the un-get-roundable fact that all ethnographical descriptions are homemade, that they are the describer's descriptions, not those of the described" (1988, 144-145). The first of these identified by Geertz is "ethnographic ventriloquism: the claim to speak not just *about* another form of life but to speak from within it" (145). The term began to circulate in Australian debates over the politics of representation in Aboriginal studies, with Jackie Huggins and Kay Saunders titling a co-written article "Defying The Ethnographic Ventriloquists: Race, Gender And The Legacies Of Colonialism" (1993). Here, Huggins explains her doubts regarding the ability of non-Aboriginal researchers to convey Aboriginal understandings even when they record Aboriginal testimony:

I am yet to witness or be convinced that non-Aboriginal researchers can penetrate the veneer that Aboriginal testimonies present....The researcher moulds the raw data into a narrative which then becomes a resource or

commodity. Once this occurs the control of the informant's experience becomes modified, codified and subsumed into the culture of the researcher (1993, 66-67).

Huggins' argument rehearses that made in other contexts of collaboration: that the concerns of the speaking subject and the contours of her subjectivity will be shaped by the assumptions of the dominant culture operating through the one who writes. She will be ventriloquised through the process of collaborating, and while neither participant may necessarily be conscious of or intend such an outcome, in this strategy of reading collaborative or multi-participant life writing, appropriation and subjugation seem to be a given.

Although those involved in collaborative life writing may not intend to distort or falsify the voice they produce on the page, readers are often aware of a seepage or contamination between the discursive tenor of the one who speaks and that of the one who writes and are prone to identify this seepage as a form of textual dissemblance. Couser, certainly, uses the trope of ventriloquism in Black Elk's case to conceptualise a superimposition of voice that deceives by meeting too well its readers' assumptions of how a Lakota Elder should sound. Interestingly, a similar expectation can be found underlying readerly dissatisfaction with Native American life writing from its very beginnings. William M. Clements cites a reviewer of *The Life of Ma-Ka-tai-me-she-kia-kiak or Black Hawk*, one of the earliest published Native American life narratives, who wrote of the text in 1835:

The only drawback upon our credence is the intermixture of courtly phrases, and the figures of speech, which our novelists are so fond of putting into the mouths of Indians. These are, doubtless, to be attributed to the bad taste of Black Hawk's amanuensis (1996, 2).

In this case the writing partner is charged with creating a voice for the Indigenous subject that falls short of the readers' expectations of how a Native American voice should sound. This contrasts with Couser's objections yet the primary assumption from 1835 to the 1980s remains the same. Readers perceive writers putting words "into the mouths of Indians" and thus ventriloquising their textual subjects.

The charge of ventriloquism has similarly vexed the reception of one of the earliest examples of Indigenous Australian autobiography published in Australia. Tim Rowse has

recently commented on parallels between North American Indigenous autobiography and Indigenous Australian autobiographical discourse and in doing so devotes substantial attention to *I, the Aboriginal*, the life story of Waipuldanya, or Philip Roberts, as written by Douglas Lockwood, a text Rowse suggests may “arguably” be the first Indigenous autobiography from this continent. Published in 1962, the book won the Adelaide *Advertiser*’s prize that year for a work on a Northern Territory theme, and has since been through numerous re-printings. In his analysis, Rowse draws on a review of the book written at the time of its publication by anthropologist A.P. Elkin. Although generally favourable in his review, Elkin directs the majority of his commentary to illustrating the disjunction between the textual voice of Waipuldanya and that which readers could reasonably expect of an Aboriginal man who, while literate, had received only basic schooling. While for Elkin the content of Waipuldanya’s narrative offers a “grand” and a “true story,” he is somewhat dismayed by the “literary adornment” of Lockwood’s style. Elkin writes that “some of us are jarred by the exhibition of the author’s wide reading through the mouth of ‘I, the Aboriginal,’ whose education at the Roper River Mission School was very limited” (1963, 295). In other words, reading in the first-person voice of Waipuldanya phrasings that could only have been Lockwood’s revealed the dissociation of voice, the ventriloquy, operating within the text. Rowse makes the point that early Indigenous texts such as *I, the Aboriginal* have been largely neglected in current theoretical and analytical reading of Aboriginal literature, due in some measure to the perception of these texts as tainted by this type of editorial contamination. Rowse cites Colin Johnson’s reading of such early texts as “compromised” narratives and “captured” texts, their Indigenous voice subject to non-Indigenous crafting and control. I have commented on Johnson’s critique of collaborative Aboriginal life writing elsewhere, but here I raise the comparison with the reception of Indigenous texts in North America to draw attention to the common tendency to read collaboration as ventriloquism.³

In contexts as geographically and culturally remote from these examples as from each other, the charge of ventriloquism can be found in critical reading such as that of nineteenth century Pacific castaway narratives, or the analysis of the collaborative production of first-person narratives of Deaf subjects in the late twentieth century. Vanessa Smith, for instance, in her study *Literary Culture and the Pacific: Nineteenth*

Century Textual Encounters (1998), uses phrases such as “editorial ventriloquism” and references to the editing process as “less transcription than ventriloquisation” in her commentary on one collaboratively produced text (1998, 37, 28). Similarly, H-Dirksen L. Bauman writes of “discursive ventriloquism” in an analysis of the problematic relationship between signer and interpreter in the production of autobiographical narratives of Deaf subjects in contexts including court appearances, doctor appointments or counseling sessions (1996, 47). The charge has become so much of a truism that the highly respected life writing theorist Paul John Eakin in his recent work on the subject writes in words that recall Geertz’s phrasing: “there is no getting around the fact that ventriloquism, making others talk, is by definition a central rhetorical phenomenon of these narratives” (1999, 181).

Wherever two write in the voice of one, wherever one who otherwise would be silent finds the means of enunciation through another, it seems that the suspicion of ventriloquism hovers around their efforts, providing a ready explanation for the dynamics of textual production. Clearly, the risks of collaborative life writing are genuine. Undeniably, there have been many examples of collaboration which have been exploitative, where Indigenous narratives have been appropriated, where Indigenous voices have been filtered through the discursive sieve of the coloniser, or have been outright fabrications. To acknowledge the risks of collaboration, however, is not to accede to the view that such works are inevitably flawed, compromised, or disingenuous.

The critical purchase of the ventriloquism metaphor as applied to collaborative life writing was questioned as early as a decade ago by Anne E. Goldman, in her article, “Is That What She Said? The Politics of Collaborative Autobiography” (1993). In her analysis of editor/narrator relations in the production of feminist ethnographic autobiography, she interrogates the assumptions of literary, sociological and anthropological studies which read the speaking subject of collaborative texts as “a textualized object, malleable to the researcher’s own interests and academic uses” (1993, 180). She takes to task Lejeune, among others, for his failure to acknowledge narratorial resistance to editorial appropriation. As she pithily summarises, “collaboration does not mean capitulation” (184). She writes: “Recognizing that an oral history is produced out of

a context of political inequality does not mean that we should dismiss it, a priori, as a form of ventriloquism for the Voice of Authority” (201).

Goldman’s cautionary words concerning the limited utility of the ventriloquism metaphor, however, seem to have had little impact. Eakin acknowledges Goldman’s article as “making a case for the resisting informant, who manages to withstand the editor’s control” (1999, 174), but goes on to claim that because of the chasm in terms of “language, class, and culture” often separating the participants, “the potential for exploitation – for colonization – is inevitable” (174). This critical insistence upon editorial dominance in collaborative writing means that the charge of ventriloquism continues to be made with scant regard for the way such criticism actually re-enacts the processes of containment that its analysis delineates. Positioning the narrator as the creation or the “creature” of his or her writing partner in effect reproduces the processes of disenfranchisement whereby the subject of the life story is once more subordinated to dominant discursive formations. The binary figure of the ventriloquist and his dummy conveniently but falsely simplifies the intricacies of collaboration in life writing by reading the narrator as a puppet whose strings are the expectations and restraints of dominant discourse played through the fingers of editors or co-writers. The charge of putting words into another’s mouth, shaping another’s utterances to suit the interests of the one wielding the pen or working the keyboard, simply cannot account for the complexity of the collaborative exchange, nor for the variety of collaborative engagements taking place through which Indigenous subjects are finding the means to achieve forms of representation over which they can and do exert significant control. I want to suggest, along with Goldman, that the accusation does little to further our understanding of collaborative life writing and that it may be time to look for new metaphors with which to read the complexity of collaborative voice.

The difficulty with voice as an analytical concept is the potential slippage towards a naïve reading strategy of yearning for the real – a nostalgia for an uncomplicated reading experience which would permit one access from the voice upon the page to the autobiographical subject beyond. Voice remains obstinately bound to a subject and entails the recognition of agency. This recognition is crucial in life writing where the one who speaks is not only textual but related inextricably to the human agent whose efforts

have made the text possible. The assertion seems to contradict the insights of poststructuralists like Barthes who insists that “the *I* which writes the text... is never more than a paper-*I*” (1984, 161). Yet there is a theoretical double bind at work here, recognized by Eakin, and acknowledged by Barthes in his own autobiographical texts.⁴ In *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (1977), he writes that “the voice is always *already* dead, and it is by a kind of desperate denial that we call it: living” (1977, 68). Yet elsewhere in his autobiographical work he comments on the delight he experiences in “amphibologies” or “double words” whose two often mutually exclusive meanings he insists on keeping “as if one were winking at the other and as if the word’s meanings were in that wink, so that *one and the same word*, in *one and the same sentence*, means at *one and the same time* two different things, and so that one delights, semantically, in one by the other” (72). Significantly, in the list of amphibologies which follow, the final term offered is “*Voix* (bodily organ and grammatical diathesis)” (73). Thus, while insisting throughout his work that “*the subject is merely an effect of language*” (79), Barthes gestures here toward the figured simultaneity of bodily and textual voice. It is an implicit recognition that voice, constituted by discourse, must also issue from a body. In another context, this double bind is reformulated by Judith Butler who writes: “As much as a perspective on the subject requires an evacuation of the first person, a suspension of the ‘I’ in the interests of subject formation, so a reassumption of that first-person perspective is compelled by the question of agency” (1997, 29).

As readers of collaborative Indigenous life writing, we know that the voice upon the page is deeply related to a human agent who lives, or has lived, and whose experiences of that life have become a written first-person narrative. We know that that written narrative has achieved its shape substantially, but not entirely, through the assistance of another, or others. Many readers will assume that the dominant culture’s institutional, disciplinary and market forces have borne upon the process. Some will also recognise that Indigenous discourse and cultural protocols have been significant in determining the contours of the narrative. Other readers will be aware that, in many cases, Indigenous language and spiritual traditions inform the narrative as well. In light of these assumptions, to read for a collaborative voice is not to long for an ‘authentic’ Indigenous voice. Yet neither can a collaborative text be adequately read as a performance of ventriloquism in which the

Indigenous voice is a textual deceit, the disjunctive product of insurmountable power relations. To read collaborative life writing is to listen for a voice which emerges not only from dissociation or dissonance, but also from consonance, resonance, and assonance. Assonance, especially, may be a useful concept as it allows for the critical recognition not only of resemblance or partial agreement but also, by way of de Certeau, the potential overlapping of local affiliations without which collaboration would not have eventuated.⁵

In Australia, anthropologist Jeremy Beckett has made this same point. Comparing Australian Aboriginal life writing to the Latin American genre of *testimonio*, Beckett draws attention to critical work surrounding the latter in which it has been suggested that “the resistance value of *testimonio*” may be located in those points of tension “generated by the disjuncture” between various subjects contributing to the narrative formation and the textual construction. Beckett finds this useful but suggests that

the preoccupation with difference and disjunction tends to obscure the conjunctions which enable the testimonialist to work with interlocutor and to reach a non-indigenous audience, and still sustain some kind of recognition among at least sections of his or her own people. Without these conjunctions the *testimonio* is impossible, even though the speaker’s rhetorical strategy may be to deny them. It seems to me that the tension ... is also found in the space between conjunction and disjunction (2001, 130-131).

This comes closest to my understanding of voice in collaborative texts. Voice, as de Certeau writes, is “a sign of the body that comes and speaks” (1988, 341), and like all signs, it exists in a network of relationships. How that voice reaches the page, from whom, with whom, through whom, for whom, because of whom, or in spite of whom all contribute to the inflections that may be detected. Voice is a product of tensions, of forces that draw and pull, of pressures that may be productive as well as obstructive. Reading the collaborative voice means reading the full range of these tensions. In so doing it may be possible to overcome the temptation to rely upon the binary figure of the ventriloquist and his dummy, a reductive metaphor which slights both producers and readers of collaborative life writing.

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¹ Providing 'voice to the voiceless' here alludes firstly to scholarship which reads first-person testimony as political empowerment, as in "Auto/Biography of the Oppressed: The Power of Testimonial," by Allen Carey-Webb, who sees the life histories of Indigenous people as "ideal texts in which students and teachers alike attempt to hear the voice of the voiceless" (1991, 44) then secondly to the poststructuralist critique of autobiographical representation as in Paul de Man's "Autobiography as De-facement," as my argument will demonstrate.

² I also thank Wenche Ommundson, who supervised my PhD thesis, for suggesting that I consider Australian convict narratives for their potential similarities with other collaboratively produced texts.

³ See my article "Critical Injuries: collaborative Indigenous life writing and the ethics of criticism," for a discussion of the repercussions of critical strategies such as those employed by Johnson.

⁴ Eakin, in *Touching the World*, has commented on Barthes' "doubly problematic" utterance in *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*. "Do I not know that, *in the field of the subject, there is no referent?*" Barthes writes, posing a question that Eakin recognises as containing both the abandonment of reference and a recognition of its inescapability (1992, 3-23).

⁵ De Certeau suggests a reading strategy that focuses on the vowel as "the site of utterance," the location "first and foremost of 'home'" (2000, 180). He discusses the vowel as that which distinguishes patois from the national language, local inflections being heard primarily in differences in vowel pronunciation. Assonance in this context, therefore, would be an overlapping of local affiliations through which the collaborative text may have been generated.