74 | book reviews

Representing lives: women and auto/biography

Alison Donnell and Pauline Polkey (Eds.); Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2000, ISBN: 0-333-75076-4 (Hbk) £52.50

Representing Lives contains, along with an editors' Introduction, 24 chapters on a huge range of auto/biographical 'subjects', from Anglo-Jewish modernist Mina Loy to postmodern Korean-American Hak Kyung Cha, taking in along the way female missionaries working in Southern Africa, Tupperware Ladies plying their trade in the UK, white blouse Edwardians and Victorian travellers, novelists and teachers, playwrights, poets and performance artists and much else besides. At their best, these essays raise intriguing new questions about how contemporary feminist readers might understand the self-representations of women in the past and present. Many of the (to me) most helpful contributions tackle the intersections of 'raced' and gendered identities. Lynnette Turner, for instance, probes the disciplinary valences of Mary Kingsley's ethnographic travel-writing, in order to suggest how representations of gendered and 'raced' subjectivity might oscillate according to the writer's shifting investments in generic and professional conventions. Nike Imoru, in turn, explores her own – sometimes troubled and troubling – performance as a Nigerian teacher of African-American theatre history to mainly white, middle-class British students to show how creative pedagogy might 'stage the interplay of identities as a form of "creative dialogue".' Meanwhile, R.J. Ellis's elegant deconstruction of Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig* discloses how this 'black woman's converse/ation of/with autobiographical norms' illuminates the workings of 'freedom's complex servitude' in the lives of African Americans in the post-abolition North.

One of the boldest moves of the volume as a whole is its refusal to kick over the traces of its origins as a conference: these days publishers supposedly hate conference books almost as much as doctoral theses. Indeed, a number of the contributors, notably Liz Stanley and Alison Oddey, insist on academic work itself, including conferences, conference papers, and conference 'proceedings', as 'auto/biographical occasions' deserving of scrutiny. The editors acknowledge the 'flattening out' that takes place when a stimulating and lively conference event is reproduced as a collection of academic essays, although they express a hope that 'the essays themselves will reflect the diversity of critical debate currently taking place among academics, writers and artists' (Donnell and Polkey, 2000; xxi). It is in this context that the sheer number of contributions invites comment. My own experience as a conference delegate

suggests that often one comes away enlivened but exhausted, often frustrated at not able to be in two places – two ‘strands’ – at once, and armed with a handful of scribbled notes about papers heard and a complicated set of mental calculations about the costs and benefits – personal and political – of attempting to cram one particular chunk of one’s ongoing research into one possible publication. Themed panels and conversations engineered according to the practical constraints of a ‘real life’ event are then re-inscribed, and/or overwritten, by editors as they struggle to satisfy commercial – and professional – deadlines and standards. Editorial aspirations and generosity on the one hand, and professional obligations on the other, often conspire to encourage the publication of the maximum number of papers offered in the quickest possible time. The tragic fatal illness of one of the volume’s editors, Pauline Polkey, can only have exacerbated what is always necessarily a difficult, arduous and often thankless undertaking. The inevitable outcome here as elsewhere is a foreshortening of individual arguments (with the exception of Liz Stanley’s essay the contributors here seem to have had no more than 3000 words as their canvas) with the result that many essays seem just to be getting into their stride when they perform ‘sum up’; but more seriously it makes for a foreclosing of possible debate and interaction. The inclusion of so many, in themselves interesting and diverse, arguments limits the reciprocal relevance of these studies to each other, to feminist auto/biographical debate or even to feminism. One article on Janet Frame does not address gender at all, while others barely touch on its significance for their topic; many contributors do not engage with existing work on gender and auto/biography *even when it directly addresses their own chosen subject*. One is left with a sense many of the essays may be re-inventing the wheel. Another result of the volume’s open door policy is that some essays seem out of context here: June Purvis’s re-evaluation of the life of Emmeline Pankhurst, for instance, although gripping and persuasive in its own terms, is only tangentially and fleetingly about either Pankhurst’s own life-writing or the feminist historian’s auto/biographical relations with her subject.

While I remain convinced that the study of gender and auto/biography can be useful for feminism, and optimistic about the anti-canonical impulse behind such volumes as this, I am left with questions about the current multiplication of auto/biographical studies. In her fascinating and timely analysis of Margaret Thatcher’s *The Downing Street Years*, Julia Swindells asks whether ‘autobiography, in Britain, for the moment at least [is] too hopelessly compromised (not *least* by 18 years of Conservatism) to service the politics of oppression’ (2000: 40). She goes on to suggest that the celebration of women’s lives through the reading of autobiography (and implicitly through the production and consumption of studies of autobiography) may – here and now – be implicated in anti-democratic and abusive modes of individualism. ‘On occasions’, she writes, ‘it is as if experiencing as a woman is not only held to be an authentication in itself, but also manages

that authenticity by rendering all other positions [...] as potentially demonics.' (loc.cit.). The instance of Thatcher is, clearly, an extreme one, but Swindells' remarks remind us that other ways of 'managing authenticity' may be just as toxic as hers. This is a sobering thought for all of us working on and with autobiography in Britain today – as critics, teachers, activists – and not necessarily just those working on contemporary writing.

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references

Donnell, A. and Polkey, P. (2000) editors, *Representing Lives: Women and auto/biography*, Basingstoke: Macmillan.

Swindells, J. (2000) *First Person Suspect, or, The Enemy within*, in Donnell, A. and Polkey, P. (2000).

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Heroic desire: lesbian identity and cultural space

Sally Munt; Cassell, London, 1998, £14.99, ISBN: 0-304-33454-5 (Pbk)

The mid-to-late-1990s saw an explosive interest in space and its relation to identity and Sally Munt has made a significant theoretical contribution to this. *Heroic Desire* is a creative and positive exploration of lesbian culture and identity politics in relation to 'space'. She is keen to demonstrate that claiming a lesbian self is political, that identifying as lesbian in a homophobic environment is 'heroic' and that being a lesbian requires a degree of rebellion in favour of one's own desire. Throughout the book, Munt looks at various identities that are included in lesbian subculture as forms of spatial existence and resistance to the 'absence' of lesbians in dominant culture. These include the lesbian hero, flâneur, butch, outlaw and citizen. The book comprises six chapters that overlap and intersect, although each chapter may stand well on its own.

Munt begins by detailing the concept of 'hero', which she has noticed to be constantly appearing in post-Stonewall lesbian film and fiction. In contrast to conventional heterosexual heroic texts that return the reader to a heterosexual world, these transport the lesbian reader to another world, for example, a new form of 'self-hood' or a preferred community, via identification and desire. She also considers the lesbian flâneur as metaphor for creating spaces for existence. Like the lesbian, the flâneur is simultaneously detached from and a part of city life, the importance of the wandering lesbian flâneur being that through mobility she takes ownership of space and offers visibility. Munt likens this to Gay Pride marches through city streets. The chapter on the butch body is a lengthy discussion of the many meanings attached to the term 'butch' and the chapter comes to life in the section regarding the stone butch and the embodiment of 'butchness'. She