Valerie Baisnee, Through the long corridor of distance: Space and Self in Contemporary New Zealand Women’s Autobiographies (Rodopi, 2014)

Women’s autobiography theorist Valerie Baisnee’s new book, Through the long corridor of distance: Space and Self in Contemporary New Zealand Women’s Autobiographies, examines, in a new light, concepts of place and space in autobiographies written by New Zealand women writers including Sylvia Ashton-Warner, Janet Frame, Laurie Edmond, Fiona Kidman, Barbara Anderson and Ruth Park. These autobiographies range in publication from the early 1970s to the twenty-first century, which reflects the emergence of a renewed interest in autobiographical theory and the changes in self-awareness for New Zealand women that occurred during this time.

After acknowledging and outlining the historically accepted ways of reading autobiography through the lenses of genre, truth versus fiction and subjectivity, Baisnee explores, more specifically, the role of ‘place’ and ‘space’ in the development and representation of identity. Questions surrounding the literal and metaphorical birth of the author take precedence over the post-modern death of the author paradigm (23), where in a post-post-modern world, the life of the author is less about what is real and what is fiction and more about the ‘body and its environment’.1

Baisnee refutes the hegemonic identification of earlier theorists regarding the difference between ‘place’ and ‘time’ which sees ‘time and its connotations of history and progress as masculine, and place with its connotations of nostalgia and inertia as feminine’ (xiv), and suggests instead that ‘the relationship between space and mobility needs to be reassessed’ (xv). Using post-colonial, geographical, and autobiographical feminist theories, Baisnee further delineates the difference she sees between the ideas of ‘place’ (both public and private) as it pertains to gender and autobiography and its fixed positions, and ‘space’, which is characterised by movement (xxi) and where ‘these marginal, in-between spaces are sites of resistance’ (xiii).

Her book is broken up into five chapters that nicely reflect these questions surrounding ‘place’ and ‘space’ as they pertain to women’s autobiography and New Zealand women’s autobiography in particular: ‘Thresholds’, ‘Homes’, ‘Displaced Bodies/Disembodied Texts’, ‘Landscapes’ and ‘Itineraries’. These chapter titles also connote the autobiographical tropes of the journey, of travelling, and of boundaries, both in the physical and metaphysical sense, which is one of the underlying themes of this work.

In the first chapter ‘Thresholds’, Baisnee applies Gerard Genette’s definition of the marginal space of paratext as ‘liminal devices and conventions, both within and outside the book that form part of the complex mediation between book, author, publisher and reader’ (21) to suggest that it is within the paratext of autobiography where ‘the game of multiple identity-positions and the limits of the genre are explored’ (2). The idea of the liminal and the marginal, of the inside and the outside, and the spaces between the two, is another important theme that permeates Baisnee’s work as it pertains to subjectivity and place. Four of the books she discusses in this chapter appropriate the ‘journey’ trope into their titles – including Janet Frame’s To the Is-Land – as a means of highlighting the subjective relation between time and space for these women autobiographers. Baisnee also analyses epigraphs, forwards and openings to ‘decode the transgressions and deterritorialisations [that] take place [which is] what the paratext allows the reader to do’ (23).


This idea of thresholds connects to the next chapter, ‘Homes’, which explores the connotations of home through a feminist and post-colonial reading and how these New Zealand women autobiographers subvert the hegemonic notion of home as a place of specifically female ‘nurture, security and stability’ (26) by suggesting that ‘home can be both lived and imagined’ (54), and also that ‘home has a different meaning for those who have been colonised’ (27). Baisnee goes on to explore the various representations, by these women writers, of this space called home, whether it be living without one, or compromising one’s freedom to have one, and, in particular, the notion of home and how it pertains to the creative life where all these women ‘had to redefine home in order to fulfil their artistic urges’ (54). She refers to Gillian Rose’s definition of homes as ‘paradoxical spaces … spaces that would be mutually exclusive if chartered on a two-dimensional map – centre and margin, inside and outside, are occupied simultaneously’ (54).

In ‘Displaced Bodies, Disembodied Texts’, Basinee, once again, connects the preceding chapter of the idea of home to the ‘most private of homes – our bodies’ (57). She further equates the accepted autobiographical text of a truthful rendering of a life to a body that historically, for females, had to be in control, both of its functions and its secretions, and explores the various outcomes rendered by these women autobiographers when they question these paradigms and the boundaries of places/spaces within them as it pertains to the body and their body of work (61).

The fourth chapter, entitled ‘Landscapes’, acknowledges there are subjective terrains to traverse, and links these subjective terrains or landscapes to a more political idea of nationhood as a ‘place’ and ‘space’ of autobiographical experience and representation, especially as this relates to New Zealand as a distant colony with an end of the world topography where ‘geography and nature have played a key role in forging the country’s self-image’ (77). The autobiographies that Baisnee focuses on in this chapter illustrate, once again, the overriding theme of her book, which is one of margins and thresholds as spaces for female expression and, so, with landscapes. Despite their different approaches, her autobiographers, ‘rather than viewing landscape from without … are involved in and contained by it … in their accounts, their bodies, selves and landscapes are interdependent, not separate … external images of the world can also become images of the mind’ (95).

In the last chapter, ‘Itineraries’, Baisnee explores the autobiographical Bildungsroman of these writers to further extrapolate on the idea of the marginal as a means for women’s self-representation where ‘the traditional portrait of the artist implies the contemplation of fixed images from a distance. Conversely as itineraries, these writers’ careers reveal themselves as tortuous journeys’ (131). These tortuous journeys include not only subjective experiences of marriage and freedom (or lack of it), but also literary liaisons and jealousies, tall poppies and influence anxieties, and a cultural cringe that befell many English colonies at that time. Baisnee highlights these less than romantic notions of personal insecurities because ‘relating a writer’s identify to its social space … helps debunk myths surrounding the writer and her career’ (128).

In the conclusion, Baisnee ties all of her ‘paratextic’ examples from the preceding chapters into a discussion surrounding autobiography and these women writers’ appropriation and subversion of the historical genre, both as a conscious act and unconscious revelation, where a myriad of boundaries of ‘place’ and ‘space’ are becoming increasingly more fluid.

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