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Abstract

Suspicion is a requirement of professional reading. As one literary critic explains, reflecting on his own process of becoming a better reader: "I have learned to be more suspicious of narrative, not simply for the sake of suspicion, but because the complexity of what is a text deserves my suspicion. I must be suspicious to be a responsible reader of literature." There is, then, a tension between a text's designs to make readers believe and a critic's need to hold that text at a distance, to question it and to remain suspicious. While this tension between text and reader can be considered the basis of any critical reading experience, it is heightened in the case of collaborative writing, the focus of this article.

Keywords

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Suspicion is a requirement of professional reading. As one literary critic explains, reflecting on his own process of becoming a better reader: “I have learned to be more suspicious of narrative, not simply for the sake of suspicion, but because the complexity of what is a text deserves my suspicion. I must be suspicious to be a responsible reader of literature.”¹ There is, then, a tension between a text’s designs to make readers believe and a critic’s need to hold that text at a distance, to question it and to remain suspicious. While this tension between text and reader can be considered the basis of any critical reading experience, it is heightened in the case of collaborative writing, the focus of this article.

Collaboration in textual production has a long history. Jeffrey Masten’s study of collaboration in Renaissance English drama makes the point that before the Enlightenment, and therefore before “the paradigms of individuality, authorship, and textual property” became entrenched, “collaboration was a prevalent mode of textual production.”² Masten also points out that much twentieth-century scholarship of Renaissance theatre has read collaboration as contagion - or contamination – where “a healthy individual style” of one writer becomes infected by the contributions of another (19). Focusing on nineteenth- and early twentieth-century texts, Wayne Koestenbaum (1989) raises the issue of the public’s unease with the possible conjunction of collaborative writing and transgressive sexuality, arguing that the implicit association of literary collaboration with a commingling of same-sex bodies resulted in a public perception of something “obscurely repellent” being enacted both within the pages and without.³ Koestenbaum goes on to link the underlying reader-response of unsettledness with collaborative writing to the semantic association of collaboration with political treason and betrayal: “The very word ‘collaboration’ connotes moral bankruptcy, stratagems exercised in the face of national defeat” and “Double writers” are, he argues, seen to “have compromised themselves, have formed new and unhealthy allegiances, and have betrayed trusts” (*Double Talk*, 8). Koestenbaum opens his book on double writing with a discussion of Andre Gide’s *The Counterfeiters* and the disdain expressed there for the collaborative practice of literary or artistic production. I find his reference to counterfeiting

¹ Mark Ledbetter, *Victims and the Postmodern Narrative or Doing Violence to the Body: An Ethic of Reading and Writing* (Houndsmills: MacMillan, 1996): 143.

² Jeffrey Masten, *Textual Intercourse: Collaboration, Authorship and Sexualities in Renaissance Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997): 4.

³ Wayne Koestenbaum, *Double Talk: The Erotics of Male Literary Collaboration* (Routledge, 1989). 174. Subsequent references will appear parenthetically.

useful and potentially productive in thinking about collaboration in writing because of the association of trust and betrayal that counterfeiting entails and the suspicion with which most critics approach collaborative texts.

Collaborative life writing covers a diverse range of texts, from widely separated historical periods. Seventeenth-century criminal confessions, eighteenth-century captivity narratives, nineteenth-century slave narratives, and twentieth-century as-told-to autobiographies are all examples of collaboration in life writing: first-person narratives published with the assistance or mediation of a second party – an editor, an amanuensis – to whom the story has been told, and who selects, arranges and in some cases rephrases or reshapes the first person’s story. While purporting to offer ‘a true account’ or ‘a faithful transcription’ of the subject’s life in his or her own words, as-told-to autobiographies are the product of give and take, of trust and vulnerability, and not infrequently, as critics have demonstrated, betrayal.⁴

In Canadian literature, Indigenous life stories have for decades been published in the form of as-told-to-autobiographies. For the most part, however, these have been sidelined critically. Sophie McCall⁵ argues that, as a result of debates over cultural property and appropriation of voice, the once dominant model of as-told-to texts, in which the Aboriginal subject narrated her or his life story to a non-Aboriginal editor, is being replaced by collaborative projects involving Aboriginal participants on both sides of the narrative exchange. Meanwhile, as-told-to narratives from previous decades are read, if read at all, as products of “literary colonization” (5). McCall’s study, in contrast, initiates a new approach to cross-cultural collaborative texts, “one that avoids reinscribing a sharply oppositional characterization of the relationship between Aboriginal storytellers and non-Aboriginal collectors, writers and editors in contemporary told-to narratives” (5).

McCall reads Aboriginal texts produced in the 1990s, a decade when the reconceptualization of thinking around “voice and representation in Aboriginal politics” was at a pivotal juncture (3). Amongst the works contributing to this debate, she briefly mentions *The Book of Jessica: A Theatrical Transformation* (1989),⁶ by non-Indigenous playwright and actor Linda Griffiths and Metis author and educator Maria Campbell. McCall cites the

⁴ See G. Thomas Couser, *Vulnerable Subjects: Ethics and Life Writing*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004).

⁵ Sophie McCall, *First Person Plural: Aboriginal Storytelling and the Ethics of Collaborative Authorship* (Vancouver, Toronto: UBC Press, 2011).

⁶ Linda Griffiths and Maria Campbell, *The Book of Jessica: A Theatrical Transformation* (Toronto: Coach House, 1989). Subsequent references will appear parenthetically.

text as an example of collaborative writing in which the pitfalls of collaboration are actually incorporated into the narrative. She does not dwell on this, but it is *The Book of Jessica*'s self-reflexivity on matters of collaboration that sets it apart from most other collaboratively produced texts, which tend to gloss over the process of their construction and smooth over any signs of conflict between collaborators. In this regard, Griffiths and Campbell's book is radically different. Theirs is a hybrid text combining not only the script of the play *Jessica* and the narrative of its production, but also transcripts of conversations between Griffiths and Campbell reflecting upon the process of making both the play and the book. Its oral basis, its collaborative and cross-cultural production, its recount and analysis of transformative events in the lives of both authors, its anxiety and reflexivity combine to make the text a powerful and controversial example of cross-cultural collaboration in life writing. My commentary here will focus on the significance in the book of giving and taking, and writing and theft. My discussion will also draw on Jacques Derrida's commentary on counterfeit coin in his work *Given Time: 1. Counterfeit Money* (1992),⁷ as I believe his comments on what is given, and what may result from giving, even if the gift is counterfeit, are relevant to discussions of collaboration in writing.

When *The Book of Jessica* was published, Canada was in the midst of heated public debate regarding cultural appropriation, particularly concerning the non-Indigenous publication of Indigenous stories. Lee Maracle's article "Moving Over" appeared in the same year as *The Book of Jessica* and Lenore Keeshig-Tobias's "Stop Stealing Native Stories" appeared the next. The following year, the article "Whose Voice Is It Anyway?" established the discussion as central to the concerns of the Canada Council and critical to contemporary Canadian cultural production.⁸ A series of articles and letters in the *Globe and Mail* followed, responding to the suggestion "that government grants should not be made to writers who wrote about cultures other than their own, unless the writer 'collaborated' with people of that culture before writing."⁹ Commenting on these exchanges, Rosemary J. Coombe notes that "collaborator" is "a peculiar and perhaps telling choice of language" (76), gesturing towards

⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: 1. Counterfeit Money*, trans., Peggy Kamuf (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992)

⁸ Lee Maracle, "Moving Over," *Trivia*, 14 (Spring, 1989): 9-12; Lenore Keeshig-Tobias, "Stop Stealing Native Stories," in Bruce Ziff and Pratima V. Rao (eds.), *Borrowed Power: Essays on Cultural Appropriation*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 71-73 [first published in the *Globe and Mail*, Jan. 26, 1990, A-7]; "Whose Voice Is It Anyway?" *Books in Canada*, (Jan-Feb. 1991): 11-20.

⁹ Rosemary J. Coombe, "The Properties of Culture and the Possession of Identity: Postcolonial Struggle and the Legal Imagination," in *Borrowed Power: Essays on Cultural Appropriation*, ed. Bruce Ziff and Pratima V. Rao (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 74-96.

the connection frequently made between collaboration and betrayal. Emphasizing cultural theft, Keeshig-Tobias put the argument in its strongest terms, claiming that “the Canadian cultural industry is stealing ... native stories as surely as the missionaries stole our religion and the politicians stole our land and the residential schools stole our language” (“Stop Stealing,” 72). This accusation of theft is at the core of *The Book of Jessica*.

Griffiths likens the making of the book and the process of narrative exchange set on the page to both a dance and a joust,¹⁰ which in many respects parallels the trading and the treaties, the promises and the thievery, that have taken place between colonizers and Indigenous peoples in Canada. At a crucial point in the text Griffiths says to Campbell, “You make this great analogy that I’m the white guy in Ottawa saying, ‘Here’s a treaty,’ but *Jessica*... it’s just hitting me now... maybe *Jessica* is a treaty. To me it was a sacred thing,” to which Campbell replies, “A treaty is a sacred thing, but a treaty has to be between two equals, two people sitting down and respecting what the other one has to offer, and two people doing it together, negotiating. Otherwise, it’s not a treaty” (82). Campbell is reacting here to Griffiths’ protestations that if she hadn’t continued to work on the book, it would not have been completed, that Campbell would have “let it die” (79). Campbell compares this to the Eurocentric notion of dominion of the land, taking Native land that is perceived to be uncultivated and making it productive. She accuses Griffiths of thinking, “So I came along and took what you were wasting and I made something out of it, because you weren’t doing it, but I need you to tell me that I didn’t steal anything, that I didn’t take anything from you” (80). Campbell refuses to comply. Instead she forces Griffiths to face up to the thievery inherent in their collaboration:

MARIA If you are telling me you’re not stealing, and on the other hand you are telling me you are being honourable, then I think, ‘Well, what the fuck do you know about honour if you can’t even admit you’re a thief?’

LINDA They say there is honour among thieves.

MARIA Of course there is honour among thieves. But first you have to admit you are a thief.

LINDA Yes. That’s what I am doing.

MARIA And you have to....

LINDA Right now. I’m admitting I’m a thief (*The Book of Jessica*, 82).

¹⁰ Interview with Linda Griffiths, recorded in Toronto, August 31, 2002.

In the text thievery is related not only to colonization but also to anthropology and its foundation in fieldwork. Griffiths' description of her experience of Metis culture and ceremony reads as participant observation, with Griffiths almost as a latter-day Franz Boas, impressed by the exotic and irrational dimension of the performance she witnesses. Early in the narrative, she and Campbell travel to northwest Alberta to attend a healing ceremony in an empty farmhouse. She enters the room and smells sweetgrass: "An ancient kind of smell, dark, a smell to lift the senses, unlock the heart and mind" (27). Describing the twenty or more people gathered around her, she writes: "They were now what I imagined 'Native' to be. They were powerful, about to be in the presence of spirits" (27). Although entranced, she remains "a watcher" (29), and like Boas, she knows that her reasons for being there are to collect, to write, and to take away that which belongs to others. Later she admits: "I saw your culture, and it was like a treasure chest opening up, and the maniac romantic in me just dived in up to my elbows. ... I know I was precious about it all, wanted to write everything. I had gold fever" (85).

The veer towards ethnography and the association of anthropology with theft links *The Book of Jessica* to numerous other collaborative works. Throughout at least the first half of the twentieth century, anthropology was engaged in not only the collection of narratives, but also the taking of ceremonial regalia and sacred artefacts, and while the recording of narratives or the taking of photographs is not always deemed exploitative, in some cases it clearly is. Near the beginning of the book Griffiths comments on a photograph of a performance of ritual piercing taken illicitly at a Sun Dance ceremony. Although she attributes the effect she experiences to the searing look on the man's face, the fact that the taking of the image was forbidden by cultural protocol contributes undoubtedly to its fascination (18). The procuring and removal of ceremonial objects, although not prominent in *The Book of Jessica*, is referenced when Griffiths explains that a bear claw necklace, "an obviously precious object" that had been given to Campbell by a Native woman to help overcome troubles in the play's production and that had "never failed to get a gasp from the Native people in the audience," was now, some years later, "in the hands of Al Pacino" (45).

The removal of power objects as a specific legacy of anthropological research in Canada is an issue that is significant to other collaborative texts. The spirit bundle of Cree Chief Big Bear, great-great-grandfather of Yvonne Johnson, whose book with Rudy Wiebe,

Stolen Life: Journey of a Cree Woman (1998), has received substantial critical attention, was obtained by anthropologist David Mandelbaum in 1933 and is now held in the American Museum of Natural History in New York.¹¹ James Sewid, the narrator of *Guests Never Leave Hungry* (1969), devoted years to the recovery of artefacts taken from his family during the potlatch arrests and then held in the National Museum in Ottawa and the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto. While Sewid does not highlight his efforts towards the repatriation of artefacts in his book, Harry Assu, publishing his life story with the assistance of Joy Inglis some twenty years later, does.¹² My point with these examples is to draw attention to the long and involved history existing between anthropology, collaborative writing and cultural theft. It is an association that has been deeply ambivalent. In what is arguably amongst the most significant of the early anthropologist/Indigenous informant relationships, for instance, Franz Boas credited his Indigenous collaborator George Hunt with co-authorship on the title page of their work.¹³ At the same time, Boas was paying Hunt to disinter Kwakwaka'wakw graves and send him the artefacts thus obtained, a practice Boas knew to be offensive to many in Kwakwaka'wakw communities.¹⁴ Cross-cultural collaboration and cultural theft clearly share a crossed and conflictive relationship.

It is the theft inherent in writing others' narratives that Campbell focuses on in her reply to Griffiths. As a playwright and actor, Griffiths realizes that her entire career has been supported by professional thievery. Her first major work, *Maggie and Pierre*, was "stolen" from Margaret and Pierre Trudeau and, she says, "I've stolen from the people I met in Jamaica when we wrote *O.D on Paradise*. I'm a professional thief" (83). Early in the book, Griffiths says that in her work she "liked to climb inside other people's psyches and kind of... sibyl them" (14), a trait Campbell recognizes while watching Griffiths on stage. "I'd stand there feeling like she'd stolen my thoughts," she says. "She'd just take it all" (15). What troubles Campbell most, however, is not what Griffiths may take from her but what she

¹¹ Rudy Wiebe and Yvonne Johnson, *Stolen Life: The Journey of a Cree Woman* (Toronto: Knopf, 1998); for reference to the spirit bundle, see Rudy Wiebe's "Bear Spirit in a Strange Land," in his *Rivers of Stone: Fictions and Memories* (Toronto: Vintage Books, 1995), 163-174.

¹² James Spradley, ed., *Guests Never Leave Hungry: The Autobiography of James Sewid, A Kwakwaka'wakw Indian* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1972) [first published by Yale University Press, 1969]; Harry Assu with Joy Inglis, *Assu of Cape Mudge* (University of British Columbia Press, 1989); see Chapter 7 "Renewal of the Potlatch at Cape Mudge," 101-121.

¹³ See Ruth M. Krulfeld, "Exploring New Methods for Collaboration in Ethnographic Research: An Attempt at Overcoming Exploitation and Violation of Informant Rights," in *Power, Ethics and Human Rights: Anthropological Studies of Refugee Research and Action*, ed. Ruth M. Krulfeld and Jeffrey L. MacDonald (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998), 21-56.

¹⁴ See Ira Jacknis, "George Hunt, Collector of Indian Specimens," in *Chiefly Feasts: The Enduring Kwakwaka'wakw Potlatch*, ed. Aldona Jonaitis (New York: American Museum of Natural History, 1991), 177-224.

may take from her community. A friend who was a “hard-core traditionalist” warns her against collaborating on the play: “‘Don’t do it. You’re going to be putting stuff out there that nobody’s got any business knowing about’” (25). Later Campbell asks herself: “(W)hat’s going to happen to the community when they see this and think I’ve been telling her things?” (49). The answer for Campbell and the point she impresses upon Griffiths is that their project must give back. All art steals, Campbell says, but the difference between good and bad art is that true art remains responsible to those from whom it takes:

Today, most art is ugly, because it’s not responsible to the people it steals from. Real, honest-to-God true art steals from the people. It’s a thief. It comes in. It’s non-obstructive. You don’t feel it. It comes in, and you don’t even notice that it’s there, and it walks off with all your stuff, but then it gives back to you and heals you, empowers you, and it’s beautiful. (83)

Literary critic Helen Hoy finds in this passage an advance beyond the debate surrounding cultural appropriation in which the Canadian cultural industry was then embroiled.¹⁵ Hoy sees Campbell’s recognition of the transgression inherent in art, theatre and writing as offering “the springboard for socially accountable art – or scholarship” (62). Her point, and Campbell’s, that writing should ‘give back’, is in fact one of the most significant in terms of protocols guiding collaborative Indigenous life writing.

The insistence that art, theatre and writing acknowledge their debt and give back to those whose lives and narratives provide the grist for published works aligns Campbell and Griffiths’ book with advances in codes of ethics forwarded by professional anthropological associations beginning in the 1980s but only becoming more common in practice in the 1990s.¹⁶ Returning research to Indigenous communities and attempting to ensure that benefits are shared by both participants and producers of anthropological study is arguably the single most significant transformation in the discipline since its beginnings. I draw this parallel here not to suggest disciplinary underpinnings to Campbell’s assertion – hers is clearly situated in the codes of reciprocity and commitment to community found amongst Indigenous peoples around the globe – but rather because the principle of return, a concept which has shaken the foundations of the relationship between Indigenous peoples and non-Indigenous research, is one that also has far-reaching consequences for collaborative Indigenous life writing.

¹⁵ Helen Hoy, “‘When You Admit You’re a Thief’: Maria Campbell and Linda Griffiths’s *The Book of Jessica*,” in her book *How Should I Read These? Native Women Writers in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001) 48-63.

¹⁶ See Pat Caplan’s “Introduction: Anthropology and Ethics” which opens her edited collection *The Ethics of Anthropology: Debates and dilemmas* (London: Routledge, 2003) 1-33.

In interview Linda Griffiths acknowledged the importance of the passage cited above and expanded on how she believed *The Book of Jessica* returned the gift:

MJ: You've just mentioned the crux of the book. Admitting that you're a thief, recognising you're a thief, but realising the obligation of giving back, as you say, tenfold.

LG: I live by that.

MJ: I don't know if it was when the tape was running or not, but earlier you mentioned that Lenore Keeshig-Tobias had contacted you and thanked you for the offering. And that offering is the giving back. But you also say that it's often not recognized in the academic community.

LG: That's just me whining. But it's hard to know that all over the world academics are trashing me. And to know that I set myself up and they don't see it. The whole apprentice/teacher thing is accentuated. I deliberately included, even created parts that make me look bad, so that the dialogue in the book would be as passionate and theatrical as we were. We both wanted it to be a good read. It's not academic, it's art. But maybe that's just the territory and I should stop whining. I'm proud of the offering. As well as all the amazing stuff from Maria, the book contains things that I learned from Paul Thompson. They're things about the theatre that most academics know nothing about. I wanted to talk about those things, about what I call the Dionysian sacredness of the stage, and I got to do that. Even the idea of taping Maria and I could be seen as an extension of Paul's work, so his gift is also there. The thing is, they're mostly white academics. When *The Book of Jessica* came out, both Maria and I were terrified, the level of exposure, the risk, the way we had put in shitty, painful stuff about both of us. She risked her community seeing her as a sell-out of their most profound teaching. I risked being seen as a racist both by my community and hers. The most narrow part of the appropriation of voice debate was at that time: we could have been torn apart. When Lenore Keeshig-Tobias phoned me and said, "Thank you for your offering," something deep inside released. It was an acknowledgement and a gift. Someone had understood my contribution and not just anyone. She was one of the toughest political people at that time, very vocal and public when she felt there was appropriation. Her call meant that I was not going to be branded a racist. Every time I did anything with that play, the possibility was there. It was there when the play was re-done in Toronto and Maria and I were supposed to co-direct it but Maria didn't show up. She said it was because her father was ill, and I know he was. But the Native community completely supported it. It had a majority Native cast and this was so rare. I'm not sure if it had even happened before. Native theatre was just talking off in Toronto at the time with Native Earth. Tomson Highway was about to write the *Rez Sisters*. He was totally supportive. So was George Erasmus, the grand chief at the

time. He responded to the spiritual life in it. He kept saying, "It's true, it's all true." This was the beginning of a connection between my theatre community, especially at Theatre Passe Muraille, and the Native world. Graham Greene, who was nominated for an Academy Award for *Dances with Wolves*, was in *Jessica* and other plays at Passe Muraille. Tantoo Cardinal played Jessica. So did Monique Mohica, who formed her own company later. There were actors who got a chance to work and people who got a chance to see them. I think audiences were surprised at the level of acting that was up there. That was a gift to all communities.

[...]

When academics write about the book, they always ignore what I've done since then - seven plays.¹⁷ Plays about abortion, royalty, poetry, illness. If they ever read them, they might understand something about the continuing impact of my experience with Maria. I try to make sure that the best part of the learning continues, and is given out into the cultural community. I'm a part of that community. I am not a person without a culture. It bugs me when I'm represented that way. As for ownership, to think anyone can work for years on a project and feel no sense of 'ownership' is absurd. To be portrayed as someone only hungry for ownership is to deny the two years I spent up in my attic to put that book together without knowing if it could ever be published. And the four years I spent working with Maria on the project itself. It is to deny that the play is beautiful, that the Native community and white community supported and loved it. To any sense of 'ownership', I would definitely include responsibility. My responsibility to the Native community could never be as large as Maria's, but to deny I felt any is ridiculous. The idea that to create art is inherently selfish is an old debate. I don't think of it that way. Through the art that we created, we advanced the debate, and we offered something to the world. I was involved in that offering. Was that an accident or was it hard work on both our parts? Whether the project should exist at all is another question. When Maria and Paul first came to me, wanting to create a play inspired by Maria's life, I was just happy to be asked. If it happened again, I'm pretty sure neither of us would do it. But I'm still proud of both of us for following through. I don't even know if that makes sense.¹⁸

Maria Campbell is less optimistic. As Griffiths mentions, Campbell did not participate in the opening of the play in Toronto. She did come for the launch of *The Book of Jessica* several years later. However, since then she has spoken of their collaboration in terms which underscore the taking that occurred rather than the giving back. In response to a question during our interview, Campbell contrasted her collaboration with Griffiths with her later work on *Stories of the Road Allowance People* (1995):

¹⁷ Griffiths' plays are collected in her volume *Sheer Nerve: Seven Plays* (Winnipeg: Blizzard Publishing, 1999).

¹⁸ Interview with Linda Griffiths.

MC: Now I think the difference between *Road Allowance People* and *The Book of Jessica* was that Linda came to me and I introduced her to community and the community accepted her and she became a part of it for that little while. They didn't accept her by herself. They accepted her because they trusted me. For her there was a sense of ownership. Now, I have a sense of ownership too. I have a very strong sense of ownership for *Road Allowance People* and everything else, as well as *Jessica*, but it's a different kind of ownership. I don't even know if ownership is the word for it. It's a sense of responsibility to those stories. [...] And that's a huge responsibility because there's a people and a culture that is part of that responsibility. Just like a leader has a responsibility. Different people in the community carry different responsibilities. Now this ownership, that's a different kind of ownership that Linda had. Linda didn't have a cultural ownership. She had a very individual ownership. Hers was, "this is my stuff and I can do with it what I want." No consideration of kinship, or of community, or even a sense of landscape. [...] I think that ownership is... what do we mean by ownership? See, that's where I feel limited because I don't know what else to call it in English. Yes I have a sense of ownership but it's a collective ownership. [...] That's the other thing that one of the old men told me when I was talking about *Jessica* one day. He said, "Well, nobody can take it away from you. What did she take away from you? She took away some stuff. She took some stuff and she's going to use it for a little while but she's going to get tired of it. And besides, she didn't understand it, so it's not going to make medicine for her. You learn something from this. That experience taught you something. Think of it as a good teacher."¹⁹

Campbell remains committed to locality and to the community from which the material is taken and she sees little evidence of giving back in this respect. Griffiths, on the other hand, turns toward a metropolitan audience and to the broad consideration of First Nations theatre in Canada. For her, while the book continues to be read and discussed and written about and while the play is performed, the gift continues to circulate.²⁰ And circulation is undoubtedly *the* prerequisite of return.

The circulation of a gift which itself appears as a betrayal, an abuse of confidence, is taken up productively by Derrida in his book *Given Time: 1. Counterfeit Money* (1992),²¹ and although its connection to *The Book of Jessica* may seem tenuous, consideration of its

¹⁹ Interview with Maria Campbell, recorded in Saskatoon, August 10, 2002; Maria Campbell, trans., *Stories of the Road Allowance People* (Penticton: Theytus Books, 1995); for longer passages from this same interview with Campbell, see Michael Jacklin, "Making Paper Talk: Writing Indigenous Oral Narratives," *ARIEL* 39.1-2 (January-April 2008): 47-69.

²⁰ In his review of the book *Aboriginal Voices: Amerindian, Inuit, and Sami Theatre*, Robert Williamson [in *The Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology*, 32, 4 (Nov. 1995): 495] mentions that *Jessica* was given a "powerful production" in Norwegian at the University of Tromsø with a Greenlandic actor taking the lead role. In 2011 and 2012, *The Book of Jessica* was taught at the University of Wollongong, Australia, in the undergraduate course "Indigenous Self-Representation in Contemporary Texts".

²¹ Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: 1. Counterfeit Money*, trans., Peggy Kamuf (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992). Subsequent references to this text will appear parenthetically.

arguments can yield insights relevant to the issue of collaborative Indigenous life writing and its return to community. Basing his discussion on Baudelaire's story "Counterfeit Money," in which a beggar is given money by a passing Parisian dandy who then reveals that the coin was counterfeit, Derrida meditates upon the double-binds at work in the text. To begin with, his comments seem to contradict the concept of reciprocity in collaborative writing. He argues:

For there to be a gift, there must be no reciprocity, return, exchange, countergift or debt. If the other *gives* me *back* or *owes* me or has to give me back what I have given him or her, there will not have been a gift, whether this restitution is immediate or whether it is programmed by a complex calculation of long-term deferral or differance (12).

For Derrida, a gift becomes an impossibility the moment it is acknowledged as given. "If he recognises it *as* gift, if the gift *appears to him as such*, if the present is present to him *as present*, this simple recognition suffices to annul the gift. Why? Because it gives back, in the place, let us say, of the thing itself, a symbolic equivalent" (13). This recognition, in other words, sets in operation a process of trust and promise, the promise to give back in return for that which is given. In Derrida's reading of Baudelaire, however, the giving of counterfeit money to the beggar, at once seemingly positioned outside of expectations of return though not of indebtedness, creates multiple fractures in the text's circuits of giving. "By giving counterfeit money (assuming at least that he did what he said!), the friend would have failed to keep his promise, he would have deceived someone, abused someone's confidence in him, betrayed – but betrayed what and whom?" (116). Speculating upon this matter of trust and betrayal, Derrida returns to Baudelaire's narrator, who concludes, "such conduct in my friend was excusable only by the desire to create an event in this poor devil's life" (120). The counterfeit coin was passed to one unsuspecting with the intention of setting off unforeseeable circumstance. The gift, therefore, is that which creates the conditions from which the unpredicted may happen. The giving must open to the unforeseeable, though equally, Derrida writes:

There is no gift without the intention of giving. The gift can only have a meaning that is intentional – in the two senses of the word that refers to intention as well as to intentionality. However, everything stemming from the intentional meaning also threatens the gift with self-keeping, with being kept in its very expenditure. Whence the enigmatic difficulty lodged in this donating eventiveness. There must be chance, encounter, the involuntary, even unconsciousness or disorder, and

there must be intentional freedom, and these two conditions must – miraculously, graciously – agree with each other (123).

Most significantly, Derrida links this concept of the intentional yet aleatory gift to narrative. He does so through a comment made by Boas on the potlatch ceremonies which the latter had witnessed during his fieldwork in British Columbia. Assuming that “the Indian has no system of writing” (43), Boas represented the potlatch—a ceremony in which gifts are given and debts acknowledged—as a public performance of a promise and a substitute for writing. Derrida seizes upon this association between writing and gift to claim that here writing “is tied to the very act of the gift, act in the sense both of archive and the performative operation” (44). Linking this back to Baudelaire’s text, the gift of the counterfeit coin is understood both as performance and as counterfeit. Because the story of the counterfeit coin is related by the narrator, the counterfeit money therefore suggests the counterfeit of textuality, “the great question of reference and difference” (128), which is passed now into our hands, along with the invitation to reflection and the possibility of generating unforeseen events. “Can one create an event,” Derrida asks, “with the help of a simulacrum, here counterfeit money?” (120).

I have risked this diversion through Derrida’s reflections upon Baudelaire’s text in order to suggest that the gift of narrative encountered in collaborative Indigenous life writing, and specifically, in *The Book of Jessica*, shares many of the traits just remarked upon. As I argued in the opening of this article, collaborative life writing is frequently viewed by its critics as counterfeit currency – as deception, as ventriloquism, as betrayal. A text that offers for circulation a construction of voice which in and of itself cannot come into existence but can only eventuate through the efforts of others entails simulation and, to some readers, suggests dissimulation. Transcribed speech is not, cannot be, the oral performance it aims to represent. Co-authorship inevitably involves dissymmetries. Power is central to these texts, both in terms of the power relations in which they are generated and of the power they in turn generate because in many cases these vulnerable texts are powerful. They make things happen. Derrida claims that “there is no gift without the possibility and the impossibility of an impossible narrative” (117). Collaborative Indigenous life writing plays itself out in these very terms of reference, bringing into circulation a written first-person account of significant life-shaping events in the voice of someone who does not, or chooses not, to write. It is, as

Griffiths says of her book with Campbell, a “struggle with an insoluble thing.”²² Yet as Derrida’s reading emphasizes, this possible and impossible impossibility provokes response; while giving and taking, and while circulating, it makes things happen.

A significant event in the creation and circulation of a book is its launch, the ceremony to mark the giving of the work to the world. Whether metropolitan or regionally based, the public performance of the book launch ceremony can, through its choice of location, indicate the focus of return and serves as an endorsement of the work and its value as perceived by those involved. In the case of the launch for *The Book of Jessica*, it is significant that Maria Campbell came to Toronto to participate. In our interview, Griffiths’ description of the launch is prefaced by her anxiety regarding Campbell’s endorsement of their collaboration:

LG: After all that work, my fear was that at any point she could go like this [*snapping fingers*] and it would be dead. I’ve collaborated in a lot of situations. And not all things are equal. What Maria offered is the subject, the substance of the book, right? So, if as the apprentice, I did the sweating, that’s, in a way, fine. That was the art of it. The part that wasn’t fine, was that she could just say no. But she didn’t. She came out and we had a major event as a book launch and we both read from it.

MJ: Can you tell me about that?

LG: We just did it on whatever set was at Theatre Passe Muraille, and it was a really interesting one, like a hollowed out circle, with a lip around the outside and a kind of bowl in the middle. I think I must have put the launch together, with community help from Passe Muraille, I don’t remember for sure. I was determined that it be a celebration. The attempt was to make it a Native/Celtic combination, so we had a Native dancer, Rene Highway, I remember him doing a fantastic dance, balanced on the lip of the circle. His brother is Tomson Highway, who was the artistic director of Native Earth Theatre Company. Then Loreena McKennett played this huge Celtic harp and sang Celtic songs. Maria and I both read and there was a big party afterwards. There were people from the Native theatre community and the white theatre community, some of the cast from *Jessica* were there too, and people from both worlds that weren’t in theatre at all. It was a great combination of things.²³

In light of my earlier comments about *The Book of Jessica*’s return to the local community, it could be suggested that a book launch in Saskatoon where Campbell lives and

²² Interview with Linda Griffiths.

²³ Interview with Linda Griffiths.

where the first performance of *Jessica* was staged may also have been a possibility. Or perhaps an event held at The Crossing at Batoche would have symbolically marked the return of the work to the local community at a culturally significant site. My suggestions are speculative and Campbell did not remark on this issue during our interview, but her comments on her book *Stories of the Road Allowance People* indicate that perhaps a local book launch was not called for.

MC: When I published *Road Allowance People*, the elders were happy, those who were still alive. I mean there was no great big celebration over it because we had that when they gave me permission to do it. And we don't have a big mass community support. I mean, I don't know what the community feels about *Road Allowance People*, other than those people who approach me and talk to me. I know that I haven't been blacklisted out of my community. And for me the only people that I need to respect and honour are those people who are my teachers, and myself. And the stories will do the rest of the work. Now, they might create controversy. They might create all kinds of dialogue. What they do has nothing to do with me. And we're told that. If you have honoured the stories in a good way, and the people that you work with, if you've honoured the teachings, then they will look after you, those things will look after you themselves, the spirits of those things. I used to use the word community very loosely because it sounded like we had these thousands of people in the background where now I try to clarify that or explain more that if you are doing what you are supposed to be doing and you are doing it right, then everything will be okay. And the stories will do what they are supposed to do.²⁴

Campbell's words provide a cautionary perspective in two senses. The first is her point that 'community' is a very imprecise term and its use can be misleading. The concept of a 'return to community' tends to imply an affiliation, a sense of relatedness and an understanding, cultural or otherwise, shared amongst those involved. In many contexts, however, community is something whose borders are porous, whose constituency is shifting and often difficult to locate. With collaborative texts, obviously community begins with those whose input has brought the text into being but, equally obviously, community extends in various directions and depends entirely upon the specific circumstances of each collaborative venture. *The Book of Jessica*, by the time of its publication, had become a metropolitan event, in both its performance and as artefact. *Stories of the Road Allowance People*, on the other hand, is local in its focus, its community consisting of those who gave most and of those who receive most from its narratives – its Metis narrators and readers. Campbell's second point is just as

²⁴ Interview with Maria Campbell.

important here. “The stories will do what they are supposed to do.” Providing the stories and their narrators have been honoured, their return to community and the work they do there will have been guided by protocols of relatedness. What the narratives then accomplish is both a matter of intention and at the same time an eventuality, something contingent – like Derrida’s concept of the gift – unforeseeable and uncontrollable.

While *The Book of Jessica* ends with the script of the play, the final section of the transcribed conversation between Griffiths and Campbell that precedes this and closes the account of the book’s production returns readers to issues of giving and taking, of betrayal and provocation:

MARIA It’s as if you’re trying to get me angry and uptight again....

LINDA No, I just want to say everything, so you don’t have a chance to get mad when it’s done. I’m not into pussyfooting around anymore.

MARIA You see? When you admit you’re a thief, then you can be honourable.

LINDA Is that all you can think of still? Is this whole thing a lie?

Is *The Book of Jessica* counterfeit coin? In the terms suggested above, it appears as such. It is both gift and stolen goods, textual currency forged between a Metis woman working for her community and a non-Indigenous woman wanting to pass the treasures on to a wider audience and readership. Yet Campbell answers:

MARIA It’s not a lie, it’s just a wound we want to be healed sooner than is possible. Maybe it’ll take a hundred years. Angry or not, I feel good, and that’s a lot better than feeling angry and bad.

LINDA I wander around, working on this, just raging away at you, but I truly love you Maria.

MARIA I don’t know if I’ll ever stop being angry with you, but I want to adopt you [*laughing*], so I can get after you the same way I get after my own daughters.... What am I saying? I must be out of my mind (112).

The trope of adoption, of inclusion in family structure, which closes the second section of the book recalls a passage at the beginning when Griffiths is preparing to accompany Campbell to a graduation of Native teachers and, reflecting on her black hair and blue eyes, says, “As I stood beside Maria, I thought, ‘I could be one of her daughters.’” Campbell responds, “I thought that too. When I started taking her into the communities, I thought, ‘She could be one of my daughters’” (22). Implicit in this recognition, both early in the book and at the close of

its sections of transcribed dialogue, is the possibility that the giving and taking between these two women does not cease with these pages. Derrida relates the generosity of opening up one's family to others, as Campbell does here, to the dynamics of the gift discussed previously. "On the threshold of itself," he writes, "the family no longer knows its bounds. This is at the same time its originary ruin and the chance for any kind of hospitality. It is, like counterfeit money, the chance for the gift itself. The chance for the event" (158). Derrida's focus is textual; however, collaborative writing spills beyond its published form. In the conditions of its making and of its reading, collaborative writing exceeds the bounds of the text, pointing towards that which is not contained. The textual relationship between Griffiths and Campbell in *The Book of Jessica* gestures towards this excess, this movement forward, this expanded sense of relationship in which healing is both a possibility and an impossibility. And although since the book's publication they have had little contact, according to Griffiths the relationship between them remains potentially open:

After doing publicity for the book, Maria and I parted well, or at least I thought. We live thousands of miles apart. Years passed and we didn't have contact, but as far as I could tell, there was no animosity. Now I know the aftertaste for her hasn't been good. I may be crazy, but I did get to know this woman. I still feel that if I was nuts enough to show up on her doorstep, she would let me in, offer me a coffee, berate me, and then make pie. We'd argue, eventually one of us would laugh, and the talk would get easier. We wouldn't be friends in the usual sense, we would simply be two women who had been through hell together. Maybe that's pure fantasy. We did the impossible, and that's never pretty.²⁵

Inclusion in structures of Indigenous relatedness is, on the one hand, a mechanism for social stability, and, on the other, as Derrida claims above, the possibility of gift, a means of making things happen, both intended and unpredicted.

"What is credit in literature?" Derrida asks (*Given Time*, 129). Earlier in his reflections he suggested that the text itself was "perhaps a piece of counterfeit money, that is, a machine for provoking events" (96). *The Book of Jessica*, as a collaborative Indigenous life writing text, poses a similar question to its diverse readers, both those close to its communities of origin and those far-flung and distant. In its many forms of circulation, the giving and taking of collaborative writing does not ask *for* credit but asks "What is credit?" *The Book of Jessica* remains as provocative today as it was when first published and the

²⁵ Interview with Linda Griffiths.

questions it asks remain as pertinent. It is one of numerous collaborative Indigenous life writing texts in Canada that call for ongoing reading and debate. “The gift would always be the gift of writing, a memory, a poem, a narrative, in any case, the legacy of a text,” Derrida writes (43-44). Collaborative Indigenous life writing is such a legacy in which both colonial structures of power and Indigenous systems of knowledge and relatedness intersect and call for readers willing to engage with its possible and impossible impossibilities.