

‘Making this book is a strange thing to me’: *Singing Away the Hunger* and the Politics of Publishing in Collaborative Autobiography

Vanessa A. Farr

I Feminism and Life Writing

One of the great successes of the second wave feminist movement is that it has, in foregrounding the importance of the lives of ‘ordinary’ women, paved the way for an explosion of life writing by those who have not previously been seen as significant social players, or indeed, as capable of recording the stories of their own lives¹. Because of its interdisciplinary nature, feminism has been an influential force in re-thinking previously rigid boundaries that separated disciplines such as anthropology from sociology, philosophy, and literary studies. It has also been particularly effective in its analysis of how traditional epistemologies exclude ‘knowers’ on the basis of their race and class². In this, feminist thought has opened new spaces from which to consider the production of autobiographical writing.

The influence of feminist methodologies, particularly in the area of collaborative life histories, can be seen to good effect in works recently published in South Africa. This paper will focus on one such project, Mpho Nthunya’s *Singing Away the Hunger*³ (edited by Kendall and published: Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1996; Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1997; London: Souvenir Press 1998), in which powerful bonds of friendship, political commitment and resource sharing, shaped and directed the development of the life history⁴.

¹ For a discussion of the inclusive nature of the term ‘life writing’, which I use throughout this paper, see Marlene Kadar (1992: 4).

² See Harding (1987) and, for an African context, Mbilinyi’s (1992:32f) additions to Harding.

³ Hereafter referred to as *Singing*.

⁴ This paper is based on interviews conducted with M. Nthunya and K.L. Kendall on 24 October 1998, in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, and with M. Nthunya in Roma Valley, Lesotho on 5-6 June 1999. The interviews form part of a larger inquiry into women’s experience of literary production in South Africa.

My interest in such projects was originally piqued by my observation that feminist debate, although it has focused on the more intimate aspects of collaborative life history production, namely, on challenges relating to the relationships between the participants in the project, has overlooked the processes by which the results of such compacts enter the public realm. This oversight is a dangerous one, especially considering the fact that a central aim of feminist politics has been to undermine the traditional division between the 'public' sphere of masculine endeavour and the 'private' sphere of feminine influence. If feminists are to emphasise that life histories play a significant part in the larger project of redefining existing social, economic and political structures, then attention must be paid to the instruments of literary production. In order to further the feminist commitment to transform androcentric, racist, and classist traditions about who has a life to write, feminist theorists need to attend to every stage of life history collaboration. It is insufficient to identify the problems of silencing, appropriation, and the undermining of authority in the process of writing, if the effects of these hindrances are not also examined as they emerge during the course of publishing and distributing the life history that is produced.

II Publishing in the New South Africa

South Africa boasts one of the most sophisticated publishing systems in Africa, but despite this, it is estimated that only 5% of the population has easy access to books. It is clear that the legacy of colonial and apartheid linguistic policies is still paramount in dictating what gets published. In 1996-97, 51% (17 512) of the books published in the country were in English, mother tongue of only 9.52% of the population, and 28.3% (9 721) in Afrikaans, home language of 14.97% of South Africans. By contrast, there were only 1 180 (3.4%) publications in isiZulu, which is spoken by 22% of the population⁵. This distribution mirrors the much-debated problem of indigenous-language expression on the continent as a whole, where the preponderance of works published are in colonial languages. Moreover, such stark figures also highlight one of the legacies of apartheid policies, which developed an educated white elite and promoted its cultural production at the expense of all others who lived in South Africa.

In the new democratic political dispensation, South African publishing houses seem to be paralysed by conservative fiscal policies and an entrenched and immovable view of the country's readership. There is only a limited commitment to an active consideration of strategies for accessing manuscripts that bring to light the

⁵ Sources: *Southern African Books in Print* Cape Town: Books in Print Information Services, 1998 and *South Africa Survey 1996-1997* Johannesburg: Southern African Institute of Race Relations, 1997.

lives of previously marginalised people⁶. Part of the reason for this, as Judith Lütge Coullie points out, is that there exists 'little or no market' for texts aimed at the black working-class readership, which continues to be plagued by 'widespread poverty ... [so that] few can afford to purchase books' (Coullie 1997:141). In addition to this lack of resources is the problem of book distribution, which continues to closely mirror class divisions in South Africa. Bookstores in the country are concentrated in historically white middle-class areas, and they are exclusive and expensive: as a writer whom I interviewed put it, they are "like boutiques"⁷. The distribution of books into working class urban areas and into rural South Africa is proceeding at a discouragingly slow pace⁸.

Existing resources for new writers, such as Basil van Rooyen's *How to Get Published in South Africa: A Guide for Authors*, and the Publishing Training Project's *Directory of Book Publishing in South Africa*, assume a high level of literacy and familiarity not only with the workings of commercial publishing, but also with the use of reference guides. It is clear that both handbooks are aimed at those who already have a reasonable chance of successfully submitting manuscripts for consideration. The economic underpinnings of this approach are clear, given that the development of new writers is a costly and time-consuming process for a publishing company to undertake. Thirty-six out of a total of a hundred and seven (68%) of South African publishing houses fall into the turnover band of R0-R99 999, and many of these small houses are those which focus on the promotion of new writing (Van Rooyen 1996:9). Their margin for development is, consequently, frustratingly small. This lack of resources means that publishers have, on the whole, contributed little to redress the injustices of apartheid policies on cultural development. Many houses are now in a stifling situation in which, in the midst of bitter complaints that the publishing industry in South Africa is in a state of crisis, publishers are still unenthusiastic to mobilise their potential to tap new markets⁹. This sluggishness is worsened by the failure of government to institute a book development policy:

⁶ This assessment is based on interviews in 1998-1999 with editors at large publishing houses, and with NGOs developing adult literacy materials in South Africa.

⁷ Interview, Dynana Kukama, 22 May 1998.

⁸ Based on interviews with Beulah Tambado, *Easy Reading for Adults*, 23 June 1988 and Elisabeth Anderson, Centre for the Book, 18 September 1998.

⁹ Some exceptions to this situation do exist, among them houses such as David Philip and Ravan, which have continued in their tradition of promoting resistance literature. Kwela Books, which is based in Cape Town, has a policy of promoting the writing of previously disadvantaged South Africans. It does not, however, publish collaborative autobiographies (interview, Annari van de Merwe, 17 November 1999).

beyond commissioning a report in 1997, the Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology has done little to kick-start the growth of a vibrant culture of reading and writing in South Africa.

As the above account indicates, the problem of raced privilege remains central in South Africa. In post-apartheid South Africa, it is clear that the collection and publication of life stories as a means to democratise access to print is a matter of considerable political importance. But the end of apartheid has also led to uncomfortable new questions which interrogate the processes by which life writing is produced, and which critically re-examine the influence on such projects of theoretical systems such as feminism.

III Feminism and Life Writing in South Africa

The production of poor black women's stories has a substantial history in South Africa¹⁰. After 1976, and well into the 1980s, 'researcher-scripted autobiographical texts,' i.e., the stories of the 'functionally illiterate [whose] testimonies had to be transcribed by those who had access to the print media' were a commonly utilised political tool whereby 'white academics sought to expose the hidden horrors of lived experiences of apartheid'(Coullie 1997:133). This form of resistance, which was undoubtedly a fairly effective means of forcing white South Africans to understand the realities of the apartheid system, was not without its difficulties. Although politically well-meaning, such texts participated in the country's complex history of 'voicing' which simultaneously 'unvoices,' a process whose effects are still being keenly felt.

Shireen Hassim and Cheryl Walker, writing in 1993 about the problem of black women's under-representation in academia, discuss how

in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the writings of white feminists began to give voice to a hidden history of women's political activity, and to the oppressive and exploitative conditions under which black women lived.

Because of the overarching importance of the anti-apartheid struggle, however, such writing inadequately challenged 'problematic aspects of the relationship between black and white women ... [Then,] 'working together in the struggle' meant that 'relations of power and privilege between black and white women were rarely openly confronted' (Hassim & Walker 1993:528-529). These conditions created what Hassim and Walker label 'a false sisterhood' in which opportunities to confront the

¹⁰ See, for example, Belinda Bozzoli (1991) *Women of Phokeng* and Hanlie Griesel, (1987) *Sibambene: The Voices of Women at Mboza*.

differences between groups of women were submerged by the struggle for national liberation. Now, in the post-apartheid era, such differences have exploded into the open: inter-racial collaborative life history projects between white academic women and poor black women have come under renewed scrutiny, and increasingly, such ventures have met with resistance from black intellectuals who have identified, even in projects which purport to be liberatory in intent, an implicit 'unvoicing'. The question of who speaks for whom has been asked with renewed vigour, and often, inadequate theorising on the problems of raced difference, or ill-concealed racist and classist imperatives, are identified on the part of the dominant member of the collaboration. In such cases, talk of friendship and shared vision may, as Anne E. Goldman argues in a discussion about collaborative life histories in the United States, 'mask editorial imperative and ... justify intervention when that intercession, albeit unacknowledged, comes into conflict with the speaker's own interests' (Goldman 1993:190f).

Now that black South Africans have achieved recognition as the authors of their own political destiny, they have also more loudly claimed their rights as potential recorders of their own lives. Ultimately, their emancipation positions individuals to reject practices which represent them passively as subjects for generalised accounts that juxtapose the researcher-as-individual against the subject-as-collective. The days when the name of the white collector of life stories could dominate the text while the subjects of the stories appeared only as "Voices" or "Women" are over¹¹. Now, ordinary people who survived the ravages of apartheid wish to commemorate, in their own words and under their own names, their survival and defeat of an unjust system.

Self-definition was a central goal of the anti-apartheid movement, which has opened up space in the newly democratic South Africa for the assertion that personal experience confers recognisable expertise. This idea is reflected in the new education system that is being implemented in the country, *Curriculum 2005* (C2005), which, incorporating an approach called 'Critical Outcomes and Lifelong Learning,' admits the need to identify and acknowledge prior experience. Under this rubric, learning is seen as

... a lifelong journey. The whole educational process is organised to help train learners in practising the critical outcomes so that the learners

¹¹ Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to examine paratextual elements such as titles, it is important to note that a similar disembodiment and unvoicing of subjects was also implicit in the titles of life story collections from other parts of Africa. An example is Jean Davison's *Voices from Mutara: The Lives of Rural Gikuyu Women*.

eventually become skilled in life-role ('real life') performances of the critical outcomes ... an opportunity must be given for learners to display prior learning [This] comes from all sources: the home, the community, informal and out of school experiences as well as from previous training at school (WCED 1998:2-5).

This recognition of knowledge and experience gained outside the formal educational system is a development which reflects two significant trends in feminist academic research: firstly, that it is necessary to engage the subject of research and facilitate her or his involvement in shaping the project in meaningful ways; and secondly, that life experience must be recognised as having comparable value to formal education. It is a vital move forward in a country in which the formal schooling experience of so many people was so seriously disrupted.

Since educational books are the mainstay of the publishing industry in South Africa, the publication and distribution of an increasing number of texts written by previously silenced South Africans would attest to the importance of this recognition; it would indicate that real changes were underway in the country's beleaguered education system; it would, above all, imply that the process of transforming the hearts and minds of South Africa's divided populace is well underway. In reality, as innovative a venture as C2005 may be, it not difficult to criticise it as idealistic and beyond reach for the majority of teachers, many of whom received poor training under the old dispensation and continue to labour in badly equipped, overcrowded, and even dangerous environments. The material conditions under which the majority of South Africans suffer in the present have changed very little. This has a direct impact on the way in which life histories continue to be produced at this moment, because the preponderance of South Africans live far outside a reading culture and are subject to restrictions such as inadequate education, money, and time. All these factors combine to prevent them from self-authorship, or even from conceiving the possibility of such an experience. Apartheid may have ended, but the effects of poverty on black South African's sense of self-worth, creativity, and potential are still being felt (Ramphela 1995:206-209). For now, the inclusive language of the new Constitution and attempts to re-make the education system have had little measurable effect on the emergence of new writing.

IV Theories of Collaborative Life Writing

Yet the stories are there to be told, and in abundance. As in other parts of the world where historical disadvantages dictate contemporary practices, however, the publication of the life histories of poor black women in Southern Africa continues to come about almost inevitably as the result of a collaboration between one who is

educationally disadvantaged, and one who has access to the world of books and writing.

In 'The Autobiography of Those Who Do Not Write,' Philippe Lejeune argues that there are two types of 'collaborative' autobiography. First, he discusses the (usually secretive) works that are produced by a 'ghost-writer' for a famous or wealthy person who needs assistance in writing his or her memoirs. A basic assumption underpinning this kind of autobiography is that it involves 'an exchange of services between people who, to different degrees, [are] all capable of writing' (Lejeune 1989:186). The second type of collaboration has more resonance for the Southern African situation. It is one which produces the life story of a member of the 'controlled classes,' whose personal life is '*studied* from above, from an economic and political point of view' by a member of 'the ruling class, either in the committed intellectual milieu or among the general public' (Lejeune 1989:199-203, e.i.o.). Such a collaboration, Lejeune contends, usually assumes that the writer is possessed of advanced writing skills which the object of her or his study has not assimilated. Furthermore, such ventures always require, he observes, that someone with resources—money, education, space to write, access to a means of publishing the completed work—combine forces with someone who has none of these, even though she or he may be recognised as being in possession of a life story which she or he is uniquely able to tell. Exemplars of such an alliance are 'M'e Mpho Nthunya and K.L. Kendall. Kendall's description of their first meeting illustrates the experiential chasm between them:

Mpho 'M'atsepo Nthunya was supporting eleven people on her salary as a "casual labourer"...when I met her. I was...a Senior Fulbright Scholar, teaching creative writing and English literature (Kendall in Nthunya 1997:164).

In Lejeune's view, power imbalances must dominate such projects—even though the 'autobiographical speech' thus produced is intended to 'neutralize...the opposition between the one who is entitled to speak and the one who is not' (Lejeune 1989:204). Ultimately in such projects, Lejeune argues, there can be no avoiding the fact that, '[at] the same time that it is a form of rescue or help, intervention is an act of violation or voyeurism, a form of abuse of power' (Lejeune 1989:210).

Lejeune, from his position at the forefront of developing approaches to life history production, is not alone in identifying the paradox of power at the heart of the collection of the life stories of those who do not write. His is only one of the important influences which has led to the practice in innovative life history projects for the author to reflect on the problems of control, authority, and authenticity in producing the story. Anne E. Goldman contends, along similar lines to Lejeune, that

collaboration is axiomatically violent. She quotes Patricia Zavella's view that there will be 'inevitable conflicts which arise in any effort at communication: disagreements, misunderstandings, differences in emphasis, corrections, amplifications, questions.' Recording these conflicts is a vital part, she maintains, of 'emphasizing what should be a crucial admission in...interracial collaboration: the question of difference' (Goldman 1993:191f).

Feminist praxis, however, has focused specifically on ways to overcome the effects of such problems of difference. Thus feminists are able, 'while...relinquishing the goal of unity around a shared social experience as women—a shared experience we know does not exist—to mobilise solidarity around those specific goals which can be shared' (Mbilinyi 1992:46). Without ceasing to examine the complexities of the power relations inherent in 'speaker-editor collaborations' (Goldman 1993:178), feminist life historians differ markedly from Lejeune in their understanding of the impetus which underlies the production of such work. Far from being what Lejeune labels as a process of 'rescue or help,' from within the feminist framework, collaborative life histories form part of an explicitly political undertaking which seeks to radically alter existing social conditions¹². Extensive feminist theorising on the challenges inherent in collaborative work have led to important developments in how such ventures proceed. From within this tradition, Carole Boyce Davies is able to reject Lejeune's somewhat bleak view that collaboration invests extraordinary power in the writer and his implication that the storyteller is a victim rather than a co-controller of the narrative that is produced (Davies 1992:7f). Through reference to a number of feminist life history projects, she overturns Lejeune's contention that, in collaborations with 'those who do not write,' the exchange between the writer and her model is 'one way, without reciprocity' and that 'the model is left unchanged by the investigation' (Lejeune 1989:210f). On the contrary, Davies observes, feminist and socialist life histories have focused on developing 'a nonhierarchical approach that eschews prescribed format and goes for friendship, shared work, responsibility,' thus opening up space for the discussion of the material that is produced (Davies 1992:6). As Judith Lütge Coullie explains, collaborative life histories—despite their shortcomings—continue to provide a politically significant space from which intellectuals can participate in the process of social transformation (Coullie 1997:141).

V Power and the Publishing Process

Feminist investigations of power in collaborative autobiography have proceeded with

¹² See (Behar 1993; Davies 1992; Kadar 1992; Mbilinyi 1989) for evidence of this political stance. See Goldman for an analysis of the difficulties which continue to beset such collaborations.

care and have resulted in a wealth of new methodological approaches to the collection and creation of life histories. Nevertheless, the important contributions that many projects have made to the break-down and redefinition of previously patriarchal, racist and classist ideas about who has a life to write, and with whom they can embark on such a project (Kadar 1992:11), are not enough to fundamentally alter the processes of the production and distribution of such works. It is in these arenas that lines of racial, ethnic, and class difference are most rigidly inscribed.

There comes a time in the assemblage of a collaborative life history when it must leave the carefully negotiated world in which it was produced in order to enter the literary marketplace, an area in which, as I have shown in my discussion of publishing in South Africa, traditional power imbalances have remained largely unchanged and unexamined. Ultimately, it is in this public terrain that power imbalances between speaker and editor are starkest, for the exigencies of publishing are such that hard-won advances in arbitrating difference within a collaboration can be dismissed at a stroke.

The complex power relations that are an implicit part of publishing collaborative life histories has been largely overlooked by theorists. Although Lejeune, Davies, and Goldman all refer to it in passing, (Davies 1992:10,13; Goldman 1993:179; Lejeune 1989:199) none of them attends in any detail to the question of how such stories come to enter the public realm. In examining this occluded area, I shall offer some indication of how a failure to problematise the processes of literary production preserves an area in which conservative ideals continue to determine whose life stories are ultimately published. I shall show that publication is not, in itself, a guarantee of sensitive presentation, marketing, and distribution, all of which play an important part in contributing to the book's success. I shall draw attention to practises which have persisted in re-inscribing lines of race and class privilege even when this is antithetical to the spirit of feminist collaboration, and demonstrate that the failure of editors, publishers and distributors to radically rethink their approach to writing which comes from the margins has troubling implications for the carefully negotiated partnerships that produce anti-sexist, -racist and -classist life histories. Finally, I shall propose that the publishing houses' refusal to deal directly with disadvantaged women, has a negative impact on the potential development of new writing within that sector of the population.

The successful production of collaborative life writing relies implicitly on the fact that the editor of the narrative has pre-existing knowledge of the functioning of publishing as an industry. This might sound like a rather peculiar observation: clearly, the very idea of making a book would be inconceivable if one member of the collaboration were not comfortably literate, and it would be pointless to embark upon this project if publication were not the ultimate goal. It is, however, a point worth thinking about because it marks the place, in the production of 'the autobiographies

of those who do not write,' at which the chasm between the privileged and the less privileged member of the collaboration is widest. In the case of *Singing*, as Mpho Nthunya often reiterates, the idea of a book of her own and its publication was so remote as to be unthinkable: 'Books are not part of our lives,' she writes (personal interviews and Nthunya 1997:1). For Kendall, however, it was obvious that 'M'e Mpho's storytelling talent could—and should—be put onto paper. Paradoxically, the epiphanic moment of 'discovering' her genius, which marked the beginning of the closest and most rewarding working relationship of Kendall's life, was also the point at which the distance between Kendall and 'M'e Mpho loomed largest. For Kendall, the collaboration with Nthunya would potentially form an important part of an existing literary canon:

as we were walking down the mountain from 'M'e Malebohang's house on that first day, I instantly envisioned a book by 'M'e Mpho. It was a kind of revelation to me, a surprise, and a vision that guided my work. I could see clearly that this would be another book to add to the shelf where Carolina de Jesus' *Child of the Dark* sits. I had used *Child of the Dark* in writing workshops with women in prison, and I had wished in those years that there were another such book (Nthunya 1997:154f)¹³.

For Nthunya, however, it was simply inconceivable that she might take her place in the world of letters. Kendall had tried 'to give her an idea of what a book about someone's life looks like' by providing her with a copy of Emma Mashinini's *Strikes Have Followed Me All My Life*. Kendall's sense was, however, that it was 'too hard for her to read, [and] made her tired'¹⁴, rather than serving as an inspiration for what her own published life history might be like. While Nthunya entrusted Kendall with her narrative and took pleasure in telling her stories, her most concrete connection to the project, at the outset, came from the supplementary income that working with Kendall provided¹⁵. That delimited for her, its usefulness. It was not until the first day that she saw her stories typed that she could relate her work with Kendall to the end product, a book (interviews and Nthunya 1997:155).

Because Kendall was part of the community of feminists in the 70s who conceived [the] goal [of] giving voice to poor women and so-called third world women' she had become quite sensitive to the fact that the publishing industry

¹³ de Jesus, Carolina Maria. 1962. *Child of the Dark: The Diary of Carolina de Jesus*. Translated from the Portuguese by David St. Clair, illustrated with photographs. E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., New York, and Souvenir Press, Ltd., London.

¹⁴ Kendall, e-mail to the author, 13 May 1999.

¹⁵ Nthunya, 1997, ch. 23; interviews; Kendall, e-mail to the author, 31 March 1999.

'assumes a very high degree of literacy [and] familiarity with books... [and makes] assumptions...about people who publish books'(e-mail, 31/3/99; interview). As an academic writer, Kendall could claim some familiarity with the book industry. She has a deep knowledge not only of how writing is introduced into the public realm, but also of how certain voices are excluded from this realm: 'Publishing', she writes, 'is almost always only possible for people of privilege, but ... it is possible to break through that barrier of privilege, if someone who has privilege (like me) devotes herself to sharing it' (e-mail, 31/3/99). This understanding allowed her to plan from the outset that Nthunya's story would defy the odds and be turned into a book. Where Nthunya 'could not imagine such a thing as authorship of a book,' Kendall could. She could also, knowing the paucity of works by and about African women, assure Nthunya that 'people are hungry' for stories such as hers (Kendall in Nthunya 1997:168). Her intention to publish the results of the collaboration was a fundamental aspect of how the project proceeded: it was her sustaining vision during the years of recording, transcribing and polishing which produced the manuscript of *Singing*.

It would be inaccurate to imply that Kendall's understanding of the literary marketplace would render painless her association with a publisher, and indeed, she assumed from the outset that the process of finding a publisher for the work would be a trying one. She also assumed that this was going to be the loneliest part of the experience for her, deciding that she would have to undertake this part of the project without any motivation other than her own belief that the book must enter the public realm. Kendall explains, and in interviews, Nthunya concurs that

'M'e Mpho never really believed that her stories could be made into a book. She laughed at me throughout the years while we worked on it, driven primarily by my obsession to make it happen, and secondly by her amused curiosity to discover what this might mean (Kendall in Nthunya 1997:165).

What this might mean did not, it is clear from Kendall's words here, include that Nthunya would learn the intricacies of book production. 'Sharing her privilege,' here, meant to Kendall that she should use her experience to manage this most difficult aspect of the project alone. She would spend 'far more hours typing, re-typing, arranging, marketing, editing and proof-reading the material than 'M'e Mpho spent telling [her] the stories' (Kendall in Nthunya 1997:168). Nthunya would be presented to the world as the author of a book, but would be shielded from the technicalities which would frustrate its delivery.

Describing how *Singing* "was sent off to one publisher and then another" (Nthunya 1997:166) in the United States, Kendall says,

all of this took a whole year, and, maybe a little more than a year, and my

heart was in my throat the whole time. It was such a beautiful book, and I so wanted it to be published (Interview 24 October 1998).

As this trying process continued, however, Nthunya, in Kendall's words, 'simply went on cleaning the guest house and forgot about it' (Kendall in Nthunya 1997:166). Kendall did not consider Nthunya's participation in this part of the book's production to be at issue because, she explains,

'M'e Mpho's vision is failing, she has no patience for reading proofs, and she is not interested in editorial decisions such as when to use italics or where to insert paragraph breaks (Kendall in Nthunya 1997:167).

Furthermore, Kendall writes,

I viewed [publishing] as another secretarial task which was beneath her, just some of the drudge work I was happy to take on so that the job could get done I found it exciting, because I knew each step brought us closer to the goal of getting her work into the world, and I was perfectly happy to do it myself. I'm a persistent hoop-jumper ...¹⁶

Two years after the publishing of her book, Nthunya agrees with this view. She did not know how books were made, could not follow Kendall's vision in this area, and still feels that the entire process of making books is a mystery (interviews).

Surrounded by printed matter, with easy access to bookstores, journals, the Internet—all privileges which are so innate to the lives of professionals that they become invisible—experienced writers implicitly participate in the economy of literacy, and are able to factor into the very process of writing the realities of the literary marketplace. Publishers not only participate vigorously in this economy, but, in fact, dictate its terms: after the University of Natal Press had sold them the American rights for *Singing*, Indiana University Press sent to Nthunya and Kendall a form which

... starts out: 'Where did you get your advanced degrees?' It already assumes that you have advanced degrees and not just a B.A. And then: 'What are your other publications?; What friends do you have that might give your book a favourable review?'; 'What other books have you read that might be in a class or a genre with this one of yours?...*Well I thought it was hilarious, and I filled it out, instead of just writing down a dumb refusal, I*

¹⁶ Kendall, e-mail to the author, 31 March 1999.

filled it out with 'M'e Mpho's details. And it was very, very funny. And I faxed it back to them and I got an immediate e-mail of apology saying, 'We realize it wasn't appropriate but it just went out because it goes out to all our authors,' and so on. And then when Souvenir Press did it, we got an almost identical form (Kendall, interview) (e.a.).

This incident confirms what I have highlighted above: Kendall's actions in the area of publication problematise the careful negotiation of power that is so important to her in her work with Nthunya. As Kendall observes, it would be impossible for Nthunya, the author of *Singing*, but a woman who describes herself when it comes to the process of writing her book as 'starting to go to school, sub A' (interview), to participate in the established academic process of bringing her story to public attention through an academic press. To publish with the University of Natal Press (UNP) was Kendall's decision alone; it was not her first choice, but was one to which she resorted after running out of the money and energy necessary to keep the manuscript in circulation¹⁷. Although she considered the arrangement to be less than ideal, her decision to publish the book through a local university press was, nevertheless, based on her knowledge that the chief advantage of such a choice is that 'academic presses keep books in print for a longer time than commercial presses.' This would be important for a book like *Singing* because 'it takes time for people to hear about it and read it, it takes time for college professors to learn about it and consider assigning it in classes' (e-mail, 31/3/99). When she is faced with Indiana UP's customary paperwork—which, befitting an academic press, is based on the assumption of a high degree of literacy that excludes women like Nthunya, Kendall is placed in an equivocal position. Her replies, which are intended to point out the inappropriate nature of the press's standard procedures, have the paradoxical effect of unvoicing Nthunya, of speaking *for* her rather than *with* her. In her afterword to *Singing*, Kendall is emphatic in her assertion that "this is [M'e Mpho's] book" (Kendall in Nthunya 1997:171), and this clearly underlies her dismay at the Press's assumption that they are dealing with her as its primary creator. Her prevarication, nevertheless, underlines her anxiety about the power imbalances that are implicit in this part of the work. Although she has convinced herself that her actions are justified, for the sake of publishing the book, I would argue that it troubles her to be wholly responsible as 'editor, agent, and advocate, [taking care] of the business of

¹⁷ There are presses in South Africa which are committed to publishing and promoting works such as *Singing*, David Philip, Ravan, and Kwela Books among them. However, Kendall was led to believe that UNP was her best option. 'I gave up and let UNP have it just because I was tired and broke', she writes (e-mail to the author, 31 March 1999).

getting the book out' (Kendall in Nthunya 1997:168). In order to achieve this goal, Kendall's privilege, the fact that she herself holds an advanced degree which permits her to send *Singing* to an academic publisher, is uncomfortably brought into play. While Kendall objects that Nthunya's place as the author of her own book is undermined by the questionnaires they received, her surprise at their exclusive nature seems, in the circumstances, rather disingenuous. Kendall's desire to highlight the fact that Nthunya could not cope with the formalities of publishing might be read, here, as an attempt to 'blur in a disturbing way the question of responsibility' (Lejeune 1989:192): to suppress her troubling recognition of her absolute power in this area of the collaboration, and her concomitant choice to act, here, in a way that is not true to every other aspect of her work with Nthunya.

The question is, why should such a demurral be so important to Kendall in her role as editor of *Singing*? Anne E. Goldman suggests, in her reading of several collaborative autobiographies produced in the United States, that 'editorial imperative' may be masked 'to justify intercession when that intercession, albeit unacknowledged, comes into conflict with the speaker's own interests' (Goldman 1993:191). She goes on to observe that the editor of a collaboration often 'insists simultaneously on the urgency of the speaker's need to textualise her life history and the urgency of editorial intercession,' but points out that whoever 'initially prompts the telling of a life story, the process of collaboration itself constructs a subject quite distinct from the authority who writes her own history without the assistance of another' (Goldman 1993:193). What is important in the case of *Singing* is that the dream of making Nthunya's stories into a publishable book is Kendall's alone: it is she who hankers after the prestige of authorship and delights in imagining the recognition and authority that this will bring to Nthunya. By contrast, Nthunya, because the idea of it is unimaginable to her, seems to have had no interest whatsoever in the public appearance of her life history. She indicates no urgency to preserve her story in written form and appears, indeed, bewildered by the book and its foreignness, and unsure of its utility: 'I try to imagine what I can do with a book written by me,' she writes. 'I think of my mother. I imagine that I can give this book of English words to her, and because of the wisdom of heaven, she can read it' (Nthunya 1997:3).

Nthunya is confident of her status as a storyteller (Nthunya 1997:150-159) and as a result of this, participates comfortably in the process of telling her stories to Kendall. She is not, however, certain of anything beyond this, and firmly refuses to be drawn into the unimaginable—and here, Kendall fails her. Having convinced Nthunya of the possibility that her spoken stories can be transformed into words on paper, Kendall demurs at extending her awareness to an understanding of the realities of authorship that exist beyond making a manuscript. In so doing, Kendall implicitly upholds the publishing industry's assumption that everyone who makes a book does

so from within a privileged relationship with the literate world. Nthunya's laughing expressions of disinterest in the production of the book became Kendall's justification for handling not only its publication, but almost all the paratextual elements of the book—its title, preface, and cover design¹⁸. It is here, I would contend, that her willingness to shoulder the burden of getting the book published corresponds most clearly to that violence which Goldman claims is inherent to inter-racial collaborative projects, even though it is violence in an area which Goldman herself has not thought to examine. Her anxiety about emphasizing the book's authenticity is acutely obvious in Kendall's Afterword to *Singing*, and her role in the book's publication continued to haunt her in a subsequent book tour to America in which she and Nthunya were met with considerable scepticism about who was really its primary author. The difficult question that is raised here is, what constitutes authorship? The 'artistic activity was all [Nthunya's],' Kendall claims (Kendall in Nthunya 1997:168), but the organisation and the public aspects of the book were out of her hands. In its realisation, Kendall's attitude to Nthunya's capacity to fully participate in their project defies her political commitment to eschew paternalistic methodologies; but more troubling than this, if one keeps in mind Gerard Genette's observation that paratextual elements play a crucial role in mediating an author's intentions to the world (Genette 1997), it muddies the question of who can rightfully be considered the primary author of *Singing*.

Singing Away the Hunger has, in mid 1999, effectively disappeared from sight in South Africa. Poorly advertised and distributed, it attracted small notice from the outset. Its cover design, a watercolour drawing of a photograph of Nthunya, has misrepresented the book. Kendall describes how

Several times I found the book in South African bookstores filed among novels, and once among novels for young adult readers. That's what the cover art suggests, I think (e-mail to the author, 99/05/13).

Why has this situation arisen? Part of the responsibility must be taken by University of Natal Press, which has failed to live up to its promise to promote and distribute the book in South Africa. Would the Press have shown more commitment to the book if they had respected Nthunya's authority after Kendall left South Africa? Would they have sent her on a book tour of the country similar to the one she went on in the United States? Would Nthunya's royalties, which have been paid in a lump sum with no account of how they were derived, have been larger and more regular? Would it

¹⁸ Significantly, Nthunya had complete control over the photographs in the book. This was another area in which she had expressed confidence in her competence (interview; Kendall, e-mail to the author, 27 May 1999).

be possible to find *Singing* in large bookstores in South Africa, which is not currently the case?

Yet another part of the responsibility for the book's marginalisation is Kendall's, but here, the blame is more difficult to apportion. As I have argued throughout this paper, theories of collaboration have failed to problematise the processes of publishing. This means that there are no guidelines which might have directed Kendall differently. Even if she had committed herself to developing Nthunya's capacity to deal with her publisher, it is highly unlikely that her actions would have been recognised and respected by the publishers with whom she dealt: after all, institutional transformation requires vision and dedication from within as much as pressure from without. It is also necessary to consider what the broader effects of Nthunya's involvement might have been. Would she now be capable of writing and publishing all the stories that she still has in her? Would she be able to facilitate the production of the stories of women in Lesotho which are being brought forward, in vain, now that there is no-one like Kendall to support their production?¹⁹

By excluding from their processes those who are at the margins of print culture, collaborative editors and the publishers of books crush the capacity of rural woman like Mpho Nthunya to develop a sophisticated understanding of their power as writers in the community. Nafissatou Diallo argues that African women, when they write autobiographies, speak with a commitment to emphasising their communal identity. Thus, participating in a project which tells the life of one person is a potent means of placing oneself at 'a point of transition between preliterate and literate cultures' (quoted in Hitchcott 1997:20), and has significant ramifications for the voicing of the marginalised. It is important, as Mirriam Moleleki writes in her autobiography *This Is My Life* (1997), to 'know that people are going to read our stories, and they will know who we are' (Moleleki 1997:1), not only for the enjoyment of public recognition, but also because rural women life historians who are acknowledged as authors, *and who know how books are made*, can understand their texts as path-breaking works which may lead to the production of the life stories of others like them:

....maybe people will come to us and ask, 'How did you write that book?' Stories give encouragement to a person, you know. Maybe there are more people with bigger histories in the community, and from this book, maybe it will bring other people together in the same way (Moleleki 1997:1-2).

If it is to transform itself to reflect the complex range of literacies in South Africa, and to participate meaningfully in the democratisation of access to print in the

¹⁹ I am grateful to Julia Chere for bringing the latter question to my attention.

country, life historians must influence the South African publishing industry to devote itself to developing what Elizabeth Eisenstein describes as the 'itch to publish.' The editors of collaborative life histories need to recognise that sharing their privileged access to literacy implies more than merely unearthing competent story tellers and transposing their words into print. They must respect the gravity, for women like Mpho Nthunya, that movement into the realm of books implies a complete break from the anonymity of oral culture:

The wish to see one's work in print (fixed forever with one's name...) is different from the urge to pen lines that could never get fixed in a permanent form, might be lost forever, altered by copying, or—if truly memorable—carried by oral transmission and assigned ultimately to 'anon' (Eisenstein 1968:23)²⁰.

Even if, as is the case with Nthunya, it is only the picture on the cover that identifies it to her community as her book (interview), she is convinced of the book's power as an object that can mediate her experiences to the world. She wants 'people who know how to read and have time to read, to know something about the Basotho,' and to 'hear the stories from women like me' (Nthunya 1997:2), to tell her story in her own voice and to be recognised as the teller. She is demanding the right of her work to participate in a world which is much broader than the confines to which her race, class, and gender have relegated her; and why should this process of self determination, of being recognised as the transmitter of one's own life story, not be extended into the realm that is entered once the story is ready for publication?

'I don't know people who publish books, don't know where to send a book if I could write it,' says Nthunya at the start of her autobiography (Nthunya 1997:3). The publishing system is mysterious to the majority of Southern Africans, for whom books are a small part of life. For an ordinary person, someone who, like Nthunya, knows of no-one else who has ever written a book, and who lives in a world where "only some 5% of the population makes up the general book buying public, and most of these individuals are white, middle class [citizens]" (Perold, Chupaty & Jordaan 1997:2), the idea of writing a book is ludicrous. And even if such a notion were conceivable, in South Africa, 'access to the publishing process[is] still a white protected thing'²¹, which implies, for the vast majority of black women, a total reliance for the production and publication of their story on collaboration, and further, on their collaborator's membership of the circles in which writing and books

²⁰ This resonates with Virginia Woolf's contention, 'I would venture to guess that Anon ... was often a woman' (Woolf [1929] 1977:55).

²¹ Mary Ralphs, Publishing Training Project, personal interview, 18 May 1998.

are produced. When this level of impuissance is so deeply inscribed, what use is it to shift perceptions that black people in Southern Africa can and should pen their own stories?

Barbara Smith contends that 'freedom of the press belongs to those who own the press' (Smith 1989:11). Smith quotes this slogan from the early women in print movement in her discussion of the founding of *Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press*, which began, after a long struggle, because a desire for autonomy, independence, and control over images of themselves was expressed by women of colour in the United States early in the 1970s²². Smith's words, and the struggle of black feminists in the USA to establish alternative entry points into the literary marketplace, shed light on the significance of the participation of disempowered women in South Africa in the publishing process, and highlight the need for the development, here, of a similar extension of ownership. It is indisputable that the experience of creating and sharing one's life story in print is transformative, and as such, is a vital site from which to celebrate and strengthen the vision of a democratic society. Mpho Nthunya's view of her book says this with moving eloquence: it is "*mehlolo*—a miracle, or a wonder" (Nthunya 1997:1), something which brings immense comfort in a difficult life:

I am so happy to make this book. It's just like the Bible to me. I read it every day. When I am lonely I just go to my room and take it and read it where I like, I just open like a Bible, like this. I find what can I read I feel like I am dreaming....And really I know that this are my story, but I didn't think that one day I can save this story in a book (personal interview).

Graduate Programme in Women's Studies
York University

* The financial assistance of the Rockefeller Foundation and the Centre for Science Development (South Africa) towards this research is hereby acknowledged. Opinions expressed in this paper and conclusions arrived at, are those of the author and are not necessarily to be attributed to either funding organisation.

²² *Kitchen Table* came into being in 1981 and was the longest-running independent black feminist publishing house in the world. It was owned by the black feminist collective who ran it. The Press encountered financial difficulties throughout its life and finally ceased trading in 1998.

References

- Behar, Ruth 1993. *Translated Woman: Crossing the Border with Esperanza's Story*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Bozzoli, Belinda, with Mmantho Nkotsoe 1991. *Women of Phokeng: Consciousness, Life Strategy, and Migrancy in South Africa 1900-1983*. Johannesburg: Ravan.
- Coullie, Judith Lütge 1997. The Power to Name the Real: The Politics of Worker Testimony in South Africa. *Research in African Literatures* 28,2:132-144.
- Davies, Carole Boyce 1992. Collaboration and the Ordering Imperative in Life Story Production. In Watson, J & S Smith (eds): *De/Colonizing the Subject*. Minneapolis: Univ of Minneapolis Press.
- Davison Jev 1989. *Voices from Mutara: The Lives of Rural Gikuyu Women*. Boulder: Reinner.
- Eisenstein, Elizabeth 1968. The Impact of Printing on Western Society and Thought. *Journal of Modern History* 40,1:1-56.
- Genette, Gerard 1997. *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*. Lewin, Jane E (trans). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Goldman, Anne E 1993. Is That What She Said? The Politics of Collaborative Autobiography. *Cultural Critique* 23:177-204.
- Griesel, Hanlie 1987. *Sibambene: The Voices of Women at Mboza*. Johannesburg: Ravan.
- Harding, Sandra 1987. Introduction: Is there a Feminist Method? In Harding, S (ed): *Feminism and Methodology*. Indianapolis: Indiana UP.
- Hassim, Shireen & Cheryl Walker 1993. Women's Studies and the Women's Movement in South Africa: Defining a Relationship. *Women's Studies International Forum* 16,5:523-534.
- Hitchcott, Nicki 1997. African Herstory: The Feminist Reader and the African Autobiographical Voice. *Research in African Literatures* 28, 2:16-33.
- Kadar, Marlene (ed) 1992. *Essays on Life Writing: From Genre to Critical Practice*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Lejeune, Philippe 1989. The Autobiography of Those Who Do Not Write. In *On Autobiography*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P.
- Mbilinyi, Marjorie 1989. 'I'd Have Been a Man': Politics and the Labor Process in Producing Personal Narratives. In Personal Narratives Group (eds): *Interpreting Women's Lives: Feminist Theory and Personal Narratives*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Mbilinyi, Marjorie 1992. Research Methodologies in Gender Issues. In Meena, R (ed): *Gender in Southern Africa: Conceptual and Theoretical Issues*. Harare: SAPES Books.
- Moleleki, Mirriam 1997. *This is My Life*. Cape Town: Kagiso Publishers.

- Nthunya, Mpho 'M'atsepo. 1997. *Singing Away the Hunger: The Autobiography of an African Woman*. Kendall, KL (ed). Bloomington: University of Indiana Press.
- Perold, Helene, Shanoo Chupty & Amanda Jordaan 1997. *Research Report on Book Development in South Africa*. Johannesburg: Book Development Council of South Africa.
- Ramphele, Mamphela 1995. *A Life*. Second Edition. Cape Town: David Philip.
- Smith, Barbara 1989. *A Press of Our Own*. Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press. *Frontier X*,3:11-13.
- South Africa Survey 1996-1997*. Johannesburg: Southern African Institute of Race Relations.
- Southern African Books in Print 1998*. Cape Town: Books in Print Information Services.
- Van Rooyen, Basil 1996. *How to Get Published in South Africa: A Guide for Authors*. Second ed. Halfway House: Southern Book Publishers.
- WCED 1998. 1998 WCED Assessment Guidelines (For C2005). Cape Town: Western Cape Education Department.
- Woolf, Virginia [1929]1977. *A Room of One's Own*. London: Grafton.