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'Some Stories Need to Be Told, Then Told Again': Yvonne Johnson and Rudy Wiebe

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‘Some Stories Need to Be Told, Then Told Again’

Stolen Life: Journey of a Cree Woman (Wiebe and Johnson, 1998) is the story of Yvonne Johnson’s experiences of childhood sexual abuse and incest, her repeated experiences of rape through her teenage and adult years, and her participation, with three others, in the 1989 killing and sexual abuse of Leonard Skwarok, a man they barely knew but whom they believed to be an abuser of children, and whom Johnson believed to be a threat to her own young children. Her story is, profoundly, a woman’s story, a story of violation by men: by her father, by his father, by her brother, by their acquaintances, by police and by strangers. It is a story of trauma, recovered and retold, while Johnson served a life-twenty-five sentence for first degree murder. In being written from prison, it is also the story of a woman’s experience of the Canadian criminal justice system, her arrest, trial and sentencing, and her incarceration – for the first part of her sentence in Kingston’s Prison for Women (P4W) and later in the then-recently opened Okimaw Ohci Healing Lodge. *Stolen Life* is the story of a Cree woman writing back to structures of power and patriarchy that have attempted to silence her. It is also a Cree woman’s story of her recovery of identity through women’s rituals and ceremony. And it is a story recovered and retold with the help of many, but primarily with the help of a Rudy Wiebe, a white, middle-aged man. It is this issue of collaboration and gender in Wiebe and Johnson’s book that I would like to address in this present essay, which is for this writer a returning to Johnson’s story.

Twice previously I have offered critical commentary on *Stolen Life*. In the first, I discussed ethical concerns relating to critical analysis of collaborative life writing that focused upon the interventions of the editor without similar attention to the contributions and the agency of the autobiographical narrator. I suggested that engagement and dialogue with all those involved in a collaborative writing project could lead to encounters with metaphors, with interpretations, that might otherwise be overlooked (Jacklin, 2004). In the second, I attempted to demonstrate such an encounter, as my understanding of *Stolen Life* and the power within its pages – for good and, in some cases, for harm – benefited from speaking to Yvonne Johnson and Rudy Wiebe, and especially from learning that Johnson wished her book to be thought of as a spirit bundle, a Cree power object needing to be approached, to be opened, with care (Jacklin, 2007c). In response to this second essay, one anonymous reviewer noted that I had inexplicably neglected to discuss how gender might have impacted upon Johnson and Wiebe’s collaboration. This essay, then, is a return to Johnson’s story, to Wiebe and Johnson’s book, and an effort to think through aspects of their collaboration as one that works across gender as well as cultural heritage. It is also an attempt to apply the concept of unsocial sociability to writing processes, particularly in regards to Johnson’s textual contributions to *Stolen Life*.

Indigenous cultures commonly recognise that social discourse is accompanied by a responsibility for the consequences of one’s public utterance,

and that quietness and care may at times outweigh the compulsion to speak. As Okanagan First Nations writer Jeanette Armstrong explains:

One of the central instructions to my people is to practise quietness, to listen and speak only if you know the full meaning of what you say. It is said that you cannot call your words back once they are uttered so you are responsible for all which results from your words. It is said that, for those reasons, it is best to prepare very seriously and carefully to make public contributions (Cardinal and Armstrong, 1991: 90).

By implication, some forms of speaking, or writing, risk violating such social codes. Rudy Wiebe's statement that 'To begin a story, someone in some way must break a particular silence' is an acknowledgement of this very risk (Wiebe and Johnson, 1998: 3). This sentence opens the first chapter of *Stolen Life* and readers are soon aware that in Johnson's life, violation has been normalised and social codes are very much broken. In this life writing text, unsocial sociability is bound inextricably to violation.

Johnson and Wiebe's collaboration begins with her sending him a letter, written from Kingston's Prison for Women, in which Johnson introduces herself, explaining that she is a great-great granddaughter of the Plains Cree chief Big Bear. This letter marks the opening of their collaboration because, as Wiebe admits, Johnson's mention of Big Bear drew him into her story as nothing else could have. Johnson says that when he replied to her letter, Wiebe said, 'I don't think I can get you to understand how much Big Bear has meant to me in my life' (Jacklin, 2007a: 38). Big Bear had, in fact fascinated Wiebe throughout his writing career. His first novel, *Peace Shall Destroy Many* (Wiebe, 1962), included a character who was a descendant of the Cree chief,

and his 1973 book, *The Temptations of Big Bear*, won the Governor-General's Award for fiction. Reading Wiebe's book about her ancestor while she was in prison prompted Johnson to write to him. Her letter begins:

Howdy Howdy Stranger

My name is Yvonne Johnson. I am currently an inmate at the Prison for Women in Kingston, Ontario. I am thirty-one years old. I am a Cree from Saskatchewan, that is where my ancestors come from. We were accepted back into my grandmother's rez after my mother was kicked out for marrying my father, who is a White from Great Falls, Montana. My grandmother Flora was a Baptiste, my grandfather was called John Bear, I lost him a few years back now; and my grandfather's grandfather was the Cree chief Big Bear (Wiebe and Johnson, 1998: 3),

She goes on in her letter to relate her story to the context of her family's experiences of disempowerment and dispossession, which followed the imprisonment of Big Bear in 1885 in the aftermath of the North-West Rebellion, and have continued to the present day. Johnson tells Wiebe that she was impressed by how much he knew of her family's history, and by his sensitive writing of her ancestor's story. She asks Wiebe for his help, not with her case or her sentence – she does not at this point say why she is imprisoned – but with her desire for information. She writes:

Please help me share what it is you know, and how you got it. How is it you came to know as much as you do? Were you led? What was the force behind you? Who are you? Why did you choose Big Bear to write about? What sparked your interest in this powerful man of long ago? I wish to clear his name and to recover his medicine bundle as I try to find my lost family, and only under our Bear Spirit will it ever be true (1998: 9).

With this letter Yvonne Johnson initiates the collaborative process. She sends out this invitation to Wiebe to enter her story, to help her reclaim her narrative and understand it in relation to Big Bear's legacy. For Wiebe, at this point even

without knowing her crime or the circumstances that led to it, Johnson's story is irresistible.

Her story, however, is not only one of colonial dispossession. It is also, horribly, a story of male violence and sexual abuse perpetrated by both family members and strangers, beginning when Johnson was two and continuing through her childhood and into adult life. Shortly after sending her first letter to Wiebe, Johnson also sent him a copy of the witness statement she had made to police not long before, regarding her first memories of sexual assault. The extract from the thirty-page handwritten statement begins:

My first attack happened when I was between two to three years old. ... The attack on me was by a grown man, by my brother Leon [eight and a half years old at that time], and later on by three other boys, one was tall with red hair. And one boy was our neighbour, and would be in later years as well (334, parentheses in original).

Johnson was unable to tell others – her mother, particularly – of what was being done to her because she suffered from a cleft palate that impaired her ability to speak and others' ability to understand her. 'Mom could never understand me,' Johnson writes. 'I would try and talk, but she was always so busy – so many kids – and she never had time to figure me out. Sometimes she'd just sit and cry, "What do you want? I don't know what you're saying, I can't do anything.'" So I'd wind up shutting up, or crying' (29). Johnson's inability to communicate was also related to her age and the traumatic impact of the violence inflicted upon her. She could not, at the time, tell anyone what was being done to her because, as she explains:

At that age I had nothing to compare, that act is all I had. You learn something because people tell you the story around it – well, this was not my case. I had no story. I registered what happened to me as pain, hate, bitterness, yelling, crying, mass confusion with no explanation [...] (337).

The phrase, ‘I had no story,’ is crucial because, although it applies to the child’s incomprehension at the age of two or three to the sexual abuse she was experiencing and extends to her eventual suppression of memories of this abuse, it also applies to how Johnson perceived herself in prison, sentenced to a minimum of twenty-five years without parole for her involvement in the killing of a man, and serving her time in a federal prison in Kingston, Ontario, distant from her family and community in Saskatchewan and Alberta. Johnson is well aware that P4W is a prison in which numerous women had died, their stories untold. A counsellor, a woman of First Nations heritage who worked with Johnson in prison, encouraged her to write and encouraged Wiebe to help her, so she could regain her story – take possession of it, take control of its telling, as Johnson had been unable to do during her trial, and as the many women who had died in P4W had been unable to tell their stories. However, this counsellor tells Wiebe:

She’s not capable of writing a publishable book, and never in P4W. [...] In certain ways she doesn’t grasp the magnitude of her own story. People who are abused are ashamed of what happened to them. There’s never been such a story out of P4W; dozens of women have died going in there, and it’s closing soon. A kind of memorial, it needs a book (40-41).

And although the counsellor feels that Johnson does not recognise the significance of her story, Johnson herself is clear in her commitment to its telling. The witness statement cited above, and the letter to Wiebe which

followed, are both part of that commitment to tell her story: one that she knows is also the story of other abused women (338).

Wiebe is well-aware of the tensions that would inevitably result from his becoming involved in Johnson's telling her story. In response to the counsellor's comments about why Johnson needs his help, Wiebe reflects that although he knows about writing books, he knows 'nothing about the one this will have to be,' and he replies, 'I'm an aging, professional man, exactly the kind of "powerful White" who's so often created problems for her. Isn't there someone else who should work with her, a woman, a Native writer?' The counsellor answers: 'Vonnie trusts you. Honesty is the key for her, no bullshit, no avoiding. When you're in her shoes, maybe a White male is safer to trust than a Native' (41).

This statement implies that the abuse inflicted upon Johnson came mostly from Native men. It is made in the months just prior to the 1993 trial of Johnson's brother, Leon, for incest and sexual assault against their sister Karen. Seven months later Yvonne will bring similar charges against him, as will their cousin Darlene (Bear) Jacques. That Native men, including her brother Leon, contributed to the abuse Johnson experienced is evident throughout *Stolen Life*. But that the abuse came only from Native men, and that Yvonne should then be more trusting of Whites than Natives, is not a completely accurate assessment of Johnson's experiences, which become clearer as the narrative progresses. In ensuing chapters Johnson recounts that her subjection to incest occurred not only from her brother, but from her Norwegian-heritage father, and from his

father as well. She accuses her White grandfather, 'Fightin' Louie' as he was known, of sexually abusing her when she was four years old and he was ninety (136). She recounts her father first abusing her when she came home crying and traumatised after being gang raped by White police (123-124). In a later chapter, as Johnson prepares to recount a significant experience involving her Cree grandparents and ancestral land she writes:

My White father and grandfather abused me, but my Cree grandfather, John Bear, never touched me. [...] When I was alone with them on the reserve, he left me undisturbed with Grandma Flora; he never so much as looked directly at me that I can remember. He must have known how deeply troubled I was as a child... (198-199).

Being White, then, is not necessarily a factor in Wiebe being granted Johnson's trust, as the counsellor suggests it may be. Nor is being White necessarily the impediment Wiebe fears it could be. The trust between them, rather, develops and strengthens from the sense both share that their collaboration is based upon a mutual recognition that traverses race and gender. Like the counsellor who advocates for Johnson's story to be written, Wiebe recognises how important her narrative is and agrees to assist with its telling. And like Johnson's Bear grandfather, Wiebe sees how deeply troubled she is, and knows that working with her to recover her story will test both of them to their limits.

It should be clear from the comments above that *Stolen Life* does not offer a seamless first-person account of a woman's life. Collaborative life writing often attempts to smooth over the potentially troubling fact that the narrating subject – the first-person narrator of the life experiences – in most cases has

not, herself, written the narrative. She has, rather, told her story to another who assists with its writing. Most frequently, if details of the narrative exchange and the editing process are provided, they appear in threshold material, such as prefaces, introductions, or afterwords. In fixing commentary and reflection upon the collaborative processes at the margins of the text, the main body of narrative retains an appearance of autobiographical cohesion, offering the reader an experience of first-person narration unimpeded by markers of its dialogic making. While this simplifies the tremendous variety of collaborative life writing – many texts do maintain dialogic markers throughout – it is a fair indication of a common type of collaborative text, one in which mediation is acknowledged in introductory material but downplayed or elided in the substance of the first-person autobiographical account which follows.

Readers of *Stolen Life*, however, face an over-abundance of pronominally marked contributors to the narrative. The two dominant voices are, of course, Johnson's and Wiebe's. Both are first-person contributors to the text. In the opening chapters, Wiebe dominates, as he constructs for the reader the outlines of Johnson's story through the contexts of her introductory letter, their meetings in prison, their conversations, and their agreement to work together to write her book. Johnson's first-person narrative, it is important to remember, is drawn as much from her writing – her seventeen prison notebooks, her letters to Wiebe, her written comments on court records and legal documents – as it is from her conversations with Wiebe. And as the chapters progress, Wiebe as narrator recedes and Johnson's first-person account takes over. As well as Johnson and

Wiebe's narratives, however, there are newspaper accounts, court records, 'cell shots' which are transcripts of conversations secretly taped in jail-cells, statements given to police by witnesses, interviews with investigators and lawyers involved, and substantial material from Johnson's father, whom Wiebe interviewed. Although selected and incorporated by Wiebe, these other voices work dialogically to complicate the reader's interaction with the events portrayed. The result of this overlay or juxtaposition of many voices is that the reader must negotiate the multiplicity of perspectives involved in each event recounted and reflect upon the partiality of each.

The greatest challenge, however, to the reader's negotiation with autobiographical voice in *Stolen Life* remains that of disentangling the contributions of the two co-writers, for if *Stolen Life* is women's life writing, it is crucial to ask how Yvonne Johnson's contributions to textual construction hold their own ground and maintain a distinct voice within the overarching narrative frame that Wiebe provides for their book. It is here that I believe the concept of unsocial sociability may be useful. Writing is a process of social engagement; life writing an effort to draw readers towards an understanding of the circumstances that have shaped the narrating/narrated subject and her interactions with the world. In its various forms, life writing shares this fundamental aim: to make the events of a life lived by one comprehensible to another who turns the pages, reading. This is certainly how Wiebe understood his collaboration with Johnson. His obligation in writing, he believed, was to make Johnson's story accessible to readers who might otherwise turn away,

unable or unwilling to face the violence that had overwhelmed Johnson's life (See Jacklin 2007a).

It is not surprising, then, that critical commentary on the book has tended to focus on Wiebe's interventions: his reliance on the generic features of 'the journalistic or documentary novel,' his application of 'the resources of fiction' to an auto/biographical text, his relentless concern for chronology and his efforts to establish 'coherency' in a woman's narrative that has been rendered chaotic and incoherent through her life-long experiences of violence, sexual abuse and trauma.¹ The third of these comments just cited is from a chapter by Julia Emberley, in which the critic makes the extraordinary claim that when Wiebe in his preface of the book refers to 'the two authors,' the reader should not make the simple assumption that 'Wiebe is one author and Johnson the other,' because this 'Other Author' is ambiguous, 'a mythical, if not transcendent, one,' which she then identifies as 'the *spirit* of the text and the law – and embodied in Johnson.' Emberley continues:

It is this mystical author who guides Wiebe's desire for a non-violent, rational, textual resolution to colonial violence. When I write that Yvonne Johnson does not figure as a conventional author, I am not saying that she is not recognizable as a co-writer, but it is Wiebe who put her narrative threads together and carefully crafted the book as a whole (2007: 225).

Throughout her analysis, Emberley emphasises the process of 'narrative containment' by which Wiebe attempts to 'account for' or make coherent Johnson's life story (2007: 213) and she argues that Wiebe's efforts result in 'Yvonne Johnson's stolen life becom[ing ...] an allegory of colonial territorial dispossession,' at the expense of the reader's full focus upon the crimes of

‘sexual violence toward indigenous women, [...] a fact that in and of itself is general to the history of imperialism, colonization, and globalization, neither supplementary nor apparitional’ (2007: 232).

It is understandable that Emberley, a deeply committed feminist scholar, chooses to interpret the woman’s narrative recounted in *Stolen Life* as a contained narrative. It is certainly the case that Wiebe goes to great lengths to provide a framing narrative that constructs a sense of coherence. To use Paul John Eakin’s term (1998), Wiebe is meticulous in his provision of ‘the story of the story.’ From Wiebe’s chapters readers gain an understanding of the complex process of his collaboration with Johnson, spanning six years of visits in prison, letter writing and phone calls, as well as Johnson’s writing of her prison note-books, Wiebe’s visits with Johnson’s father who provided material relating to her childhood and adolescence, Wiebe’s attendance at the trials of Johnson’s brother Leon for sexual assault against her sister Karen and later against Yvonne their cousin Darlene, and, eventually, Johnson’s narration in the presence of a Native elder the events of the night of the killing of Charles Skwarok. Each stage of their long process of narrative exchange is detailed. Although not necessarily arranged in the book in sequence, their meetings and conversations are identified by date and place and the intent reader could construct a time-line of Johnson’s writing, of her and Wiebe’s narrative exchanges, and of her coming to terms with the telling of her story.

These markers of place and time and mode of narrative exchange are myriad in Wiebe’s sections of text. The introductory letter from Johnson, for

example, is identified by the date Wiebe receives it, 18 November 1992. Three hundred and thirty-odd pages later we are told that Johnson gave her witness statement describing her first memories of abuse on 2 November 1992, which would have been before writing to Wiebe (Wiebe and Johnson, 1998: 334). In the second chapter, we read:

In her first journal, begun in May 1991, a few weeks after she was taken to Kingston and a year and a half before she contacted me, she states, 'I wish I could write my life-story book. Maybe then and only then will my life be revealed, and it might help the next abused and hurting person whom the world judges and condemns as already dead. But this dead person, me, is not beyond help. Maybe in death I'll be of some use' (40).

And when she finds herself able to recount what she did, and how she contributed to Skwarok's death, Wiebe fixes the narrative moment in time:

On 26 December 1996, in the Elder's apartment at the Okimaw Ohci Healing Lodge, she speaks for hours into an audio recorder. [...] On 29 December, Yvonne personally gives me a copy of the tapes when I visit her in the presence of Pauline Shirt [an Elder]. I began listening to them on 2 January 1997 (395, 396).

Markers of mode – whether the particular portion of narrative is written or spoken – are equally frequent. In places in the text, narrative exchange is situated during a particular visit: Wiebe visiting Johnson at the Okimaw Ohci Healing Lodge, or earlier visits at Kingston's Prison for Women. Some episodes are constructed from multiple narrative exchanges, and Wiebe marks these with phrases such as 'Yvonne writes to me in a letter' (91); then, 'Yvonne laughs at a lighter memory' (92), followed a page later by '...she writes me' (93), indicating that the textual narrative is one that has accrued through retellings, in both speech and writing.

My point in drawing attention to these markers is that their prolixity convinces the reader of two important points. One is, as stated, that each step of the narrative's accrual is allotted to a particular place and time. They help to establish that the maker of the book, Wiebe, has been scrupulous in his documentation of the process of assembling the story. They also demonstrate that Johnson's narrative is one that she has worked to construct, to retrieve, and to retell, over a period of years, not just with Wiebe, but with multiple other interlocutors including Native Elders who counselled her in prison and fellow prisoners belonging to the Native Sisterhood. They also move the reader towards the most confronting and brutal sections of the book, chapters in which the markers of narrative exchange disappear completely, chapters in which Wiebe's textual presence recedes – his pronominal presence vanishes – and chapters in which Yvonne, as narrator, dominates.

Emberley's comments on authorial figuring, cited above, move her to suggest that it would be an interesting project

not to try to situate Johnson as an author of *Stolen Life*, in order to respond to established notions of authority claimed through identity and representation, but to seek to understand how her textual contributions de-authorize and de-mystify the violence that is constitutive of the colonial law of narrative and the narrative force of colonial law (2007: 225-226).

To a certain extent Emberley attempts this. She comments upon Johnson's contributions to the earlier chapters, those in which she and Wiebe share textual space, in order to demonstrate the disruptive force of Johnson's memories and her recovered narratives of sexual abuse, rape and incest. She comments on the 'unfocused' quality of the narrative, 'the lack of coherency, the fragments, the

bits and pieces' (2007: 221-223), to make the argument that Wiebe's efforts towards narrative coherence are doomed to fail so long as 'the originary violence of incest and sexual abuse' are not fully and comprehensibly acknowledged (2007: 224).

To take up Emberley's suggestion that a critic should read with care Johnson's textual contributions to gain an understanding of how they 'de-authorize and de-mystify' the violence through which her life has been lived and determined, I wish to focus upon the first of the chapters in which she is the sole narrator. Chapter Six, 'Growing Up in a Beer Bottle' is delivered entirely through Johnson's first-person narration and, although previous chapters have included lengthy accounts of her memories of sexual abuse and incest, in this chapter the narrative develops into a detailed analysis of abuse suffered not only by Yvonne, but by her sisters, her mother, and by many Cree women in Canada's prairie provinces. Here Johnson's narrative supports Wiebe's earlier established argument that contemporary Cree experiences need to be understood in the context of colonial dispossession. She sets her own experiences of sexual abuse and violence amidst the historical processes of dispossession resulting from the imprisonment of Big Bear and the scattering of his descendants. As she crosses the border from Montana into Alberta she reflects:

A hundred years ago Big Bear's son, Little Bear, escaped from the Canadian prairies to hide in the mountains of Montana; I was born and raised all over those mountains; now I was running back to hide north of the border. My mother, my sisters, me – running, looking over our shoulders, hiding – Big Bear's descendants, we had become nomads again; we were hunters hunting whatever we could find to stay ahead of

hunger and homelessness. Still running from Whites (Wiebe and Johnson, 1998: 152).

But the running she emphasises here, the flight of her mother, sisters and her, is a running from violence, male violence, as much as it is an uprootedness resulting from colonial dispossession. She and her sister Minnie are leaving Butte, Montana, because of threats from the local police, by whom she has already been raped, and because she feared recurring violence from her father, who had recently raped her and threatens to beat her.

Sexual abuse and violence and colonial dispossession are entangled, as Johnson's narrative makes clear. As she recounts her, her sisters' and her mother's experiences, it becomes evident that abuse and shame have been normalised across generations of Cree women. Johnson writes: 'I was never taught what it meant to be a woman – except what I understood to be the shame of it' (165). Yvonne's sister Minnie epitomises the acceptance of violation and shame experienced by many Indigenous women. Johnson writes: 'By age nineteen, Minnie had already resigned herself to take whatever kind of violence she got battered with. However often it happened, she simply refused to think about it' (163). Johnson describes one winter night when Minnie turned up at their mother's house in Winnipeg near frozen and unable to speak. She had been hitchhiking drunk, 'got raped and left naked,' but had managed to dress herself and walk over thirty miles in sub-zero weather. 'Sometimes,' Johnson writes, 'I can't believe what women have to survive' (161).

The violence to women in this chapter includes beatings by police – Yvonne witnesses her mother being bashed by Winnipeg police (159-160) –

and intimations of the sexual assault of a young Native girl, 'no older than six' by workers in a detention home in Lethbridge where Johnson, in her teens at the time, is held for a brief period (156). Throughout the chapter, Johnson maintains that the experiences she recounts are common ones: 'I know I'm part of the hidden, sometimes forgotten-for-a-little-while-but-never-erased sorrow of the many people I knew who, like me then, lived on Winnipeg's skid, one of the biggest aboriginal peoples' hell-holes on earth' (164). In this 'hell-hole' Johnson describes, the violence comes not only from Whites, but just as often from Native men who have had

their conscience destroyed. They wait till women are passed out, either from booze or drugs, and then they brutalize and rob them, and sometimes it's done by a crowd of men daring each other on. Native men do this a lot, especially to Native women – a dreadful shame on our people, but they prey on each other's suffering (165).

Native women, too, participate, Johnson says, and she recounts being invited to a party by a young Native woman who then drugs her beer so that the young woman's relatives could gang-rape her. Days later when they meet again, Johnson, enraged, beats her, as she describes,

with all the pain and fear and misery for all those people who had violated me and whom I could never catch. Rage for ever bottled up and screwed up tight inside me, acts blacked out, or unremembered, by nevertheless still, for ever, there. [...] Only men can rape and hurt you the way they do but, worse still, sometimes women help them (168).

The violence relentlessly described by Johnson in this chapter is both deeply personal in its devastation of individual lives and, her analysis insists, systemically entrenched. The passage above alludes to Johnson's recovered

memories of being abused as a child. She understands her eruptions of rage as being related to the trauma she suffered as a young child. Children who are brutalised can go on to brutalise others. ‘To be taught how to suck, fuck, drink and fight is a very hard, cruel way to live; to survive it you have to act adult before you know you’re doing it. Becoming an adult in a beer bottle is small and limiting...’ (165). The chapter ends with another description of sexual violence: this time Johnson is raped by a man with whom her mother was living. Johnson’s sense of degradation is total. She writes:

What’s so special about my ugly body, men forcing themselves into every opening in it – why don’t they just slash open my belly and wash their face in my guts as I die in one piece. At least I’d know it was final. But no, they ram themselves into me and defile my life forever (174).

My reason for reproducing so much of the detail of this chapter is to demonstrate two things. First, it is important to apprehend the enormity and the relentlessness of the violence and sexual abuse experienced by Johnson and by *all* of the women she knows. The chapter builds to an understanding that every woman in her life has experienced abuse by men, Native and White, abuse which is to be endured, ‘the way women have to’ (170). Second, it is crucial to acknowledge that the chapter is both an analysis of the pervasiveness of this violence and a denunciation of its normalisation. Readers frequently comment that Johnson’s chapters are overwhelmingly brutal and many are unable to continue reading.² It is in this sense that her textual contributions are unsocial. In breaking the silences surrounding incest and sexual abuse suffered by Native women Johnson narrates in ways that for many are nearly unreadable. Yet

Johnson's chosen manner of delivery is integral to her objective: to confront her abusers with the shame that is theirs. Earlier in the book, Wiebe quotes Johnson saying 'I've learned to wear my own shame, but I refuse to wear anyone else's – and I give back to my abusers the shame that is theirs and theirs alone' (23). In this chapter and in other extended narrative passages throughout the book, Johnson does this. She shoves her reader's face into the gore that has been her life. In Johnson's case, this is what women's life writing is when that life has been shaped from infancy by male violence. This writing is not a product of Wiebe ventriloquising a Cree woman's voice. Wiebe's extended passages are often lyrical and figurative, as critics have pointed out, and his aim is that of accessibility and coherence. His portions of the text provide readers with a sociable reading space, whereas Johnson's contributions are frequently as brutal and as horrible to read as those cited above. In narrating thus, Johnson insists that her readers face the violence of her world, the violence which has been forced upon her throughout her life. 'I write as I speak,' she says (Jacklin, 2007b: 49), and her writing conveys, viscerally, the brutality she has endured and denounces the actions of all those who have contributed to her brutalisation.

The risks in such a narrative strategy are significant, of course. Laura Tanner, in her reading of rape and torture in twentieth-century fiction, identifies a range of subject positions in which a reader of narratives of violence may find herself. These include the disembodied, detached observer to whom the victimized body becomes 'simply another text on which the reader inscribes

meaning' (Tanner, 1994: 9); the empathetic witness for whom the distance between reader and victim has been collapsed; and, disturbingly, a subject position in which the reader finds herself, or himself, 'located in discomfoting proximity to the violator' (1994: 10). The third of these, Tanner claims, while 'repugnant and frightening' may also provide 'an opportunity for interrogating the mechanisms of representation and the conventions of reading through which the material dynamics of violence are depicted' (1994: 10). This is precisely what Johnson's narrative demands of its readers. It is this sense of repugnant proximity to the perpetrators of violence that prompts Anne Collett to write of her encounter with *Stolen Life*: 'The more I read the more I engaged in what I felt to be a violence done to Yvonne, by me personally' (2007: vii). However, to turn away from the text in response, Tanner argues, to chose

not to see violence or its effects is not to erase its existence but simply to ignore it. *Seeing into* violence, on the other hand, becomes a form of resistance when what is exposed before the eyes of the reader/viewer is not his or her own helplessness but the dynamics of violation; the critical reader in the scene of violence uncovers not just the vulnerability of the victim or the observer but the very power dynamics upon which the violator's force depends (Tanner, 1994: 15, italics in original).

To return to Emberley's suggestion that Johnson's textual contributions might be read for the ways in which they de-authorize the sexual violence to which Indigenous women have been subjected through colonial history, the argument can be made, as I have been attempting here, that Johnson's narrative smears the reader with the guts of her story in such a way that the dynamics of violation are palpable, unavoidable, and utterly shameful. Far from being unfocused, Johnson's textual contributions here, and through the book, insist

that the reader face ‘the ordinary violence of incest and sexual abuse’ (Emberley, 2007: 224). Wiebe’s contributions may well work otherwise, as Emberley and others maintain, but Johnson’s efforts in her book are directed towards this: that readers know beyond any possibility of denial the horrible, shameful circumstances of sexual violence and the dynamics of its perpetuation in prairie Canada.

‘Some stories need to be told, then told again,’ Wiebe and Johnson write (1998: 387) towards the end of *Stolen Life*. The sentence appears just after a section break, between accounts of events in P4W, narrated by Johnson. In critical honesty, one cannot be sure if this particular sentence has been written or spoken by Johnson, or whether it may have been provided by Wiebe, as a transition marker between two narrative units – a brutal fight with another woman inmate before, and the bestowal of Johnson’s spiritual name following. The phrase reminds readers of Wiebe’s recurrent emphasis on the circularity of Yvonne’s storytelling, while it also resonates with Johnson’s statement two pages on: ‘I must tell the story again’ (389). There are numerous utterances like this, where attribution remains uncertain. Also, there are sections of the text that are undeniably Wiebe’s, that are entirely Wiebe’s, as there are long sections such as those analysed above that are Johnson’s, although even those passages comprised entirely of Johnson’s first-person narrative have been assembled and edited by Wiebe. As I have tried to demonstrate, however, Johnson’s narrative contributions work in ways of her choosing and of her design. Her narrative is not trapped or constrained. Her narratives may circle, they may return to

violence repeatedly, but they do so necessarily. To write of violence as Johnson does is to analyse it, to challenge it, and to denounce it.

The two voices – Wiebe’s and Johnson’s – interweave in the closing chapter of their book, as Yvonne narrates her memories of Cree ceremonies of release and purification performed upon her as a child by her grandmother, Flora Baptiste Bear, while Wiebe recounts how Yvonne has passed these narratives to him. Following Johnson’s account of a shaking tent ceremony, Wiebe writes:

Yvonne tells me this particular story of ceremony the day in August 1996, when we complete the second four-round sweat on the high glade near Okimaw Ochi [sic]. [...] She tells me the story again, in greater detail, in the pages she types for me afterwards, circling around and around the variant facts as if by sheer force of will she will ultimately unwind a meaning my intellectualized mind can, against all odds, fathom (431,432)

From beginning to end of *Stolen Life*, then, the reader is reminded that Yvonne’s narratives have been assembled by Wiebe, often – as with the example above – from both oral and written accounts, each with repetitions, each version ‘circling’ through the story. Wiebe’s involvement, however, does not diminish, constrain, or contain the power of Johnson’s narrative, or of her manner of narration. As I have argued, in the extended sections of first-person narration, Johnson’s strategies, her choices, her repetitions and her focus are *hers*. This is especially so with regard to her focus on male violence in the chapter analysed above, where her words are as violently brutal, and as painful to read, as the events she narrates. In this, her ‘unsocial’ writing demands that

readers experience violation – as she has – at the same time that it risks turning those readers away.

In the book's final pages, Johnson writes, 'I was told that my life was hard, and it would remain so. I was told to keep seeking, I was told you do not give your pain to the spirit world, you must give your pain away' (438). In *Stolen Life*, Johnson has given her pain away by writing it out and detailing the sexual violence through which her life had been defined and which led, ultimately, to her participation in the taking of another's life. In forcing her readers to confront her pain, her violence, and the violence and sexual abuse that she endured all her life, Johnson insists (where Tanner can only suggest) that readers see into the dynamics of violation and the structures by which it is perpetuated. It is this demand, and the unsocial sociability of the collaborative writing from which it arises, that makes *Stolen Life* such a powerful reading experience.

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¹ The quotations are taken, in sequence, from Egan (2000: 15), Omhové (2003: 108), and Emberley (2007: 216).

² This has been the reaction of some students who find the book unbearably confronting; see also Collett (2007).