

Telling Trauma

Generic Dissonance in the Production of *Stolen Life*¹

S*tolen Life* by Rudy Wiebe and Yvonne Johnson is the life story of a young Cree woman presently serving a life sentence for murder. The child of a Cree mother and a Norwegian American father, Yvonne was born with a severely cleft palate that was not repaired until she was in her teens. Recalling her early struggles with language and with the basic tasks of breathing and eating, Yvonne also remembers chronic and continuous abuse: from other children who despised her as “Indian,” and from babysitters and neighbours, acquaintances and strangers, who raped her. Her own grandfather, father, and brother are among her sexual abusers. Her childhood memories include strong family bonds and times in which she hid under the house, emerging only to eat when she had to. Her acceptance into the Red Pheasant Reserve in Saskatchewan as a young adult was significant for her sense of Native identity. Her relationship with a white house-painter in Wetaskiwin, and the birth of her three children, precede the brutal murder on which this text finally focuses. Yvonne was part of a drunk and violent group that turned on a casual acquaintance whom they had invited over because they suspected him of child abuse.

The story of life stolen and life stealing makes for painful reading; it disturbs—far more than is usual even with narratives of trauma—those blurred boundaries between personal response, social responsibility, and literary criticism. After several readings, many discussions, and attention to very thoughtful criticism,² I find my own disturbance begins with Yvonne’s appalling story (no child, ever, anywhere, should suffer as she describes herself suffering) but concludes with what I perceive as a generic dissonance in

the narration of her experience. Generic dissonance is surely a very small problem beside life-experience of trauma and abuse, but it is not insignificant at all for the reception of Yvonne's story or the uses to which it can be put. With serious respect for the courage and integrity of both narrators, I propose to unravel what I mean by generic dissonance and to explain its effect on this one sympathetic reader. While focussing exclusively on *Stolen Life* for this discussion, the issues I propose to raise concern collaborative autobiography in general and narratives of trauma in particular. I begin and end with questions about narrative as a maker of meaning and about the meanings that narrative can make.

First, in terms of category, this work has run several risks from conception to production. Three risks in particular can be described as the political results of a fairly straightforward reading derived from the information that is available in *Stolen Life* prior to any significant shaping: that is, the attraction of voyeurs, the provocation of the extreme right, and the provocation of the politically correct. (As I name these risks, I wonder whether any reader is entirely excluded.) If I am correct, and if Wiebe, Johnson, and Alfred A. Knopf have considered these particular risks, their choices for narrative and for production will have been critical and carefully deliberate. I am, therefore, puzzled to consider that the dissonance that troubles me may be neither careless nor accidental and must take care to acknowledge the benefits of this collaboration. I would like to pause on the risks as I see them and propose, in describing them, to introduce the genres involved in this work and their relationship with each other, which I see as problematic.

As a story of incest and abuse, *Stolen Life* enters a market that has been flooded with victim literature, which is a seriously problematic genre. On the one hand, societal and narrative opportunities are now available to people who have traditionally been mute or unheard both during and after appalling experiences of abuse. Courts are being sensitized, social workers and health professionals are being educated, and victims themselves are turning to what Suzette Henke has called "scriptotherapy," "writing through traumatic experience in the mode of therapeutic reenactment" (xii). To my mind, these are valuable achievements. Raised on "the canon," trained to appreciate quality, I have learned how hard it is for me to hear unfamiliar voices and am a latter-day convert to the importance of literature that serves more purposes than the aesthetic. On the other hand, more problematically, this sensitizing, education, and therapeutic production have led to what Louise Armstrong has referred to as "an incest industry" (qtd. in Tal 195), a

cheapening of the experience by virtue of its value as commodity. Michael Posner's recent article in the *Globe and Mail* is entitled "Chronic book syndrome" and repeats the point. He writes of "the Medical Misery Library (a subset of the much larger Victimology genre)," which describes "an increasing trend in publishing." "Pick a disease," he writes, "any disease." His mocking search for some work on the ingrown toenail dismisses all forms of scriptotherapy as self-indulgent and inane with scant attention for writing that is not opportunistic, for the political work that such writing does, or for the large readership that finds the humblest stories of survival against odds personally helpful. Nonetheless, the "incest industry," or the ingrown-toenail saga, does describe with some justice one reading constituency of which publications like *Stolen Life* need to beware.

One need only cast back to the infamous O. J. Simpson case or similar coverage in the popular media to realize that "the incest industry" has developed an audience of voyeurs. In the case of *Stolen Life*, a combination of circumstances invite such voyeurism, not only the violence, abuse, and murder, but also the position of this story among Native issues and the fact that Yvonne is the only Native woman in Canada currently serving a life sentence. Where the public's desire for personal narratives of chaos and distress may be served by the sort of "information" that makes popular headlines, neither scriptotherapy for the victim nor redress on a larger scale is served as efficiently as that public desire for more story. However serious the situation, and however valuable the decision for a woman in Yvonne's position to speak out, the risk remains that her story will be cheapened by public response. The question for her and for Wiebe had to be what kind of story?

Yvonne's story is so personal that even those closest to her, who knew or may well have surmised what was going on, could not or did not take responsibility for knowing. Further, as atomised, pre-narrative experiences, emerging only in nightmares, the constituents of Yvonne's story lacked language both because they go back so far in her life and because of the cleft palate that seriously impeded her speech. Significantly, Yvonne's experience of chronic and silent trauma only becomes a "story" with her implication in the violent murder for which she was brought to trial and convicted. Where murder requires attention both in itself and for the human experiences that have made it possible, trial provides a trope for narrative and its powers for explanation. From this point on, Yvonne seems to have become compulsive in her need to write and to talk, to retrieve her own history and to create a viable identity. Henke's term "scriptotherapy" is useful for Yvonne's urgent

and massive task of *re/collection*. It implies a healing activity dependent on language, a process rather than a product. It implies, too, all the repetitions that Wiebe notes in Yvonne's talking and writing, revisitations of moments that are not yet resolved. Scriptotherapy is profoundly personal, of and by and for the self, likely uncensored, certainly unshaped. Insofar as it seeks narrative meaning, it does so in far too fragmentary and voluminous a form to arrive. Eventually, perhaps, it stops.

In contrast, Rudy Wiebe is the listener, the one who becomes "you" when Yvonne's words need an audience. His task is to hear and receive Yvonne's scriptotherapy, a distinctive trauma in its own right. His ability to do so entails huge responsibility for good and for ill and in complex ways; Wiebe's failure to hear would effectively annihilate Yvonne's past while his ability to nurture her use of language will validate her story but must also affect the form of story that emerges.³ His attention to Yvonne convinces him that her chronic suffering needs to be known, that her conviction for murder is inappropriate, and that her strengths and gifts as a remarkable woman deserve recognition. In other words, he becomes her advocate, wrapping her scriptotherapy (and his own extensive research) into his testimony.⁴ Wiebe stands by Yvonne in her processes of scriptotherapy and then takes responsibility for the interpretive and public act of inserting her experience into history. His testimony is necessarily a political act involving choices and articulating positions. Always, it seems to me, the risk with testimony is that it overrides complexity because it has a case to make. Where Yvonne had called upon Wiebe to listen, so now Wiebe calls upon his reading public, and his task is to persuade us of the righteousness of his cause. He is first recipient and interpreter of Yvonne's story, and bears it out of the prison, beyond her own limited reach, to an audience whom he addresses with indignation on her behalf.

Collaboration enables the co-authors of *Stolen Life* to divide responsibility for genres in this text and my treatment of their two names denotes the basic distinctions between these two genres. Yvonne Johnson plays a double role; insofar as she is author of this text, involved in the complex decision-making about its final form and part of its promotion, she is (as is common in Humanist academic discourse) "Johnson." Insofar as she is the subject of a personal story, she is "Yvonne." Wiebe, on the other hand, plays essentially one role, enabling me to specify one site at which I feel the dissonance setting in.

Despite Yvonne's references to "Rudy," and her perception of him as a free-standing subject and friend, Wiebe is not a subject in this work. He

does, of course, position himself as invited by Yvonne to help her with this book. He does express his interest in working with a descendant of Big Bear. He does quite frequently express his concern to understand and his respect and sympathy for Yvonne as she struggles to speak. He does acknowledge the problematic nature of his role in relation to Yvonne in that he is both white and male. Nonetheless, these positioning moves are infrequent in the text. Wiebe is, for the most part, a silent witness, an investigator, journalist, novelist, but not a part of the narration, not a man with his own questions, concerns, and reactions. He claims no personal need to tell this story (beyond his interest in everything pertaining to Big Bear), nor any personal involvement in it. Wiebe's own relative absence as subject certainly defers to Yvonne's central role. However, it also removes from his testimony all sense of his role as mediator between Yvonne's trauma and the reader's reception of it. Even as this testimonial narrator engages so centrally with the meaning-making process, Rudy Wiebe the man seems to withdraw from personal presence or involvement. As the making of meaning is so extensively determined by the genres that attempt it, I need to pause at this point to consider the dynamics of testimony that may be in force in *Stolen Life*.

Ross Chambers has described "testimony" as complex, multi-faceted, and subversive in form, "hijacking" familiar genres, as he puts it, for unconventional uses.⁵ In this case, for instance, Wiebe may be described as hijacking the genres of novel, biography, history, and journalism in order to filter through all of them a story that is "obscene," or, literally, off the cultural stage, and to insist upon its being noticed. Insofar as genres determine meaning within culturally acceptable parameters, testimony witnesses experience beyond cultural acceptance; it insists upon representing the unrepresentable, and giving voice to the unheard. Significantly, therefore, testimony increases the range of genres that regulate cultural discourse, expanding the kind of information that can be received and attended to. (This possibility is worth bearing in mind as a possible rejoinder to my understanding of dissonance; I may, of course, be failing to appreciate generic development that works for other readers.)

For trauma on a major scale, testimony is a powerful political tool.⁶ Testimonial literature has emerged as a significant genre from South America. It has been important to narratives of war, of the Holocaust, and of the AIDS epidemic.⁷ Sometimes it overlaps with autobiography when the personal story serves a political purpose. However, and this point is another key to the dissonance I am identifying in *Stolen Life*, Wiebe's testimony is distinct

from autobiography in its separation from the primary subject position. In this case, for instance, Wiebe's testimony implicates him only as mediator between subject and reader. He is not by any means an autobiographical subject. Further, because I read his intervention as so largely determining of meaning, I hope to show that he produces not a subject, Yvonne, but a discursive assemblage through which Yvonne can be read and understood. Wiebe creates meaning from the traumatic experiences for which Yvonne's "scriptotherapy" can find only primary expression. Furthermore, because the man Rudy is not fully implicated and Wiebe the writer makes meaning, the genre that emerges most clearly in this work is that of the journalistic or documentary novel. And here is another part of my problem: in its many variations, the novel creates an emotional truth but does not claim an extra- or pre-linguistic truth-to-experience. It tends to be language at work for the literary, not language at political work in the world. (I recognise, of course, that these categories overlap but am nonetheless drawing some necessary distinctions.) And literature is where Wiebe and I both begin, but it is not at all where Yvonne's trauma begins or, indeed, her need for reclamation.

If I am understanding Chambers' distinctions accurately, I can also suggest that Wiebe conflates two distinct kinds of testimony in this work—the political, which requires action (as in the court of appeal), and the ethical, which defers action but requires moral engagement (as with reader response). Neither is best suited to or most commonly used for the primary expression of "scriptotherapy," which, in its effort to find vocabulary, circles and recircles potential meanings without conclusion. With or without Chambers' distinctions, testimony works to establish meaning in ways that are external to scriptotherapy, indeed, in ways in which scriptotherapy cannot, and offers closure on matters that scriptotherapy keeps open. Crucially, testimony that relies on the novel as its prime genre may find itself defeated by the raw materials of scriptotherapy and will accordingly create meanings that could be persuasive on their own but are challenged by a counter-text that seems to be pulling in another direction.

Stolen Life clearly moves between these two genres with uneven results: in terms of scriptotherapy, Yvonne produced many volumes of journals and talked into numerous tapes quite apart from her phone conversations and meetings with Wiebe, pouring out her narrative, repeatedly approaching and avoiding dangerous terrain. References to Yvonne's circular narration describe her psychological distress but also represent a distinctly non-European, non-linear approach to story-telling: "her awareness flowing

through time and endless people and places as unstructured as the questing mind flows,” Wiebe writes at one point (41). As so often, this novelistic observation is his, not hers, an interpretive commentary by an apparently omniscient narrator. In terms of testimony, Wiebe is clearly an advocate for a woman he comes to believe has been unjustly singled out for conviction for a murder in which a group was involved. Not just Wiebe’s role in the production of this book but, more specifically, his own narrative as Johnson’s collaborator ensure that *Stolen Life* is read as testimony. Where Yvonne may begin with the nightmares, the flashbacks, the suicide attempts, and the helplessness of chronic trauma requiring urgent therapy, Wiebe as primary recipient and respondent for her stories takes up her cause against her conviction for murder, against her brother Leon for rape, and against the systemic racism and sexism in which she has been trapped. However, familiar as he is with the role of testimony, Wiebe, too, is trapped in this instance. As a white man, Wiebe sees himself as part of the history that has oppressed Yvonne’s people and Yvonne herself. Telling her story, he is either implicated among the guilty or can choose to redress her ills by means of a testimony that is wholehearted and, therefore, uncritical. Wiebe has chosen the latter; an unwavering advocate for Yvonne, he serves the case for her “defence” without perhaps imagining the complexities of possible “prosecution” in the form of reader response.

Then again, we might conclude that scriptotherapy and testimony combine in *Stolen Life* in such a way as to serve the purposes of both genres. Certainly the victim, Yvonne, does not depend on Wiebe to fight her battles for her. She emerges from this text as a powerful woman who, at her most vulnerable moments, seems to have had impressive resources of her own. She is clearly what Australians would call “a battler.” For her, collaboration has proved to be a valuable tool that shifts narrative responsibility at crucial stages of the story. For example, insofar as this work is testimony, Johnson faces the serious difficulty, which she addresses in the text, of speaking against her own people.⁸ As Kalí Tal has observed, the earliest feminists to speak out on abuse were white and tended to erase distinctions of race and class in their analyses of women’s oppression. Comparatively, their indignation was single in focus and in directness of attack. If they had consulted the African-American testimonial literature, Tal suggests, they would have learned of the complex ramifications of accusation and “they might have realized that testimony signals the beginning of a long process of struggle towards change, rather than effecting the change by itself” (160). Like

African-American women, Johnson must remain silent or, in seeking change, must implicate her own people, already oppressed in other ways, in her accusations. Certainly, she herself and not Wiebe presses charges against her brother Leon, and she herself and not Wiebe also accuses her father and her grandfather of rape. However, because Wiebe is indeed the primary recipient of these stories of incest and abuse, he serves as a filter, as first interpreter, as advocate, in ways that free Johnson within the text at least into therapeutic rather than accusatory mode.

Tracing a fine line, then, between a personal story of lifelong abuse whose reception could well be “obscene” and a testimonial that implicates close family members (father, grandfather, and brother in this case) and therefore separates the narrator within her ethnic community, Johnson’s story finds an inspired middle path. She has turned to Wiebe as collaborator both for his professional skills and for his already proven advocacy on behalf of First Nations peoples with his prize-winning novel, *The Temptations of Big Bear*. Establishing herself as a descendant of the Cree Chief, Big Bear, and choosing as co-author the prize-winning writer who had constructed Big Bear as a romantic hero in the early days of the British move west in Canada, Johnson effectively aligns her own oppression with that of her people and dignifies the obscenity of her own experience by association with the experience of defeated nations whose spirituality was very closely tied to the land and to the natural world. To identify these effects is by no means to be cynical because many layers of narrative determine reception of this very powerful book. However, this alignment of distinct oppressions does ensure that Wiebe’s largely white and immigrant readership stands accused with him of the originary situations for Yvonne’s personal experience of chronic abuse.

Significantly, given this choice that Yvonne’s personal trauma should be aligned with the oppression of her people, Wiebe’s very involvement induces a particular kind of backlash—the second of the risks that this book has run from its inception. *Western Report* (July 20, 1998) ran a cover story titled “Dances with Wiebe.” Under a photograph of a smiling Wiebe flanked by Yvonne Johnson on one side and Big Bear on the other, the caption explains: “Big Bear’s biographer stokes the fires of white guilt by invoking the chief’s memory to defend a native murderer.” Seriously over-simplifying the politics of the Wiebe/Johnson collaboration and suggesting a (distinctly white) rapacity in Wiebe’s “mining” of Native issues, *Western Report* and its author, Davis Sheremata, nonetheless touch a nerve. Part of my own reservations about this book involve questioning the effect of Wiebe’s involvement on

Johnson's very painful story. Not least, is it possible that Wiebe's commitment to Johnson, based on her history of appalling and repeated abuse, her spiritual development, and her appeal to him for understanding, have led to denial of and apologia for her involvement in a particularly brutal murder? Sheremata's story, which dwells on the details of the murder, is unambiguous in deciding that Wiebe (like Norman Mailer in the case of Jack Henry Abbott, or William F. Buckley in the case of Edgar Smith) has been "conned," and that Yvonne Johnson has been appropriately imprisoned for murder. In practical terms, this pattern of denial and apologia is a moot point; Johnson is serving a life sentence and the process of this work has not granted her an appeal. In narrative terms, the effects are uncomfortably open to Sheremata's crude diatribe. What remains troubling is not, in fact, Yvonne's guilt or innocence in the case of Leonard Skwarok's murder. She herself tells of many occasions when reckless behaviour has driven her to violence. What remains disturbing are the evasive or slippery moments in the narrative when meaning does not flow clearly from scriptotherapy to testimony, when Wiebe's romance does not match the raw brutality of the experience, when meaning is most patently manipulated for public consumption. Notably, Knopf has controlled production in every detail so as to combine and control possibilities, overriding the ugliness of Yvonne's personal experience and endorsing Wiebe's creation of a hero to succeed Big Bear.

Production of this book indicates in every detail that Knopf has anticipated a problematic reception for *Stolen Life*.⁹ Knopf presents *Stolen Life: The Journey of a Cree Woman* with impressive flair and subtlety: Rudy Wiebe is the first author.¹⁰ Every detail of the cover design appeals to a particular kind of mass market, that of the educated white liberal who wants to take some responsibility for the injustices of stolen generations—Japanese, Chinese, or, in this case, First Nations. These are Rudy Wiebe's readers. This large volume joins his impressive list of publications all stamped with his moral indignation, social concern, and profound empathy in particular for First Nations peoples. However, Knopf's cover also complicates this presentation, listing Yvonne Johnson as co-author, the Cree woman of the subtitle, whose "journey" moves from her own "stolen" life, and the stolen lives of her generation and of the generations from which she descends, to the life that she herself stole and for which she is now serving a life sentence.

Johnson's involvement as co-author for her own story introduces the issues of abuse narrative that I have already noted as well as issues of ownership; this is, after all, Johnson's story, but she has entered some strange form

of collaboration in which she is not first author. The designers at Knopf have foregrounded such questions and framed reception of the text as “Native issues.” For example, the letters for “Stolen Life” appear as dramatic brush strokes, white against the rich reds, yellows, and purplish blue of a sky at sunset. Beneath these brushstrokes on the spine, but inserted through them on the front cover, the subtitle, like the authors’ names, is given in simple golden capitals shadowed in black for further dimension. At the bottom of the cover, beneath the text, a black landscape, gently rolling hills, is overlaid with four glossy brushstrokes or feathers that pick out the brilliant colours of the sky. Yellow, red, blue, and white, these are also the colours of the four directions (6), a point that is entirely clear on the paperback issue, where the brushstrokes appear on all four edges of the front cover. Where the gold lettering inscribes dignified and traditional western authority, suggesting a work of substance and value, the thick, white brush strokes for “Stolen Life” (the brief title, the quick reference), suggest activity and drama. This drama, furthermore, licks at the edges of a narrow picture of a little girl produced in glossy black and white. (On the spine, this picture is cropped to provide just her upper body.)

Here, at the centre, fragile and beleaguered, stands the “shattered subject” (see Henke). Knock-kneed, pigeon-toed, her arms crossed tightly across her chest (is she hugging a stuffed animal that merges with the white of her skirt?) she grins at the photographer (and therefore at the bookstore browser)—a tight grin explained in the text as deformed by a cleft-palate. This picture has been severely cropped to exclude the people with whom the child was standing. Holding herself tightly together, she stands alone. Her appeal is instantaneous and powerful. Distinct from the rich colours of the jacket and the fine gold lettering, her white skirt creating the visual centre for the white brushstrokes of “Stolen Life,” this child is the original waif that sold *Oliver Twist* and, more recently, *Angela’s Ashes*.

Yvonne’s story is appalling, and this picture is certainly worth the proverbial thousand words in terms of its immediate presentation of just how much was stolen and from how early an age. However, the work of this photograph is not over. On the back cover, behind text from this book and “Praise for Rudy Wiebe’s *A Discovery of Strangers*,” Big Bear in his blanket fills the page, mouth grimly closed, eyes narrowed in intense gaze into the distance. Here, in contrast to the rich colours and dramatic lettering of the front cover, regular black type overwrites the muted browns and creams of both photograph and jacket. Big Bear is not so much a declared as a haunting presence.

Even to those of us who might not recognize him, he is evidently “Indian,” culled from the archives, romanticized by distance.¹¹ This nineteenth-century Plains Cree Chief held out on his own against white ownership of the land that settled Native peoples on reserves. Returning after protracted trauma to the spirituality of her ancestors, Yvonne claims her lip as “the Bear’s Lip” (436) and accepts her Cree name “Muskeke Muskwa Iskewos,” or “Medicine Bear Woman” (435). Yvonne’s wholehearted adoption of her Native heritage enables her to reach for meaning out of chaos and enables Wiebe to identify her plight with that of the Cree people.

The colour photograph of the two authors on the inside back flap of the hard-cover version sets them against green open spaces and against the distinctive round roof and radiating poles of the Okimaw Ohci Healing Lodge for Native Women in Saskatchewan. Sent there from the notorious Kingston Penitentiary to complete her sentence, Johnson has returned to her spiritual homeland and to the healing traditions of her people. This photograph positions her accordingly. She and Wiebe together, windswept and gently smiling, present the resting place for this particular visual journey that begins with the waif on the front, refers to Big Bear on the back, one of Johnson’s stolen lives and one of Wiebe’s literary triumphs, and concludes here with the Wiebe and Johnson collaboration.

Every phase of the interior design of this work supports and develops the collaborative venture, which is, of course, complex. Yvonne Johnson’s dedication appears first, “To my children, whom I love endlessly; to all survivors and those who help them; and, with the greatest respect, to Rudy.” Johnson’s dedication moves forward in time, to her children, who should not relive the story of that front-cover waif, to her own survival from repeated trauma, and her recognition that her experience is not singular, and to the validation and healing provided by those who attend very carefully to the experience of trauma. (My own difficulty with the nature of Wiebe’s involvement in this work is distinctly nuanced by Yvonne’s appreciation of his collaboration.) With its layered emotional appeal, Johnson’s dedication is profoundly political. Wiebe’s subsequent dedication is “To the memory of Mistahi Muskwa (Big Bear), 1825-1888.” Wiebe’s dedication is apparently self-effacing except insofar as it implicitly claims his right to speak on behalf of a Cree woman (even preferring Big Bear’s Cree name). Both dedications implicate Wiebe quite centrally, as immersed in Cree culture, inspired by Big Bear, whose story has also brought him fame and royalties, and as a powerful channel for Johnson’s story.

Three introductory epigraphs, from Elly Danica, Albert Camus, and Peter Fallon, all engage with trauma and its imperatives for hearing and healing. The table of contents, centred on the page, both margins unjustified, consists of chapter titles that are catchy (“Growing Up in a Beer Bottle . . .”) and, followed by ellipses, incomplete: “Down into Disaster . . .” or “What You Did, and Where You Did It . . .,” which addresses Yvonne as involved in murder and speaks for Wiebe as part of an investigative team that begins with the police and the courts. In the body of the text, these same chapter titles, painted in brushstrokes like the short title on cover and title page, are followed in each instance by epigraphs that belong within this text. Most are extracts from Yvonne’s journals. Several are excerpts from court proceedings. One, near the end, is a quotation from Carl Jung, a significant influence on Yvonne’s healing process. Again, as with all other aspects of the production of this book, these pages dedicated to chapter headings and extracts speak both of capacious volume and of plural voices.

At every stage, the plural voices are unmistakable. Wiebe’s prefatory note positions Yvonne’s truths within the context of other people’s stories and data he has collected “from court, police, government, school, and newspaper records in both Canada and the United States.” Yvonne’s own notebooks, audiotapes, letters, statements, comments on other documents, and conversations in person and by phone contribute several layers of her story over several years in which she circled and recircled specific memories. Wiebe’s preface also positions Johnson as vivid in narration, uneducated, enriched by reading in prison, and developing her own talents through this extended process of narration. Finally, “the spelling, punctuation, and grammar in Yvonne’s letters and notebooks have been standardized.” (This honest admission of one aspect of Wiebe’s involvement signals an early warning of appropriation and distortion. Heather Hodgson, too, is troubled by this sentence: “[t]hat word’s implicit indifference to a difference of voice, even from such a compassionate figure as Wiebe, made me shudder.” “Can’t a major figure of Canadian literature offer a gift without taking?” she asks at another point in her review.) Acknowledging all sources for a richly plural narrative and the research that Wiebe himself has undertaken, this prefatory note describes Johnson as articulate and prolific, but requiring editorial work in order to go public. As her own preface, Johnson follows Wiebe’s prefatory note with a short prayer to the Creator for help in making amends and in sharing pain in order for other people to understand themselves. Yvonne’s attention to her primary experience and need for healing establishes

her role as subject of *Stolen Life*, just as Wiebe's (paternalistic) preparation of her experience for public reception establishes his role as advocate.

Given these features of the production of *Stolen Life*, I read this work as Yvonne's personal narrative (journals, letters, tapes, conversations) organized by Wiebe's capabilities as an interviewer, his extensive research, and his ability (and likely very hard work) to distil voluminous materials into a coherent narrative. Wiebe writes in his prefatory note that the "selection, compiling, and arrangement of events and details . . . were done in a manner the two authors believed to be honest and accurate." In terms of arrangement, their first meeting in the text takes place at the Okimaw Ohci Healing Lodge, and not, as in reality, at the Kingston Penitentiary, thus highlighting in the text the distance that Yvonne has travelled on her "journey," her primary claim to Native rather than criminal identity, and Wiebe's respect for that Native identity, his interest in meeting her on her own ground. We are asked to acknowledge two levels of interaction between them: one for information and the other for interpretation. In both cases, Wiebe has been concerned to retain a sense of conversations in process with his attention to the circularity of Johnson's storytelling and the significant nuances of her oral presentation. Repeatedly, I must acknowledge the generosity of Wiebe's attention to Yvonne, the person, but also regret his tendency (increasing through the text) to sublimate these processes that he describes at this early stage. I am concerned that the novelist takes over from the collaborator and becomes a ventriloquist for Yvonne.

The nature of Wiebe's narration is problematic on two particular counts that transform his strengths as a novelist into a liability: first, because he frames his own processes of investigation and discovery in terms of Native understanding of landscape and journey; second, a further result of his downplaying of his role as mediator, he creates a deceptive (novelistic) sense of inevitability at key points of the story. Wiebe's relative absence from the text conceals his personal preferences as "natural" readings of Yvonne's story. His uncritical reception creates gaps in comprehension for the reader who cannot lose sight of the narrative as grounded in specific experience and is accordingly startled by disjunctions between narrative and the "reality" so far. Central to my own discomfort with this text, therefore, is an identifiable disjunction between experience and narration by virtue of pre-determined meaning. Although Johnson, Wiebe, and Knopf of Canada may all have agreed on one single and forceful meaning—that Yvonne's long history of abuse, with its apparently natural result of crime and imprisonment,

mirrors the history and present situation of her people—this meaning does not adequately describe or account for the experiences of the scriptotherapist. This meaning is, perhaps, too tidy for the mess of trauma on which it is based, with the result that each part of this collaborative team undermines the other, creating not corroboration but two “unreliable” narrators.

Wiebe positions himself from the beginning of this text as so immersed in Cree culture as to have no critical distance, no position separate from Cree culture from which the Mennonite writer, Rudy Wiebe, may come into the situation. For me, this immersion rings alarm bells for the third risk I identify this work as running—that of provoking the politically correct reading that excoriates Wiebe for appropriation of a Native woman’s voice and story. Again, as reader, I find myself with mixed sympathies, identifying with Wiebe even while I deplore the possibility that he has, indeed, subsumed the Native voice into his own. For example, Wiebe renders his understanding of the landscape on his opening journey to the Okimaw Ohci Healing Lodge for Women in Saskatchewan in terms of Cree culture: “At the road crossing,” he writes, “where I feel the pavement end, I stop, turn right, and drive south—the Cree direction of the Law of Order, which is the natural order of Creation, the order of how things will happen. I need that today: order” (3). On the one hand, Wiebe’s entry into specifically Cree territory, following the extensive research that he must have undertaken for *The Temptations of Big Bear* and the extensive research and personal commitment involved in Yvonne’s story, surely give him some claim to use Cree cultural terms. On the other hand, he is either naturalizing these terms, as if his largely white readership surely knew that south was the direction for order, or he is romanticizing them, introducing a Native element that makes sense of and therefore justifies the world of the initiated. He introduces the Cree name for these hills, “pa-ha-toonga” (4), and returns to the Cree points of the compass to describe the setting of the Lodge: “The level land disappears everywhere into horizonless silver under the blue, brightening sun, disappears everywhere north, which is the direction of the Bear and Honesty and the Law of Harmony that subsumes within itself all four of the sacred laws—the control, order, balance, and harmony within Creation” (6). While Wiebe as mediator for Yvonne’s story may be demonstrating receptivity to her world, he is also luring his reader into a novelistic world order in which he forfeits his own distinctive subject position and therefore the possibility of his own critical stance to lived experience.

Nowhere does this lack of critical distance, or this tendency to naturalize or romanticize, come more forcefully into play than during the extended and

problematic scenario and description of Leonard Skwarok's murder. Because Wiebe writes as Yvonne's advocate, because Yvonne has taken a long time to come to this part of her story, and because the events themselves are so ugly and confused, the meaning that is made in this section is fraught with difficulties. For a start, the situation is made to seem inevitable, a word that recurs like a refrain; with hindsight, every event in that day becomes significant. Wiebe may claim to have worked with Yvonne's stories and with trial and appeal records (239), but the novelist takes over from the reporter: "Outside, the gentleness of a September day, trees gold and shedding, Yvonne could see children jumping in the leaves in the park across the street; her littlest ones were there and her heart gave a jolt, and suddenly she ran, she had to for ever be on watch for them every minute, every second, like a deer or caribou mother" (240). The explicit naturalizing of Yvonne's maternal vigilance in a form that would be bizarre if not offensive to a white woman, cannot cover the gaps in which this same mother seems to leave her children in order to run errands, to collect beer, or to become helplessly drunk. Apparently unable to account for discrepancies in this mother's behaviour, or demonstrate that she was indeed a loving and careful mother whenever she could be, Wiebe as apparently uncritical advocate reasserts the harmonies of the natural world in order to rarify this troubled woman at one of the most troubled points in her story.

As a further instance of such discrepancy between messy experience and deliberate narrative meaning, the night of the murder continues with another momentary focus on the children. When the eldest girl emerges, disturbed by a five-person punch-up slamming into walls and furniture just outside her room and then down the basement stairs, she is told to go back and watch her brother and sister. Wiebe as narrator continues:

There may be heavy thuds and shouts and crashes in the basement, but that small room with most of its floor covered by mattresses for sleep or play must hold only quiet breath. The block letters of the alphabets they pasted to the wall begin just above the middle mattress, Chantal's, and rise like a mountain to the brightness of the T lit by the streetlight shining through the frilly curtains, and turn the corner of the room on U to Z by the window. Straight across, the ABCs begin again, slant down until M disappears into the closet doors folded open. The three children asleep. (257)

Somewhere behind the caribou mother and the tender homemaker with all her children safely asleep is the terrible mess of a night in which Yvonne participates in a violent murder, heads out into the night to collect beer, is raped by the man who spots her as an easy target and later informs on her, wishes to kill herself, and somehow gets her daughter off to school, from

which the daughter has to be collected when her parents are arrested. Wiebe's meaning does not take all of these pieces into account; it presents but fails to acknowledge the information it sets out to shape. It is not accountable either to events or to Yvonne's explicit recognition of the task in hand. "You see," she writes, "I've spent the last thirty years running . . . but due to imprisonment I was forced to stop running, and that's so hard" (5). The facts presented in this text, the raw experience on which this work depends, require a facing of the trauma both received and inflicted if meaning and information are to coincide in a satisfactory manner.

For me, concern for the children recurs throughout this long chapter. (How *could* they be forgotten?) One justification, perhaps, for Wiebe's naturalising and romanticising of Yvonne as mother is my own unfortunate but deeply cultural tendency to be more critical of a delinquent mother than of a murderer, more prone to respond emotionally than rationally. Nonetheless, and taking such tendencies into account, I am still responding as a reader to a text when I say this part of the narrative is spongy and infirm. The alphabet drawn like a magic circle around the mattresses on the floor and the frilly curtains at the window become as false as the quiet breath of sleeping innocence. The advocate is justifying extraordinary violence on the grounds that this caribou mother is holding a supposed child molester at bay. Then, lacking the critical distance that could keep the telling honest, the advocate turns novelist, amalgamating information he may well have gleaned from other points in his exchanges with Yvonne with information about the night of the murder to create a scenario that aims to account for but, in the process, avoids the lived experience of that night.

One strange question remains: is it possible that a text created by two writers, including the life-story of one and the research story of the other, not to mention court records, newspaper articles, and numerous interviews with other people, should ultimately be monologic in effect? If the discrepancies I have been noting represent, as I suspect, the soft ice of interpretation rather than strategically juxtaposed alternative meanings, then Wiebe as meaning-maker has assumed a protective control over the darkest aspects of Yvonne's narrative. For Wiebe as a writer, and for Wiebe as advocate for Canada's First Nations, this control over narrative is retrograde. In *The Temptations of Big Bear*, for example, Penny Van Toorn sees Wiebe as releasing "archival documents into new interpretive contexts in the open-ended present, where they may enter into dialogue with a diversity of readers" (113). Despite what Van Toorn calls Wiebe's tendency to arrest polyphonies

with his monologic, Mennonite voice, she suggests that Wiebe “dialogizes the historical records—releases these suppressed voicings—by bringing the documents into the zone of contact with the unfinished, open-ended present, where their meaning remains open to negotiation” (Van Toorn 114). *Stolen Life*, on the other hand, reaches the relatively single conclusion that justice has miscarried in the case of a chronically abused young woman, who is a good wife and mother and a deeply spiritual person.

By way of tentative conclusion, I suggest that no collaborative venture can afford such definite closure, far less a single conclusion. In this case, the uninvolved and therefore invisible writer of testimony encloses the scripto-therapist, trapping her subject position in an ideal configuration that exonerates her from personal responsibility, that ultimate validation of the viable subject. I am reminded of Lee Maracle’s “Prologue” to *Bobbi Lee: Indian Rebel*: “There are two voices in the pages of this book, mine and Donald Barnett’s. As-told-tos between whites and Natives rarely work, when they do, it’s wonderful, when they don’t it’s a disaster for the Native. Don never intended it to be a disaster for me” (19). I have been reading *Stolen Life* with every respect for Rudy Wiebe’s intentions, and with no ability to separate myself from them, but with mounting concern for the dissonance, if not disaster, that results. Where John Beverly, writing on specifically South American *testimonio*, describes “[t]he powerful textual affirmation of the speaking subject” (96) and “a challenge and an alternative to the patriarchal and elitist function the author plays in class and sexually and racially divided societies” (97), Wiebe has used his gifts as a novelist to intervene between the speaking subject and her audience in a protective ploy that invites me to hear with his ears and see with his eyes. One result is a powerful book that is selling well and that must, to a very significant degree, bring comfort to Yvonne Johnson. Another less fortunate result is a shortfall between this collaboration and what Gilmore or Chambers might call a limit-case narrative, an exploration of trauma that pushes the boundaries for modes of telling and enables me to read and to understand in new ways.

NOTES

- 1 This paper has developed out of a Peter Wall Foundation project, “Narratives of Disease, Disability and Trauma,” in the course of which I have worked extensively with Angela Henderson in Nursing at the University of British Columbia. Her work on women’s experience of trauma and abuse has been important to my reading, and discussions with her have affected my thinking.

- 2 Gabriele Helms raised important questions. Marilyn Iwama has been generous with her guidance and critical questioning. An anonymous reader for *Canadian Literature* also challenged me to think through my categories with more care than I had originally shown. I am also grateful for the careful work of Michael LaPointe as research assistant and for Kieran Egan's help with web-based information.
- 3 I am drawing on the work of Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub for this brief discussion of witnessing and testimony. Much of their discussion treats of the subject as bearing witness to his or her own experience of the Holocaust, and bearing witness, as well, to the process of bearing witness. For discussion of *Stolen Life*, I am therefore reading "witness" in one part of its potential only. Although Yvonne's purpose includes witness, she depends on Wiebe to bear that witness. Because *Stolen Life* is a collaborative work, and because Yvonne remains in prison while Wiebe travels with the story and reads to a large public, I see him as the witness to her story.
- 4 The legal connotations for much of the language I find myself using in this discussion of narrative are quite striking: Wiebe works with Yvonne's "evidence" to arrive at (his own) "conviction" and bear "witness" to her experience. The implications of this discursive overlap are important beyond this one story that involves murder, trial, and conviction, in that they bear also upon the very role of storytelling as meaning-maker.
- 5 Comparative Literature Seminar at the University of British Columbia, Winter 1999.
- 6 Critical indignation at the presumably "false" testimony of Benjamin Wilkomirski and Rigoberta Menchu indicates how seriously readers connect such writing to appalling circumstances that need to be remedied and how seriously they feel betrayed by any suggestion of fraud. Menchu has disavowed portions of her autobiography as the work of the French anthropologist who recorded them. See also David Stoll. The assault on Wilkomirski's work has also been expressed through popular media. In both cases, discussion of the relations between fact and fiction in autobiography plays out with particular ferocity when doubt is cast on testimony. Testimony, therefore, is not primarily a literary genre, or does not enjoy the literary privilege of separation between language and experience. Rather, testimony is language at work in the world. See, in particular, John Beverly, who distinguishes the political from the literary and identifies the political risks involved in literary reception.
- 7 A web search for "testimonio" produced 46,000 entries, nearly all South American, and nearly all individual. See also, the extensive AIDS literature, which frequently depends on the personal story for political manifesto. Holocaust literature consists very largely of the personal story that serves the urgent purpose of cultural memory.
- 8 Yvonne's urgent and painful accusations against her own family members run counter to the other strong impulse she expresses in this collaboration. In her first letter to Wiebe, Yvonne seems powerfully impressed by his understanding of Native issues as evinced in *The Temptations of Big Bear*: "How is it you came to know as much as you do?" she writes. "Were you led? What was the force behind you? Who are you? Why did you choose Big Bear to write about?" (9). She then expresses interest in clearing Big Bear's name, recovering his medicine bundle, and reclaiming both the family and the place that have been scattered.
- 9 In fact, a tribute to this whole production, *Stolen Life* received wide and favourable coverage when it appeared in 1998. See, for example, *The Globe and Mail*, Saturday, 27 June; 1998, *Maclean's*, 13 July, 1998, and *The Vancouver Sun*, Tuesday, 19 January, 1999. Although Heather Hodgson's review in *Canadian Literature* is on the whole sympathetic and favourable, she does take issue with the nature of Wiebe's intervention.

- 10 According to conventions in the Humanities, alphabetical listing indicates equal partnership. Reversal or scrambling of alphabetical listing, therefore, indicates superior responsibility for the first name. In the case of *Stolen Life*, Wiebe and Johnson, in that order, marks Wiebe's contribution as superior to that of Johnson. It is possible that Johnson herself chose this order. It is also possible that the publisher and its legal representatives require the responsibility to rest with a recognized authority. Julie Cruikshank, for example, is the primary author of *Life Lived Like a Story: Life Stories of Three Yukon Native Elders*. However, despite the "Cruikshank" on the spine, the title page in that case allows no pause between Cruikshank's name and the phrase "in collaboration with Angela Sidney, Kitty Smith, and Annie Ned." In that case, too, the University of Nebraska Press has placed photographs of the three Native elders to face the title page. Ownership of publication is clearly fraught with complications. Copyright for *Stolen Life* belongs, as is traditional, to the press and not to either author.
- 11 As I have noted, Yvonne Johnson reached out to Rudy Wiebe for help with her story because she respected his work in *The Temptations of Big Bear*. See *Stolen Life* 9-11 for Wiebe's outline of the Big Bear narrative. *The Temptations of Big Bear* won the Governor General's Award for Fiction in 1973. So many works of fiction and life-writing were published on Native themes in 1973 that this year has been called the year of the Indian. See, in particular, the very influential *Halfbreed* by Maria Campbell. *Stolen Life*, published in 1998, is part, therefore, of a quarter-century tradition of life-writing, much of it collaborative, often coercively so, in which Native peoples have written themselves into Canadian history and agitated for political change. Rudy Wiebe has also co-authored the film script for *The Temptations of Big Bear* with Gil Cardinal. The film, starring Gordon Tootoosis, Tantoo Cardinal, Lorne Cardinal, Michael Greeyes, Kennetch Charlette, Patrick Bird, Gail Maurice, Dianne DeBassige, and Simon Baker, and directed by Gil Cardinal, was shown on CBC TV, 3 and 4 January, 1999.

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