Vicarious Writing, Or: Going to Write It for You

Carsten Junker

Abstract

The article introduces vicarious writing as a category of literary and cultural analysis that can reframe the study of authorship with respect to this specific form of collaboration. It argues for shifting emphasis from an ongoing privileging of singular authorship and its conceptual legacy of individualism to writing for others as a site where power constellations become operative and particularly salient. Four vignettes of twentieth-century vicarious life writing—The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas (1933), The Babe Ruth Story (1948), The Autobiography of Malcolm X (1965), and I, Rigoberta Menchú (1984)—bring to the fore the manifold motivations and manifest and latent functions that writing for others can have as symbol and matter of literary practice, exposing it as a craft, as a means of cultural authorization, and as a strategy for constituting and positioning authorial subjects in entangled processes of writing. Considering the theoretical implications and historical situatedness of vicarious writing, the author argues that the key issue is not one of identity (“I am an author”) but one of stance-taking (“I position myself / someone else as an author”), highlighting the contractual relations writers and signatories enter to create author figures. The article also pleads for consideration of collaborative dynamics in the academic field that are analogous to the procedures of the literary marketplace.

Keywords: authorship; co-authorship; collaboration; vicarious writing; life writing

Moving beyond Singular Authorship

Who writes and what does it matter? Gertrude Stein must have had such concerns in mind when she famously undermined the generic conventions of autobiography in The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas (1933). The text playfully violates what Philippe Lejeune calls the autobiographical pact, “the affirmation in the text of [the identity (‘identicalness’) of the name (author-narrator-protagonist)], referring back in the final analysis to the name of the author on the cover” (14; emphasis in original). It is a violation staged in highly ironic ways, as it splits the autobiographical self by distributing this position between two subjects: while Alice B. Toklas features as narrator, her life partner Gertrude Stein is assigned the position of what Lejeune calls “author” within the text (and on the cover of the book, albeit not in its original edition), with Stein acting more as protagonist than Toklas herself. This split is
highlighted in the following passage from the closing paragraph of the book, from which the quote in the title above is taken. Toklas is planning to write her autobiography but because she seems to be making little progress on the project, Stein takes on the task of writing instead: “About six weeks ago Gertrude Stein said, it does not look to me as if you were ever going to write that autobiography. You know what I am going to do. I am going to write it for you. […] And she has and this is it” (Autobiography 252). By thus addressing questions of authorship in humorous ways, this modernist, highly canonized instance of “a first-person biography or a second-person auto/biography or un/collaborative storytelling” (Smith 28) points to the fact that writing can be a collaborative effort, or that the difficult work of writing can be undertaken by someone who is writing for someone else. This phenomenon—writing for someone else or, putting it differently, vicarious writing—is of central concern here, especially with an eye on life writing, and it also prompts a reconsideration of the intricacies of authorship at large.

Acting vicariously means acting as a substitute for another—second-hand, once removed. This structure also transfers to practices of writing: vicarious writing is materialized in phrases like: “I am writing as a representative of X,” or “in the name of Y,” or, in Stein’s words, “I am going to write it for you.” A writer writes in place of, on the authority of, and on behalf of another. I call this other the “principal,” a term adapted from Erving Goffman’s sociological model of “footing,” which defines a principal as “someone whose position is established by the words that are spoken [or written], someone whose beliefs have been told, someone who has committed himself to what the words say” (17).¹ The phrase “going to write it for you” points to what can be called a divergence model of authorship: one that is not defined by the identity of writer and principal, but by the bifurcation of authorship into the act of writing and the principal’s signature.

Generally, the concept of vicarious writing can be defined as a relationship between writers who are authorized or authorize themselves to write and principals and signatories who are written about. This relationship can be a matter of actual writing practices that take different forms including, among others, co-writing, ghostwriting, and the transcribing of oral documents. Vicarious writing does not necessarily have to involve actual collaborative labor; vicariousness as a practice can also be narrated in a text. The relationship between writer and principal can be marked in more or less explicit ways that span a scale from overt to fully covert vicarious writing. Furthermore, this relationship—both within and outside of a vicariously written text—involves power relations acted out between writer and signatory. Power differentials along lines such as gendered and racialized differences, social stratification, and geopolitical location structure vicarious writing on a spectrum from voluntary collaboration to violent coercion.

¹ In Goffman’s elaborations on “footing,” which he understands as “the alignment we take up to ourselves and the others present as expressed in the way we manage the production or reception of an utterance” (9), he breaks down the notion of “speaker” in contexts of utterance into the three specific functions of principal (“someone whose position is established by the words that are spoken”), “animator” (a “talking machine”), and “author” (“someone who has selected the sentiments that are being expressed and the words in which they are encoded”) (17). I refer to what Goffman calls “author” as writer.
1 Framing Vicariousness Conceptually

Why is the phenomenon of vicarious writing relevant to American Studies? Does it not seem dated to re-center issues of authorship—a concept traditionally relevant within the purview of the field of Literary Studies—after scholars have spent so much energy defining this field ever more widely in interdisciplinary fashion, especially in light of debates in the past decades that have revolved prominently around cultural theories? Writing in the journal of the Association of Canadian College and University Teachers of English, ESC: English Studies in Canada, Robyn Wiegman points out the forceful impact of Cultural Studies on English and, by extension, American Studies when she notes the compelling array of practices that have emerged to keep pace with the discipline’s speculative ambitions. Postmodernism. Deconstruction. Feminism. Postcoloniality. Post Humanism. Transnationalism. Affect. Ecocriticism. Biopolitics. Afro Pessimism. The Digital Humanities. Neoliberalism. The Reparative Turn. (“Wearing Out” 22)

As Wiegman further asserts, “it is the very process of wearing out what enlivens the discipline that helps sustain faith in the work we do” (22). Wearing out such interpretive frameworks also implies prioritizing these orientations over a seemingly old-fashioned Literary Studies concept such as authorship. But although the image of “wearing out” these various critical orientations potentially makes them seem like clothes that can be discarded when they are no longer in fashion, Wiegman does not, in fact, suggest that “wearing out” involves a random proliferation of approaches, or even an arbitrariness of position-taking—in other words, a wearing out in the sense of exhausting the significance of these conceptual clothes. Rather, Wiegman engages those institutionalized modes of knowledge production that critically attend to the study of race, gender, sexuality, and nation.

While authorship—as a worn-out concept—could also be thrown on the rag heap of history, I suggest saving it from this fate and propose that we instead reconsider authorship as a persistent, core object of study, that we recuperate it—but with a twist. Cutting-edge theories and methodologies can invite us to frame authorship with aspects of these conceptualizations and reflections, to re-center authorship by, in essence, dressing it in different clothes. And indeed, only a brief survey of research on authorship suggests that the concept has not at all been relegated to marginal status. Theorists even delimit a field of Authorship Studies in its own right, a field that eschews drawing artificial lines between Literary and Cultural Studies: “Conceptual and historical studies of authorship abound, and the field is now thriving more than ever” (7), Ingo Berensmeyer et al. maintain, observing that it is “currently marked by a conflicting multitude of concepts, coming from different disciplines and historical periods” (12). Authorship Studies can ensure best practices in the interdisciplinary project of American Studies.

2 Wiegman speaks of “identity knowledges” (Object 1). Her scenario points to scholars putting on clothes of “identity,” as it were, in which self-identification with, or the severe critique of, one or several categories of difference which constitute “identity” leads them to put on a conceptual suit of armor in the struggle for the recognition of rights and a critique of inequalities. For a critical stance toward this mode of identity knowledge production, see Lilla.
Stephen Donovan et al. relate the concept of authorship to questions of social authority and in this context identify nodes of historical change such as the shift from “the tremendous prestige of the author as genius in the Romantic and Modernist era, to the ever considerable decrease in social authority of the modern author in the twentieth century” (8). In other words, they note conjunctures and correlate them to shifting approaches in Literary and Cultural Criticism and Theory. Every scholar of literature is familiar with New Critical approaches that discarded the author as irrelevant to the reading of texts, or theories that replaced the author with models such as the implied or the inferred author, and while Roland Barthes prominently declared the author dead in 1967, Michel Foucault, in 1969, let the author survive as an institutionally and discursively constructed, historically situated author-function (148-53).

In a more recent trend, Authorship Studies has declared the demise of the demise of the author, the author’s return. In other words, it has asserted a renewed interest in the concept of authorship based on the continuing significance of author figures, a tendency that can be observed transnationally and beyond language-specific Literary Studies contexts. The boom of scholarship on autobiographical writing in the past decades has contributed and attested to the reappearance of the author.

How can the phenomenon of vicarious writing be related to these authorship conjunctures? As contested as the concept of authorship is, the assumptive logic of its various considerations generally rests on a specific manifestation of authorship: that of the singular author figure in which writing process and signature are assumed to be one and the same. No matter how many conceptual clothes the concept of authorship has worn out, we commonly continue to reproduce a dominant image of authorship: that of an author put on a pedestal, an authorial persona associated with effortless creativity and access to a presumably autonomous cultural sphere (see Pease 108-11). And as the canon wars of the 1980s and 1990s in the United States highlighted, authorial agency has largely anticipated and carved out writing positions that are available primarily and prototypically to White male hegemonic subjects.

The primacy of singular authorship is also underlined by the glaring disregard for peripheral modes of writing such as vicarious writing and various forms of collaborative writing—and I am not only referring to business or technical or digital media or academic writing. This neglect, if not disdain, reveals a desideratum. Studies on collaborative literary writing practices occasionally appear; Wayne Koestenbaum’s Double Talk: The Erotics of Male Literary Collaboration (1989) and Jack Stillinger’s Multiple Authorship and the Myth of Solitary Genius (1991) are two examples. Linda Peterson’s work on the significant role that collaborative modes of literary production played in women’s life writing in the nineteenth century is another, as are the tellingly titled volumes Women Coauthors by Holly Laird (2000), Rethinking Women’s Collaborative Writing: Power, Difference, Property by Lorraine York (2002), Col-
laborators in Literary America, 1870-1920 by Susanna Ashton (2003), and Literary Couplings: Writing Couples, Collaborators, and the Construction of Authorship, edited by Marjorie Stone and Judith Thompson (2006). Nevertheless, collaborative writing in its various forms and functions still remains underexamined and undertheorized. In relation to the primacy of singular authorship, collaborative writing—and vicarious writing in particular—is still relegated to the margins not only of the literary field, but also of the field of Literary and Cultural Studies. Moving vicarious writing center stage not only addresses a lack in discussions of authorship; approaching vicarious writing as a site where power constellations become operative and particularly salient and where author figures are made and authorized—this is the central claim I put forward here—also facilitates a reconsideration of power structures as discussed in relation to the critical orientations discussed by Wiegman.

2 Setting the Cultural-Historical Stage for Vicariousness

The professionalization of authorship, the ability to make a living from writing, is closely connected to the practice of vicarious writing. In the history of authorship in the United States, Jonathan Plummer (1761-1819) is an example of a writer who was active at a moment in time that predates the Romantic myth of the author as genius. Plummer was a “highly significant figure in early American print culture” (Williams 151), one of the first writers in the years after the American Revolution to try to earn a living by writing. Notably, Plummer took up the vocation of a vicarious writer. On the bottom of a broadside penned by him in 1795—five years after Congress had implemented the Copyright Act of 1790, which granted authors the right to publish their own work—Plummer offers his services as a writer of love letters for others:10 “Printed for and sold by JONATHAN PLUMMER, JUN. price 6d, who still continues to [illegible] various branches of trifling business […]. Love-letters in prose and verse furnished on the shortest notice” (Pomp and Plummer).11 We witness Plummer’s attempt to position himself as a professional writer by offering his services as someone who might today be called a ghostwriter, someone who offers his handicraft to others in order to make a living. One may wonder if Plummer felt alienated from his labor, from producing textual commodities that he then sold to the principals who had commissioned the texts he created. Such writing as vocation did not compare to the work of those who would, in later decades, be able to fashion themselves into geniuses kissed by muses. Donald Pease’s argument from his well-known essay “Author” bears repeating here:

[T]he work of genius provided a politically useful contrast to other forms of labor in an industrial culture. In producing his own work out of materials in his own imagination, the genius performed “cultural” as opposed to “industrial” labor. […] In correlating nonalienated labor with his work rather than

10 On the nexus between copyright and the emergence of professional authorship, see Kaplan; Rose; Woodmansee; Woodmansee and Jaszi; Newbury; Rice; Saint-Amour; Buinicki.

11 The broadside uses the genre of the so-called dying confession; it presents a first-person account of a Black man, Pomp, and the commentary of Plummer, a White man who has supposedly recorded Pomp’s words but who may have authored and invented them all by himself. For a detailed discussion of this text, see Junker.
with the work of an ordinary laborer, the genius provided a tacit justification for the class distinctions separating those individuals who owned their labor from those who did not. If nonalienated labor defined the category of genius, it became a cultural privilege, a benefit accrued in the cultural realm rather than in the ordinary workaday world. (109; emphasis in original)

The emergence of genius authorship correlates with the emergence of a cultural sphere that was located at a growing distance from the commercial sphere that Plummer inhabited and that is marked by the laborious work of taking on ghostwriting assignments from others. And while a book with which a writer could earn money was increasingly seen as lacking aesthetic value, those who aspired to embody the concept of genius authorship were still entangled in the "commercial paradox of modern or Romantic authorship" (Bennett 52; emphasis in original). A case in point is Herman Melville (1819-91), who aspired to liberate himself from the ordinary sphere of the laboring world, seeking to increase his social prestige and reach higher spheres by giving voice to his intellectual creativity. Melville wished to see himself as an author on a pedestal. He sought to distance himself from early novels, which had brought him commercial success; nonetheless, those books had laid the ground for his attempts to embark on a literary career that would gain him critical acclaim. Melville did not reach a pedestal of recognition during his lifetime. It was not until after the centenary of his birthday in 1919 that a Melville revival took place (see Zimmerman). Ultimately, the publication of F. O. Matthiessen’s study on *The American Renaissance* in 1941 facilitated the consecration of Melville as one of the five New England authors, alongside Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry David Thoreau, and Walt Whitman. Their canonization obscures the labor of their actual writing practices, relegating acts of writing to the background and making way for the symbolism of their respective embodiment of genius authorship instead. Suffice it to say that the canonization of Melville and his peers informed a universalizing, if particularly White and male, notion of singular authorship, which came to embody a twentieth-century agenda of U.S. literary exceptionalism. When Pease speaks of the genius’s work as “his” work (109), the use of the masculine possessive pronoun does not come as a surprise.

It is against this historical backdrop that I consider four twentieth-century examples of vicarious writing in the following vignettes. Placed in chronological order, they highlight vicarious writing as symbolic action and plain matter of literary practice, and they also show the manifold motivations as well as various manifest and latent functions that vicarious writing—as symbol and practice—can have. Giving but a cursory overview of the dissimilar ways in which vicarious writing can manifest itself across antiquated dividing lines between high and popular culture, I outline a phenomenon of both “literary” and “political” writing that urgently calls for further exploration because it has not been addressed adequately. To paraphrase Gertrude Stein: there is a there

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12 As Berensmeyer et al. corroborate in “Authorship as Cultural Performance,” Melville’s rejection of market expectations after his first commercially successful novels reinforced his efforts to achieve the status of genius (20-21).
there. While the case studies display differences in writing practices—which include singular writing staged as vicariousness as well as actual relationships between those authorized to write and those written about that range from close collaboration to more distant and even coercive interaction—they stand on common ground: all vignettes present life writing produced by vicarious writers rather than their protagonists and signatories. Some of the select texts engage writing for someone else on a meta-communicative level more explicitly than others.

3 Vignetting Vicariousness

Who was able to act as an author in the literary field of the first decades of the twentieth century? Gertrude Stein (1874-1946) provides an answer to this question precisely around the time that Melville was rediscovered and installed as a canonical author. In The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas, she exposes and ironizes the male-coded solitary genius author as an ideal. This highly innovative text allows Stein to position herself as a female author by introducing a playful version of vicarious authorship and thus undermining conventional notions of a singular writing self. As already noted, The Autobiography raises the question of authorship in relation to questions of genre, violating, as it does in highly ironic ways, the autobiographical pact and replacing it with what can be called a vicarious pact when it assigns Toklas the position of principal—whose signature lends the autobiography its title—and Stein the position of writing self. In effect, Stein substitutes Stein and Toklas’s entangled lives for the life of a singular autobiographer, thwarting claims to any truthful account of life writing. The Autobiography also invites readers to rethink normative expectations of the nexus between genre and gender, including how the genre of autobiography is coded in gendered ways, who has access to it, and what gendered speaking positions it provides. Stein uses generic conventions to reconfigure embodiments of autobiographical author, narrator, and protagonist. Toklas, as narrator, speaks to the difficulty of integrating writing into the various different domestic tasks assigned to her as Stein’s partner. The extended concluding passage of the book makes this clear:

I am a pretty good housekeeper and a pretty good gardener and a pretty good needlewoman and a pretty good secretary and a pretty good editor and a pretty good vet for dogs and I have to do them all at once and I find it difficult to add being a pretty good author.

About six weeks ago Gertrude Stein said, it does not look to me as if you were ever going to write that autobiography. You know what I am going to do. I am going to write it for you. I am going to write it as simply as Defoe did the autobiography of Robinson Crusoe. And she has and this is it. (Autobiography 251-52)

Apart from reconfiguring Robinson Crusoe as an autobiography—and why not? Its first edition was published as an autobiographical account,
after all—the literary play with vicarious writing here gives us a sense of the fact that authorship involves the skillful craft of writing. In a tongue-in-cheek way, we learn that it takes an adept writer like Stein to devise the text. It is the vicarious pact staged here that exposes the myth of the male solitary genius author, whose effortless creativity readers have imagined and privileged over aspects of the writing process, not least because they are generally not privy to the writing process and cannot evaluate its significance. And indeed, the text carves out a writing position for Stein, as a female author, precisely by installing a vicarious writing subject at odds with and in place of canonical and hegemonic White, male author figures.

Today, when strolling through Bryant Park, adjacent to the magnificent New York Public Library building, we find Stein as author on a pedestal herself. But this is not only the case in a literal sense. Stein’s female authorship has been immensely important for reconsiderations of gender politics in modernism; her oeuvre has been part of the literary canon for decades. Her avant-garde, non-normative writing also lends itself to queer readings. And it is the staging of the vicarious pact in *The Autobiography* that poignantly exposes the heteronormative assumptions at play in a contractual relation such as the one constituted by the conventional autobiographical pact. As readers, we are invited into the lives of two women whose narratives are intricately bound up with one another, constituting an illustrative, queer case of what has been discussed as “relational autobiography” (Smith and Watson 64-81, 201). And yet, while the manner in which their intertwined lives are narrated may be unconventional and highly modernist, this narrative presents a couple that faces conventional everyday challenges. The description of Toklas’s female-coded chores is reminiscent of the irksome labor assigned to women in patriarchal power relations. And the biographical backdrop of *The Autobiography* bespeaks the couple’s entanglement in emotional turmoil. As Stein and Toklas scholars have argued, the writing of the book may have been motivated by Toklas’s discovery of Stein’s unpublished manuscript *Q. E. D.*, in which Stein had treated her earlier lesbian relationship to another woman during a trip to Europe in 1902. As if to compensate, Stein wrote *The Autobiography*, meant as a public demonstration of their committed partnership, joining their names and “iconizing the two in the world,” as Ulla E. Dydo and William Rice have put it (498). Introducing vicariousness overtly, the book stages an embodied notion of pluralized subjectivity and in this way attests to the knowledge of what it means to be positioned outside of the norms of a singular writing self.

Power becomes operative in a number of ways in Stein’s case of “going to write it for you.” First, interrelated categories of social stratification such as gender inform the relationship between vicarious writer and principal, and second, the vicariousness of *The Autobiography* enables Stein to position herself as a potentially “queer” modernist genius
author. As an analytical category, vicarious writing thus opens up important new perspectives on the social functions of literature because it allows us to understand how someone like Stein, by staging vicariousness, can take a stance in the (gendered) literary field.

While the authorship of *The Autobiography* can evidently be ascribed to the staged vicarious writer Stein, not the signatory Toklas, the second vignette points to a different dynamic. “Going to write it for you” here becomes “as told to” a vicarious writer by a principal who seeks to claim authorship. The principal and signatory of this example of vicarious writing is the record-setting baseball player Babe Ruth (1895-1948), born George Herman Ruth, who entered the literary field with the publication of his memoirs in 1948. The lengthy title of the book is *The Babe Ruth Story: By Babe Ruth; as Told to Bob Considine, with 49 Photographs*.

To assure readers of the veracity of the narrative, the top of the cover features the handwritten phrase “My only authorized story,” followed by Ruth’s signature. In fact, the book features Ruth’s name three times on its cover, twice as a reproduction of his handwritten signature. It is as if the book could not underline enough that its story conforms to facts. The insistence on the signature should evidently make the signatory’s claim to authorship more plausible. This is, after all, a book about his life “as told to” someone else, the journalist Bob Considine, who takes on the role of an overt ghostwriter. Paradoxically, the paratextual markers of collaboration, of the contractual relation of this vicariously written celebrity book, single out Ruth as its only star.

While recognizing Ruth’s sportsmanship, which would be unthinkable without his team spirit, the book celebrates his outstanding status and positions him as unique *primus inter pares* in the field of sports. But it also positions its principal as author in the wider social field. Authorship becomes the baseball star’s property, and vicarious (ghost)writing becomes a reminder that claiming authorship highlights what Pierre Bourdieu has called “consecration” in certain cultural contexts (13-14). Ruth, too, wanted to erect a monument to himself. By publishing the book that bears his name on its cover, he sought to climb on the pedestal that notions of singular authorship afford. He believed that authorship would elevate him and fortify the base on which he stood to be looked up to. To his highly iconic body—literally “ravaged by cancer” at the time when “The Babe” promoted his ghostwritten book (Malafronte)—Considine added a figurative voice crafted to make the sports celebrity immortal. And it was not only Ruth who benefited from this consecration; his vicarious writer also benefited financially, as did his agent, publisher, and booksellers.

Ruth’s case—that of an icon of popular culture who sought to exploit values associated with high culture—points to the logic of a “heteronomous” cultural field (Bourdieu 32) and invites us to interrogate *ghostwriting* as a specific form of vicarious writing that increases a principal’s symbolic capital. The ghostwriter became central to vicarious writing in
the North American public sphere after World War I, a sphere shaped by popular culture in a broad sense and the commercialization of literature in a narrower sense. The term ghostwriting originates from the context of celebrity book publishing in the 1920s. It was coined by the baseball agent and “literary entrepreneur” Christy Walsh, who founded a successful syndicate for ghostwriters specializing in sports celebrity memoirs, mainly those of baseball stars (Sutherland 189).

A baseball player could purchase a ghostwriter’s writing skills, in effect allowing a vicarious writer to produce a book and, by extension, an author. The ghostwriting of such a celebrity book—like ghostwriting services of any kind, when principals hire someone to write texts for them—puts emphasis on the writing process as one side of the coin of vicarious writing, while generally the other side has a signature written on it that anticipates an author. Becoming an author and being recognized as one, that is to say, owning authorship, implies authority, and prominent figures in public life like athletes, celebrities, and politicians want that additional authority but do not necessarily have the time or the skills to write their own books and claim it. Ghostwriters, in contrast, have the writing skills but perhaps not the recognition or the resources to succeed as professional authors on their own.17 Ghostwritten books focus attention on principals who hope that such attention will enhance their profiles as experts: show-business celebrities and sports stars seek attention by making public confessions about their private lives; politicians like to publish books before elections to highlight their expertise; high-profile activists mobilize their constituencies and attract publicity. Since the first vicariously written celebrity books appeared a century ago, authorship has increasingly acquired such high social prestige that it has become de rigueur to have a book out. Authorship has become the product of a lucrative business branch in a commodified literary field.

In addition to framing the authorship of books that stage vicariousness or that are written vicariously as a matter of exchange in the overlapping literary, social, and economic fields, the following two examples contribute to conversations about literature as a category relevant to position-taking in the political arena. The Autobiography of Malcolm X (1965) is a famous case in point, highlighting the extent to which vicariously written books can be politically controversial and empowering. To briefly recount, The Autobiography is an “as told to’ book” (Haley 387) by Malcolm X (1925–65), written “[w]ith the assistance of” or, even more likely, entirely ghostwritten by Alex Haley (Malcolm X i). Haley’s epilogue attests to the fact that the narrativization of the political leader’s life and message was itself a difficult task (see 385–94, 413–16, 419, 456). In academic and activist discussions that have revolved around the “struggle for control of the text” (Andrews 46), questions about Haley’s role in shaping the book have been related to an assessment of its rhetorical efficacy. Vicariousness, these discussions unsurprisingly show, was detrimental to its political impact. The more Haley was construed as a

For a discussion of the contradictory dynamics between writer and principal in ghostwriting, see Junker and Löffler.
covert ghostwriter, the more Malcolm X’s authorial voice could resound from the written pages, amplifying the political leader’s message after his assassination. While scholars have analyzed *The Autobiography* as a conceptually oral text which effectively features Malcolm X’s singular voice—a voice that could articulate the demands of an entire group or movement—they have also emphasized Haley’s role in the process of writing the book vicariously, clearly accounting for Haley’s decisive role in crafting it (see Wideman 103-10; Marable 307, 310-13; Andrews 45-47).

Eakin sees “relational paradigms [of social identity formation] prominently displayed” in *The Autobiography* (Living 61). What this famous example shows, in brief, is the following: determining the overttness of vicariousness in a collaborative effort such as this one becomes itself a highly charged political issue.

Malcolm X and Haley’s book is situated in the tradition of the ante-bellum African American autobiography, the so-called slave narrative, which was authorized by a White subject whose role generally went far beyond taking dictation, editing, and distributing the text, thus casting doubt on the veracity of the “as told to” narrative. These questions continue to be a matter of contention in discussions of slave narratives—discussions revolving around the strategies by which those who inhabited non-hegemonic speaking positions claimed an authorial voice to speak out on behalf of others. John Sekora’s famous phrase, “Black Message / White Envelope,” points to the hegemonic discursive framework that over-determined and in effect de-authorized the voices of those narrating their trajectories toward freedom and giving a voice to others along the way. The formulaic subtitles “Written by Himself” / “Written by Herself,” of the narratives of Olaudah Equiano (1789), Frederick Douglass (1845), Harriet Jacobs (1861), and others, are expressive, paradoxically, of the historical circumstances that could split authorship into the two positions of Black author-signatory and White amanuensis-compiler-editor-vicarious writer, working to the detriment of the signatories’ authority and potentially undermining it. As can be gleaned from the vast critical apparatus relating to the genre, this fraught relationship was glaringly asymmetrical, consolidating wider social power relations in place during the antebellum period and beyond. In the signatories’ struggles for subjectivity and recognition of their humanity, such subtitles mark textual efforts to authorize their authorship more than their actual writing skills.

In contrast to Black autobiographies from the antebellum period,*The Autobiography of Malcolm X* demonstrates an equal relationship between writer and signatory. And while Malcolm X and Haley’s collaboration may have been fraught with tensions, sparking contentious scholarly debates, it hardly compares structurally to the complexities of vicariousness in discursive practices which Linda Alcoff has framed as a “problem of speaking for others” (8), particularly when those who speak and those who are spoken for inhabit vastly different social and
geopolitical locations. When someone is altogether abjected from the logic of hegemonic subject formation and, in the sense of the Spivakian “subaltern,” structurally excluded from the possibility of being heard, speaking on the subaltern’s behalf from a discursively privileged position can reify what could be called “discursive imperialism” (Alcoff 17) or “discursive violence” (19). However, doing so may also be ethically necessary and politically efficacious. Alcoff here points us to the example of vignette number four: *I, Rigoberta Menchú* (1984), the testimony of the Indigenous Guatemalan activist Rigoberta Menchú (born 1959). Its autobiographical “I” becomes a communal one that strategically claims to speak for and tell “the story of all poor Guatemalans” (Menchú) in order to campaign against neo-colonial human rights violations and for Indigenous emancipation from settler-colonial rule. Using the genre of *testimonio*, which emerged in South America in the 1960s, the book is marked by a double layer of vicariousness: Menchú speaks and writes for her community, and she is spoken for by her official transcriber and editor, Venezuelan anthropologist Elizabeth Burgos-Debray.

This double layer of vicariousness has had detrimental effects on assessments of Menchú’s authority as an activist author. Her own *speaking for* has been discredited by her *being spoken for* in light of assumptions that her narrative underwent “manipulations and reordering” by Burgos-Debray and others (Bañales 363). A notorious controversy about the veracity of the text, triggered by U.S. anthropologist David Stoll, was not long in coming. Stoll denied that Menchú had the authority of an unquestionable speaking position from which to present a conclusive narrative of her community, thereby questioning her status as vicarious writer and collaborative author. Ultimately, a debate over vicariousness such as this one throws into sharp relief the attempts of interpretive communities in the Global North to maintain explanatory power over Indigenous peoples. It diverts attention away from the empowering vicarious relationship between Menchú and the community for whom she speaks.

What the controversy brings into view in place of Menchú’s communal self is, first, the contentious relationship between her and her vicarious writers-editors. As Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson remind us, Menchú’s case presents a complex instance of “collaborative life writing” as a “transcultural process [that] can be a situation of coercion and editorial control” (55). Second, we can observe a startling hierarchical hemispheric divide between Menchú as Indigenous author and non-Indigenous readers of the Global North who, like Stoll, misread the community-generating genre of *testimonio*. Instead of construing the *testimonio* as a frame for decolonial knowledge production and collective Indigenous self-empowerment, a non-Indigenous Northern misreading, in effect, de-authorizes Menchú’s vicarious author figure and communal activist agenda and reinstates non-Indigenous Northern hegemonic notions of singular authorship.
4 Re-Centering Authorship Studies

As these brief readings in the vignettes illustrate, the phenomenon of vicarious writing spans a spectrum ranging from intra- to extra-textual negotiations. As a matter negotiated within a text, vicarious writing facilitates symbolic reflections on authorship more generally: as in the case of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, intra-textual negotiations of dynamics involving acts of vicarious writing can point beyond a text proper. In *The Autobiography*, the staging of an entangled writer-principal relation in the text allows readers to assume that Toklas and Stein’s entangled selves straddle the line between the textual inside and outside. As the text substitutes a vicarious pact for an autobiographical one, it playfully recasts expectations readers may have about the identicity of narrator, protagonist, and author. Vicariousness thus becomes a matter of subverting the ways in which the generic framing of a text conventionally pre-structures readers’ perceptions of author-text relations. It niggles at what Paul John Eakin has called the “referential aesthetic” associated with autobiographical writing (*Touching* 29), and teasingly sabotages readers’ expectation that the name in the title of a book should be identical with the name of its author. The text thus raises general questions about the authority readers accord an author, hence potentially alerting readers to the complexity and unreliability of their own meaning-making.

On the other end of the spectrum, as a practice of literary production external to texts, vicarious writing can also shed light on the significance of authorship, and singular authorship in particular, as symbolic capital that aids subjects—those who most likely cannot write skillfully, as in Ruth’s case, but who can afford to perform as principal—in achieving the recognition of their target audience. Here, too, vicarious writing may be explicitly marked on a meta-communicative level within the text and on the cover of the book. Across the spectrum of intra- and extra-textual negotiations—and across diverse genres, not only of life writing—vicarious writing becomes a device for the effective (self-)positioning of authors.

As an indexical category, vicarious writing opens up analytical perspectives on the strategies that writers use in and outside of narrative scenarios to take a stance toward others and thus to position themselves in discursive and material settings. Stein could be read as patronizingly giving a voice to her voiceless partner but the narrative setting makes undoubtedly clear that she is speaking and writing for her as a gift. While Menchú, with her own precarious authority to speak, sought to give a voice to the voiceless, both her vicarious writers and her critics compromised her potential as an author in the geopolitical context of asymmetrical power relations. Haley and Malcolm X shared the idea of amplifying the reach of a political agenda despite their fraught relationship. The ghostwriter who wants to make money from someone else’s
authority represents yet another configuration of vicariousness: Considine capitalized on Ruth’s story by request; Ruth wanted the authority of authorship, and Stein seemed not to want it but in effect asserted it. Vicariousness, these examples show, brings out connections between texts that have been previously ignored.

Tying these case studies together underlines the efficacy of vicarious writing as a powerful strategy in processes of (self-)positioning. Considering the epistemological potential of vicarious writing reveals that the key issue is not one of identity (“I am an author”) but one of stance-taking (“I position myself / someone else as an author”). The study of vicarious writing thus dynamizes the study of authorship. It seeks to overcome an obsessive interest in the identity of individual authors. Instead, it brings to the fore the ways in which authorial subjects and vicarious writers are constituted in entangled processes of cultural production, as well as highlighting the collaborative dynamics at play in the literary marketplace at large, the investments writers and signatories make, and the contractual relations they enter in order to create author figures.

Collaborative work is nothing new or surprising in various forms of media, and although it has gone in new directions in digital media, this has not challenged basic assumptions about the authorship of books and printed works. Yet these vignettes show that the long tradition of collaboratively authoring printed texts has a lot to tell scholars about questions of cultural authorization, not only by exposing their own assumptions and biases, but also by encouraging a rethinking of authorship at large. If vicarious acts of writing specifically and collaborative practices generally have had an enduring impact on North American literary communities, then why is collaboration more evident and more evidently accepted in, and studied with reference to, cultural spheres that move beyond the strictly literary? And why is collaborative authorship more apparent in media other than books? It is an obvious practice in new media and has been studied as such: social-media fan fiction and other kinds of participatory culture come to mind (see Jenkins et al.). We can also think of artists’ workshops, dance companies, theater groups, music ensembles, film and television production companies, and mainstream comics and video game studios—all of which are more markedly shaped by practices of collaboration than literature.22

Answers to these questions may point in the direction of the unflinching aura of literary authorship marked by a unique and unmistakable signature written on the cover of a book—a chiffre for the assumed immediacy of the imagination, a cipher of the unrelenting spirit of a brilliant mind, untainted by the laws of the cultural market. Library stacks are filled with books about books and their authors—books that contributed to creating the idea of the autonomous, individual author in the first place. The fascination with singular authorship becomes apparent when we take a look at the history of cinema. Cinematic authorship



22 Thank you to Mark E. Horowitz, senior music specialist at the Library of Congress, who pointed out fascinating aspects of collaboration between lyricists, librettists, and composers to me, giving the example of Stephen Sondheim collaborating with James Lepine on the musical Sunday in the Park with George (1984).
has always been largely collaborative, but not until the invention of au-
teur cinema was film elevated to the sphere of respectable art and thus
made into a serious object of study (Bennett 106). Another example that
comes to mind is the differentiation between commercial comics, which
commonly involve a collaborative division of labor, on the one hand, and
single-authored graphic novels that have distinctly more literary prest-
tige, on the other. The prestige of singular authorship in cinema or the
comics field, however, remains haunted by the specter of collaboration,
and the sphere of literature should be no different in this respect.

Scholars of literature have much to learn from film and comics schol-
ars who recognize the collaborative work that goes into the production
of filmic and other visual forms of cultural expression. In turn, an analy-
sis of vicarious authorship—in its attention to relations of power—can
satisfy many of the concerns of contemporary Cultural Studies and Me-
dia Studies approaches. Authorship Studies in this sense refuses to draw
artificial lines between Literary and Cultural Studies.

Considering vicarious writing in its different instantiations allows
us to examine the constitutive linkage between two diverging aspects
of authorship whose connection otherwise remains hidden: writing
processes and the discursive weight accorded to an author’s signature.
Literary authorship continues to draw its prestige from a singular au-
thor’s signature, but innumerable instances of authorship would not ex-
ist without acts of vicarious writing that require skillful collaborative
work in order for an authorial signature to be established. Taking this
dynamic into consideration calls for a divergence model of authorship,
the theoretical implications of which are manifold and yet to be explored
more fully.

Only if we relate our observations on vicarious writing back to the
larger framework of Literary and Cultural Studies, and connect them to
the dynamics of a “wearing out” of theories—only if, in other words, we
dare to put on the clothes of a crucial concept like authorship—can we
fruitfully interrogate the iconic status of authors on pedestals. Vicarious
writing may thus teach us important lessons about writing as a craft,
about writing as contractual relation, about writing as cultural authori-
ization, and about writing as a strategy of positioning entangled autho-
rial subjects. It will allow us to engage those who argue for and praise
the legitimacy and prestige of authorial autonomy, and it prompts us to
consider critically how privileging singular authorship intersects with
the conceptual legacy of “possessive individualism” (Eakin, Living
63). By bringing vicarious writing into focus in the field of Authorship Stud-
ies, we can combine conceptual considerations and historical localiza-
tions of literature and culture, and we can gain important insights into
the textual politics, economic operations, and social functions of textual
production. Not least, we can learn more about the potential effects that
writing has on the world to which it responds, including the making and
positioning of authors in it.
Although it might suggest otherwise, a “wearing out” of concepts in Wiegman’s sense does not refer to an egotistical, self-centered project of specific individuals or groups that exhaust concepts for the sake of group-specific success. Rather, the idea of a “wearing out” of concepts points to a collaborative endeavor that reaches beyond camps: in this sense, critical orientations, concepts, and methodologies do not belong to certain groups, nor are they owned by individuals. On the contrary, they can and will be worn out for the sake of enlivening the field. This makes Authorship Studies a collective project—an umbrella discourse for manifold actors and their antagonistic perspectives, an arena of competing positions that should be articulated beyond the confines of distinct, particular groups—involving the handwriting and signatures of many scholars who speak and write from various perspectives and viewpoints.

Hortense Spillers has recently noted that the handicraft of writing is always a matter of working and acting not in isolation but in relations of social and disciplinary situatedness, in communicative frameworks: “the writer is never advancing in isolation but, rather, in the sociality of belonging to a world shaped by a synthesis of forces that precede particular gestures of response” (58). Revealing the inadequacy and inaccuracy of the idea that scholars write in a vacuum, Spillers puts a collective notion of authorship in place of the concept of the isolated, withdrawn, and non-communicative singular author. In a similar spirit, Wiegman can be read as an author figure who co-writes the script of the academic field, who co-authors its agenda. Referring to Spillers’s and Wiegman’s author-function in this sense, in effect, helps to structure the field, situate it, and make it readable as a collaborative effort. In this vein, we can assume in analogy to the procedures of voluntary vicarious writing that collaborative authorship is and should be a standard procedure of scholarship.  

And this, ultimately, returns us to Gertrude Stein’s “going to write it for you.” Centering vicarious writing, we reinvigorate Authorship Studies, and we learn about the shared processes that form part of the signature of an author, or a text—or a disciplinary discourse, for that matter. Someone needs to do the difficult work of writing; someone needs to acquire the skills to fill the page. And more often than not, this craft can be performed together or as a service to someone else. We should start treating vicarious writing as a serious object of study for American Studies, lest we kill off one of its key figures: the vicarious writer.
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