The Indignity of Speaking: the Poetics of Representation in Erin Mouré's "Seebe"

by Melissa Jacques

> *A work of art is a form that articulates forces, making them intelligible.*
> —*Guy Davenport*

> *In any case, apart from that, the 'knotted space, a fold, folding' is still the way I think of a poem, and I still think that wherever we talk about structure (and we must), we butt up against the issue of privilege, of who stands where in the social order, and how this order enacts us as we enact it.*
> —*Erin Mouré, "The Anti-Anaesthetic"*

Erin Mouré's poetry is fragmented, meta-critical and explicitly deconstructive. Folding everyday events and ordinary people into complex and often irresolvable philosophical dilemmas, Mouré challenges the standards of accessibility and common sense. Not surprisingly, her work has met with a mixed response. Critics are often troubled by the difficult and therefore alienating nature of the writing; even amongst Mouré's advocates, the issues of accessibility and political efficacy are recurrent themes. In an essay comparing Mouré's writing to that of Gertrude Stein, Dennis Denisoff suggests that, because Mouré chooses to articulate tensions rather than supply her readers with answers, her critics respond with something like fear:

> A number of people have criticized Mouré's work, however, for being too obscure, too difficult—ultimately too dangerous. The poet counters such accusations by arguing that individuals often feel threatened by those people who have the confidence to interrogate dominant codes of discourse and to challenge the control fostered by these codes. (114)

More recently, Lisa Dickson has suggested that a reader's discomfort is one of the desired effects of the work. In her careful reading of Mouré's 1992 collection, *Sheepish Beauty, Civilian Love*, Dickson

argues that structural innovation is deployed as part of an explicitly political agenda: "the discomfort arising from structures that resist our attempts to read them is an integral aspect of [Moure's] political poetics which attempts at every turn to make a reader feel, if not disconcerting dizziness, at least that everything is *not* fine" (31; emphasis in the original). Like Dickson and Denisoff, I would argue that those who feel threatened are responding to something more than Mouré's linguistic dexterity. Granted, her poetry is difficult. However, the real danger lies in her sensitivity to the issues of equity and power associated with the act of representation. Much of the criticism generated in response to Mouré's work includes a discussion of her rather extensive poetic oeuvre.[1] While I consider this a legitimate approach to a prolific poet, I have chosen to focus, instead, on a single poem. What follows is a close reading that negotiates the intricate components of one poem in order to confront the myriad ways in which Mouré makes us feel that "everything is *not* fine."

Taken from her 1989 collection *WSW (West South West)*, "Seebe" is disturbing because it forces the issue of complicity. Mouré represents an event—the narrator rescues a young Native boy who has been hit by the train she is working on—while at the same time providing a critique of that representation. The narrator acknowledges her complicity with the social order over and against which she is writing.[2] The poem therefore functions as a meta-critical performance, reenacting the relations of dominance and submission it is designed to undermine. In "Seebe," the dynamics of power and privilege under critique are not limited to the rescue of the boy (who, incidentally, does not even want to be saved), but are intrinsic to the act of representation itself.

I have structured my reading of "Seebe" around the problematics of representation outlined above. In keeping with Mouré's insistence on formal as well as theoretical discontinuity, I have broken my analysis into sections. Although the topics of these sections refer to issues or debates surrounding 'postmodern' representation, they are neither discrete nor fixed; the sections fold into one another as do the issues, and the poetic practice, they are designed to represent. Finally, although I refer to work by several theorists, including Michel de Certeau and Gayatri Spivak, the American art critic Craig Owens provided me with analytical framework as well as title. His belief in the significance of feminism to a critical postmodern aes-

thetic, as well as his distrust of realist and/or figurative forms of representation, have made his work invaluable to my analysis of Mouré's political as well as postmodern poetics.

Tactical Postmodernism

In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, the French philosopher Michel de Certeau makes an important distinction between the actions of the powerful and of the powerless, identifying them, respectively, as strategies and tactics. A strategy, according to de Certeau, "is the calculation (or manipulation) of power relationships that becomes possible as soon as a subject with will and power (a business, an army, a city, a scientific institution) can be isolated" (35-36). Put simply, a strategy is a means of control over others sanctioned within a larger system of power. This control is manifest three ways. First, the success of a strategy is contingent upon hegemonic definitions of self and other; upon a delimitation of the proper (and therefore, by implication, of the improper): "It postulates a place that can be delimited as its *own* and serve as a base from which relations with an *exteriority* composed of targets or threats . . . can be managed" (36; ellipses added). Second, power is exercised through the interplay between vision and visibility. The proper is "a mastery of places through sight" (36). Within the domain of the proper, the eye "can transform foreign objects into objects that can be observed and measured, and thus control and include them within its scope of vision" (36). Finally, it is through this insistence on the proper that the Truth is made legible. Defined by de Certeau as the *power of knowledge,* the proper "transform[s] the uncertainties of history into readable spaces" (36) thereby rendering them static.

A tactic, by contrast, "is a calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus. No delimitation of an exteriority, then, provides it with the condition necessary for autonomy. The space of a tactic is the space of the other" (36-37). Without the visual and/or discursive mastery characteristic of strategies, tactics are perhaps best understood as incursions or interventions. Undertaken in "isolated actions, blow by blow" (37), a tactic "must vigilantly make use of the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of the proprietary powers. It poaches in them. It creates surprises in them. It can be where it is least expected. It is a guileful ruse" (37).

Mouré's poetry is tactical as opposed to strategic. Dissatisfied with arguments about the legitimacy of specific images or representations, she attempts to expose the scopic regime within which these representations are produced. In de Certeau's terms, Mouré poaches in the cracks and fissures created by the present crisis in representation. According to Craig Owens, it is "precisely at the legislative frontier between what can be represented and what cannot that the postmodernist operation is being staged" (168). It is also precisely at this legislative frontier that the poem "Seebe" unfolds.

If we accept Owens' argument that a cultural war is being staged at the level of representation, then Mouré's work is almost definitively postmodern. Where modernism sought a kind of formal autonomy from the realm of things, postmodernism actively seeks to break down the barriers between art and life, thereby undermining the distinction between the work of art and its referent:

> Postmodernism neither brackets nor suspends the referent but works instead to problematize the activity of reference. When the postmodernist work speaks of itself, it is no longer to proclaim its own autonomy, its self-sufficiency, its transcendence. It tells of a desire that must be perpetually frustrated, an ambition that must be perpetually deferred; as such, its deconstructive thrust is aimed not only against the contemporary myths that furnish its subject matter, but also against the totalizing impulse which characterizes modernist art. (Owens 85)

Mouré's work is brimming over with the world of things. Resisting the demands of propriety, of a textual or lyrical etiquette, she litters her work with the detritus of Western post-industrial existence: slaughtered deer, battered cars, pop-guns, garbage, television sets, photon scanners, trains, hospital hallways, fruit, intestines, toques, drugstores, truck parts, trailers, and guns. However, these objects are not included as part of some misguided attempt to reinstate the real. Rather, they are markers of something that exceeds representation, functioning more as an evocation of absence, impossibility, than the faithful reconstruction of presence. Echoing Dickson's recognition of discomfort as necessary provocation, Jamie Dopp associates Mouré's refusal of a transparent and readily accessible reality with the poetics of discomfort: "As an alternative, Mouré makes the case for her discomforting poetic. Rather than comment on reality, her poetry seeks to disrupt accepted notions of the real" (268).

In "Seebe," Mouré's ambivalence towards the act of representation is written into the opening lines: "The mind's assumptive power / The assumptive power of the mind over the mind" (81). Dynamic, relational, power is also necessarily the power over. It is as if the power of the mind is turned in upon—even against—itself. This impression is reinforced in the second verse paragraph of the poem. Mouré's description of the release of water from behind a dam leads, curiously, to a circuitous exchange of energy or force:

> release of the river behind the dam at Seebe, recoil of water
> rushing the gorge, where we have stood, our lines
> taut connection between us & the water's surface, our blastular memory
> (t)autologicalour shirts empty, empty,
>
> (81)

What I want to draw attention to here is the relationship between the assumptive power of the first verse paragraph and the (t)autological memory of the second. In both instances, there is reference to a lack of agency, a sense that the narrator is suffering some kind of compulsion, which leads, ultimately, to the act of representation.

If we take into account the root word from which assumptive is derived, as well as the neologistic reworking of (t)autological, Mouré's ambivalence is brought more clearly into focus. In the *Canadian Senior Dictionary,* the entry under 'assume' reads as follows: "1 take for granted; suppose: *He assumed that the train would be on time*. 2 take upon oneself; undertake. 3 take on; put on. 4 appropriate; usurp. 5 pretend: *assume ignorance*." Synonyms are also indicated: "1 presume. 5 feign, simulate." Tautology is defined variously as "the saying of a thing over again in other words without adding clearness or force . . . a statement that is true by virtue of its form" and "the stating or believing of a fact to be its own reason; confusion of cause and effect."

Embedded in the vocabulary of "Seebe" is the suggestion that the mind is compelled to *pretend*, to, *feign*, to *simulate*. Form or structure functions here as the means by which these activities, or their simulations, are rendered *true*. What is left out of the equation is the uncertainty characteristic of Mouré's own work. As Dickson points out, "Mouré does not *speak for* the elided terms of the social world, the working classes, people of colour, combinations of these" (31; emphasis added). Rather than supplement dominant or mainstream representations with counter-images, she pursues a course

that is less direct and therefore, paradoxically, more subversive: Mouré launches a critique of the activity of representation from within representations that she, herself, is compelled to construct. The incommensurability of these two positions results in a tension characteristic of the tactic.

According to de Certeau, "a tactic boldly juxtaposes diverse elements in order suddenly to produce a flash shedding a different light on the language of a place and to strike the hearer" (37-38). Critical of the ways in which experience, especially corporeal experience, is rendered *knowable* on the page, Mouré draws our attention to events, sensations, and interactions which exceed the epistemological constraints of those with power. Through the juxtaposition of first-person narrative, enigmatic description, repetitions and blank space, she illuminates the "incredible spillage" (81) of language, memory and blood that is Seebe, Alberta. Here, the spaces between words are more significant than anything that might be said, written or remembered:

> who we are, now, the spaces between words where time leaks out
> & we are finished, finished, gone old;
> the table of food finished & the guests left, & the spillage of glasses, &
> our shirts empty, empty,
>
> (81)

Seeing is Believing

In "The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism," Craig Owens argues that, unlike modernism, postmodernist work does not lay claim to aesthetic authority. Work that is both feminist *and* postmodern opposes those representational systems which privilege the authoritative vision of the "constitutive male subject" (Owens 167). They oppose these systems not simply because they restrict how *others* may be seen, but because they define the "subject of representation as absolutely centered, unitary, masculine" (167).

Like the work of the artists Barbara Kruger, Laurie Anderson and Cindy Sherman cited in Owens' essay, Mouré's poetry enacts and thereby exposes the ways in which subjects and their objects are constituted through the gaze. Although her work is consistently (and often pejoratively) identified as postmodern, she nevertheless remains skeptical of the term and the various practices to which it

refers. In "The Anti-Anaesthetic," she argues that postmodernism is susceptible to the operations of mastery and objective neutrality it is determined to undermine. Like de Certeau, Mouré identifies the gaze—or vision—as a prerogative of privilege. However, it is important to note that unlike de Certeau she makes an explicit connection between the gaze and issues of gender:

> So what I'm saying is tied with both social and linguistic condition, and with the gaze in which femininity has been defined. (And in some philosophers, when the gaze is questioned or displaced, not only femininity disappears, but women. The discourse of privilege is infinitely absorptive. The relational vanishes. There is a post-modern too that wears this privilege. . . .[3] (13)

Aware of the fact that, as Owens claims, "there is, of course, no lack of representations of women—or, for that matter, of other marginalized groups" (262), Mouré remains dissatisfied with the postmodernist gesture of displacement. It is as if she is seeking some sort of contingency position that would allow her to question sexist and racist systems of representation while at the same time acknowledging the material conditions of the specific objects (and subjects) being represented. Leaving almost half a page of blank space after the meditation on space and emptiness quoted above, Mouré enters into a discussion of women, and of Woman's reproductive function, in light of the events at Seebe:

> They say what saves the bones is weight-beating exercise
> except for the carrying of children
> Which is our namesake,
> which is what we do, naming
>
> (82)

Rather than counter the traditional view of women with the essentialist imagery of maternal feminism, Mouré uses reproduction as the deconstructive lever with which to dismantle both paradigms. Although the following verse paragraph begins with the word "children," the reproductive process being described is neither organic nor strictly maternal in nature. Rather than pulling a child from the womb, Mouré describes herself lifting him "up from the side of the rails" (82). The metonymic link between reproduction

and representation culminates in something like a sudden flash. The events are straightforward. The boy, hit by the train while fishing, is discovered and carried to safety; the narrator, an employee of the railway, is simply doing her job. And yet the narrative is convoluted, disassociative and in places almost breathless:

> This spillage, rusted gates pulled upward
> to release the downstream blood
> The mind's assumptive power of the Bow at Seebe
> Carrying the boy to the conductor & then running back for the
> kit, sunlit, "we hit a cow" they said in the lounge car afterward,
> & me lifting the boy up from the dam where he was fishing,
> the bridge where the whitefish run among the planted trout
> at Seebe
>
> (82)

The boy's leg, "just torn a bit at the skin" (82) is linked, through repetition, to the dam on the Bow river where he was fishing. The narrator, in her blood-spattered uniform, performs an act of labour that registers on at least two levels. "Carrying the boy to the conductor" she acts as handmaiden to the (presumably) male figure of authority. The act unfolds in violent imitation of a birth, with Mouré acting as both mother and midwife. Drawn together dynamically in an embrace scripted in blood, the distinction between surrogate mother and child is blurred. The bones of the child-bearing women of the previous verse paragraph encounter their specular double in the boy whose "Stony Indian face & bone weariness" (82) are almost too much for the narrator to bear.

One of the most striking aspects of this scene is the way in which the relation between the narrator and the wounded child is mediated by touch. Quoting the French feminist Luce Irigaray, Owens argues that an emphasis on touch as opposed to vision is characteristic of feminist art and philosophy:

> Investment in the look is not privileged in women as in men. More than the other senses the eye objectifies and masters. It sets at a distance, maintains the distance. In our culture, the predominance of the look over smell, taste, touch, hearing, has brought about an impoverishment of bodily relations. . . . The moment the look dominates, the body loses materiality.[4] (179; ellipsis added)

What Mouré suggests, through this representation of a physical bond, is a sense of sameness or solidarity. It is as if the narrator recognizes herself in the boy; as if she becomes her *self* through the trauma of their interaction.

It is precisely at this moment of communion that the second level of reproduction or labour occurs. The memory of the boy, of carrying and lifting him "into the vast, vast emptiness" is exposed as a re-presentation. Despite the potential for alliance between two relatively marginalized peoples (*Native* boy and *female* railway worker), Mouré refuses to erase the sign of inequity and power from the scene. Once again, the reference to emptiness is followed by a blank space. This time, however, the space is interrupted by a revision of the scene without sentiment or recognition: "Actually he was in the weeds / actually he was nested hurt leg red in the weeds beside the train / so as not to be found again, got that?" (82). This passage demonstrates Mouré's uncanny ability to simultaneously reveal and disrupt her readers' (*this* reader's) expectations. It would be more comforting and perhaps even more satisfying to have the narrative continue along in a mode identified by contemporary anthropologists as the 'salvage paradigm':

> While in the narrow sense of the word "salvage" may sound antiquated (passé), in a broader sense I believe that it lies at the heart of most forms/practices of representation—visual, audio, literary, expository-in which the representer uses or incorporates material or immaterial objects s/he perceives to be the creation or property of others. Our complementary constructions of otherness and history also manifest themselves in a salvage mode. (Dominquez 131)

The boy's evasiveness, his desire to remain hidden, suggests that even our narrator's altruism is not selfless. Caught between her compulsion to save the boy and her reluctance to exercise power over him, the narrator occupies an untenable position. It is as if, by virtue of her situation, she is forced to assume the visual perspective of Owens' constitutive male subject. The boy is translated by the gaze into a literal object, a body. Paradoxically, it is this perspective that saves him:

> 1) check breathing if you can find the mouth,
> 2) stop the bleeding,
> 3) immobilize fractures,

> thinking the second step, going over it in the mind, so that when you look
>
> at someone completely bloody you see blood only where it is moving, it is the assumptive power of the mind, the mind over the mind, the deconstructive power of the human body, to take this, outward
>
> (83)

By repeating different versions of both the accident and the rescue, Mouré's reconstruction of the event is a cumulative rather than linear narrative. Although this representation is primarily linguistic, the effect achieved is like that of a palimpsest. Contradictory, mobile, transformative, the poem destabilizes its own inscriptions. As a result, the reader is forced to take an active role, to experience or participate in these transformations as they occur, a process Dennis Denisoff describes as follows:

> This shifting about of wording, this *re*positioning, or *pre*positioning, connotes multiple perspectives in a process of defamiliarization and revitalization. As with Stein's piece, Mouré's work is 'changing' even as it appears to be spinning its wheels. The sense of energy and growth comes not from a developmental narrative but from an intense focus fostered by an insistent return to the same (changing) issue. The text evokes the temporal permanence of a spatial object, even as it continues to change through linguistic repetition, suggestive of the process of change a visual artifact goes through in the viewer's mind as she continues to look at it. (117)

In "Seebe," however, these interruptions and repetitions force Mouré's audience to visualize something beyond changes within an aesthetic field. The 'visual artifact' is a wounded child. While the text elicits an empathetic response, it nevertheless disrupts the experience of relative sovereignty that too often accompanies empathy. We become tangled up, implicated in the narrator's identification with and separation from the child. Dickson argues that such blurred and very often disorienting identifications are not simply a feature of Moure's work, they function as an innovative expression of a political agenda: "Manifested in structural experimentation that attempts to break habits of reading, the principle of dynamic interaction works toward the articulation of a bodily experience of difference that is not based on a hierarchy of terms ranged in exclusive dichotomies of insider comfort and outsider abjection" (30). The deconstructive power of the human body and the flexibil-

ity of the human mind are brought together in the figure of a little boy. This figure is not a metaphor. The boy is real. However, as any good post-structuralist knows, direct and immediate access to this *real* is impossible. While each successive attempt at representation contributes to a more complex image, Mouré is forced, in the end, to admit defeat. Folding together fear, reassurance, vision, bone, blood and movement, she attempts one final revision. However, any contest between the boy and the woman has been decided upon in advance: "He was in the weeds. & scared. He looked up soft at me. Hey, I say. / You're okay. He was hiding there from me. I could see him. & ignored / his hiding" (83).

The Indignity of Speaking

In "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Gayatri Spivak rearticulates the post-structuralist critique of the speaking subject from a post-colonial perspective. Focussing on the same conversation between Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucualt that served as the foundation for Owens' critique of representation,[5] Spivak argues that while these theorists may have the best intentions, their perspective is dangerously limited: "Some of the most radical criticism coming out of the West today is the result of an interested desire to conserve the subject of the West, or the West as Subject. The theory of pluralized 'subject-effects' gives an illusion of undermining subjective sovereignty while often providing a cover for this cover of knowledge" (271). Frustrated with what she sees as the "unrecognized contradiction within a position that valorizes the concrete experience of the oppressed, while being so uncritical about the historical role of the intellectual" (275), Spivak goes on to elaborate what, for her, are the steps necessary to a more critical system of representation. The one most relevant to our reading of Mouré is described as a process of unlearning: "In seeking to learn to speak to (rather than listen to or to speak for) the historically muted subject of the subaltern woman, the postcolonial intellectual systematically "unlearns" female privilege. This systematic unlearning involves learning to critique postcolonial discourse with the best tools it can provide and not simply substituting the lost figure of the colonized" (295).

The subaltern in "Seebe" is not a woman. Nevertheless, the process of unlearning is very much the same. Mouré's attention to the

silence of this child demonstrates her willingness to take up Spivak's program despite its practical—or empirical—impossibility. The point here is not to posit a speaking colonial or subaltern subject. Rather, it is incumbent upon the intellectual/poet, to resist the lure of the speaking subject altogether: "To say that the subject is a text does not authorize the converse pronouncement: the verbal text is a subject" (Spivak 297). Put simply, presence is not contingent upon speech, despite what Deleuze, Foucault and even Owens would have us believe. In the penultimate verse paragraph of "Seebe," Mouré attempts to set the record straight:

> The poem has fallen apart into mere description.
> It is years later, thinking of the mind's assumptive power & remembering
> the train hitting the boy at Seebe, Alberta and how I went out
> to get him
>
> (84)

Here, the narrative structure of both memory and history refers back to the reworking of (t)autology at the beginning of the poem. We have come full circle, but without resolution. What Mouré gives us, instead, is the self-critical analysis Spivak suggests is our only defense against reinstating the subject-positions of an oppressive colonial order:

> Here we have only my assumptions, only the arrogance of
> Erin Mouré made into the poem; in the course of history, which is
> description, the boy is mute.We have no way of entering into his images
> now. The description itself, even if questioned, portrays the arrogance
> of the author. In all claims to the story, there is muteness. The writer as
> witness, speaking the stories, is a lie, a liberal bourgeois lie.
>
> (84)

This passage marks a shift in Mouré's writing. According to Dopp, "Mouré generally supported or enacted the convention of poet as witness" in her early work (266-7). Although she comes dangerously close to valorizing speech *over* silence in the concluding lines of the stanza, Mouré manages, in the end, to reassert the conflicted or double position enacted throughout. Rejecting the witness model as "narcissistic" and "linguistically naive" (Dopp 268), she reveals a self-awareness bordering on fatalism, and finds herself caught in a bind from which there is no escape: "The description, *even if questioned*, portrays the arrogance of the author" (84; emphasis added).

Spivak closes *her* essay with a pithy declaration, often quoted but rarely understood: "The subaltern cannot speak. There is no virtue in global laundry lists with woman as a pious item. Representation has not withered away. The female intellectual as intellectual has a circumscribed task which she must not disown with a flourish" (308). Despite Mouré's insistence that: "each word of the writer robs the witnessed of their own voice, muting them" ("Seebe" 84), she accepts the circumscribed task of the female intellectual. While the boy remains mute, his silence does not simply reinscribe him as victim. In her discussion of Mouré as "linguistic heretic" (123), Karen Press states that silence "is a kind of non-sense, but a decidedly double-sided one" (128-9). Cautioning us against violence, Press reminds us that not all silence is the same, but "must be treated with care even if it can be expressive" (129). Invoking a feminism that sees gender as simply one marker of difference, Mouré reveals herself in the process of unlearning called for by Spivak. Resisting the indignity of speaking for others, she is nevertheless compelled to speak. The care with which she concludes her account of the dynamic interaction that takes place in "Seebe" testifies to the necessity as well as the impossibility of this task:

> *Lifting him up, bone weary, taking him*
> *into the vast, vast emptiness.*
> (84)

Notes

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1 See, for example, the essays by Karen Press and Jamie Dopp included in the Works Cited at the end of this paper.

2 There are two points that should be made here. First, the narrator is identified as Erin Mouré near the end of the poem. Therefore the slippage between poet and narrator is advocated by the poet herself. Lisa Dickson defends her own use of Mouré's extra-poetical writings as secondary criticism with the following: "Nor will I suggest that Mouré's extra-poetic persona should be bracketed off from readings of the poetry in order to avoid the dangers of intentional fallacy. Such a bracketing is contrary to the poetry itself, which persistently confronts intention in order to problematize the notions of both stable intention and formal self-containment" (35). This sentiment is particularly apt here, where the narrator/writer refers to herself by name. My second point is that

writing, within a deconstructive paradigm, often includes speech (rather than simply being opposed to it) as well as memory. I am using the term here in its broadest and most deconstructive sense.

3 The parenthesis remains open-ended in her text. The ellipses are also Mouré's, and she concludes this passage with a footnote which reads as follows: "Because it refuses to examine the context of the 'voice'-subject and its relationship to the reader, and to the Law . . ."

4 Although it may seem odd that I would use Irigaray to bolster an anti-essentialist argument. I am of the belief that any accusation of essentialism she has received is the result of careless and/or overinvested (mis)readings. I am in good company, see Margaret Whitford's *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine*, Tina Chanter's *Ethos of Eros: Irigaray's Rewriting of the Philosophers*, and the Judith Butler's analysis of Irigaray in *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex."*

5 The conversation is entitled "Intellectuals and Power." Craig Owens' most direct engagement with this conversation is written in the form of an 'imaginary interview' and is titled "The Indignity of Speaking for Others." See Works Cited for the full references.

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