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Locating the Subject of Post-Colonial Autobiography

Abstract

Somewhat of a growth industry these days, theoretical formulations of the poetics of autobiography by and large continue to ignore post-colonial writings even though many of the texts emerging from these locations, particularly in the past twenty years, are 'life-writings'.¹ Generally, EuroAmerican autobiography theory focuses on its own cosmopolitan space. Displaying an all too familiar geographic and ethnocentric bias, theory is made in the West and it speaks of the West. Because of this bias, theory tends to ignore the issue of place- that is, spatial and geographic location -as a constitutive element of the autobiographical 'I'. Where the 'I' is, theory says, doesn't really matter. But this ignores the fact that literary texts are always deeply rooted in specific places and histories. It is my argument that spatial location is crucial to post-colonial autobiographical self-representation, and that the forgetting of the located ness of the subject speaks of an imperialist assumption of centrality that has never been possible for the post-colonial writer.

LINDA WARLEY

Locating the Subject of Post-Colonial Autobiography

Somewhat of a growth industry these days, theoretical formulations of the poetics of autobiography by and large continue to ignore post-colonial writings even though many of the texts emerging from these locations, particularly in the past twenty years, are 'life-writings'.¹ Generally, Euro-American autobiography theory focuses on its own cosmopolitan space. Displaying an all too familiar geographic and ethnocentric bias, theory is made in the West and it speaks of the West. Because of this bias, theory tends to ignore the issue of place – that is, spatial and geographic location – as a constitutive element of the autobiographical 'I'. *Where* the 'I' is, theory says, doesn't really matter. But this ignores the fact that literary texts are always deeply rooted in specific places and histories. It is my argument that spatial location is crucial to post-colonial autobiographical self-representation, and that the forgetting of the locatedness of the subject speaks of an imperialist assumption of centrality that has never been possible for the post-colonial writer.

The problem as I see it is a foundational one: the poetics of autobiography has been produced by a critical enterprise that creates theory through divergent readings of the same corpus of texts. In the European tradition, these would include autobiographies by St. Augustine, John Bunyan, Jean Jacques Rousseau, Cardinal John Henry Newman, John Stuart Mill, W.B. Yeats and the more recent French autobiographies of Michel Leiris and Roland Barthes. In the American tradition, autobiographies by Benjamin Franklin, Henry David Thoreau, Henry James, and Henry Adams are the core texts. Important challenges have been made to this heavily white and masculine canon;² nevertheless, the 'great' autobiographies, and the theories that have evolved to describe and explain them, have been consistently occupied with the same three issues: the problems of truth, time, and form.

To support this broad generalization, I will briefly sketch out what the central debates within autobiography studies have been. First there are the critics such as James Olney,³ Roy Pascal,⁴ and Paul John Eakin⁵ who are concerned with the problem of truth in autobiography. Not surprisingly, truth – partly because of the vagaries of memory – is a slippery thing, and so the question for these critics is not 'is it true?' but 'what kind of truth

is it?' The argument here is basically that in the process of writing his life, the autobiographer makes a new, metaphoric truth. This special truth, which conforms to some inner vision of the self, organizes and gives meaning to the life.

The second variety or school of autobiography theory is equally concerned with patterns and meanings but finds those patterns in temporal moments. This group includes both the various histories of the development of the genre and critical analyses that see the autobiographical project itself as a fundamentally periodic or historic enterprise. Of the latter category, Susanna Egan's *Patterns of Experience in Autobiography*⁶ is paradigmatic. Egan argues that autobiography re-presents a personal quest where the autobiographer traces his life by organizing the narrative according to significant stages. These stages she names childhood, youth, and maturity, thus producing a developmental, organicist model of autobiography.

The third and final group, which pledges allegiance to post-structuralist literary theory, distrusts both the notions of 'truth' and 'meaning' and argues instead that 'form' is the thing. Here the *graphe* is important, not the *bios*. Certain that to interrogate the referentiality of the 'I' is to ask the wrong question, this group of critics – among whom are Paul de Man,⁷ Jeffrey Mehlman,⁸ and Michael Sprinker⁹ – focuses on the 'I' as a signifier, an enunciative site in discourse, not a marker of presence.

Recognizable at the heart of each of these critical projects is the matter of the 'human subject'. Different as these approaches are, they create a peculiar kind of subject, one that I call an *unlocated subject*. If life is a journey, and autobiography fundamentally a quest narrative, then that journey to this point at least has been imagined as a temporal or metaphysical or linguistic voyage, not a spatial one. Details of place, it has been commonly assumed, are mainly set-dressing, *not* significant constitutive elements of the autobiographical 'I'.¹⁰ James Olney's comment on this point is perhaps the most succinct and revealing of the bias I have been describing:

though it treats often of specific places and times and individuals, and must do so to make its experience real, autobiography is more universal than it is local, more timeless than historic, and more poetic in its significance than merely personal.¹¹

Here we have it then: the universal, de-personalized, non-localized subject, an autobiographical subject that is, curiously, no place.

I do not want to suggest that critics of the poetics of autobiography have exercised a certain wilful blindness with regard to the issue of place in the representation of identity. If theory has taken this direction it is because the canonical texts themselves tend to underplay the geographical positioning of the 'I'. Why is this so? Because these autobiographical subjects are securely positioned within absolutely central, powerful, and *known*

territories: the Roman Empire, France, England. Rousseau or Mill don't have to self-consciously contextualize themselves because the space that they occupy is itself taken for granted. It is the site of Western culture.

Not so for the African, Jamaican, or Canadian autobiographer to whom the intersection of language and place is at the very centre of post-colonial identity politics. Always aware that his or her place has at one time been marked red on the imperial map, and that views of both 'home' and 'away' have been configured and frequently distorted by the colonial past (and, perhaps, the neo-colonial present), autobiographers from these locations struggle to construct a viable representation of the 'self' as a located 'self'. At stake here is more than local colour, painting in words a landscape against which the 'I' can authentically figure. The post-colonial autobiographer is engaged in a project of imaginative possession of place, an act of self-articulation at once necessitated by and working in opposition to the invasion of both territory and mind enacted by Europe upon colonial space.

Geographic position, as I have suggested, has particular valency for post-colonial subjects since their home locations have been historically constructed as peripheral. And, as critics such as Paul Carter,¹² Martin Leer,¹³ and Graham Huggan,¹⁴ have argued, tropes of maps and mapping – representations of a spatial sensibility – recur in post-colonial literatures. But spatial location also has meaning at the micro level. Spaces 'speak'. They are coded, meaningful signs. Spaces are permitted or taboo, safe or unsafe (every woman is finely attuned to these differences). They are measured, hierarchized, gendered. They mark race, ethnicity, and class – I am thinking here of the meanings of the ghetto or of being on 'the wrong side of the tracks'. Location positions the subject *socially*. And, of course, the specific meanings of spaces are culturally specific and culturally mediated. The relation of self to place, then, is not natural; rather space operates in discursive fields, and our understanding of our position within certain spaces or places, and also how *others* position us, is always mediated.

Further, *where you are determines what you say*. Location makes available certain discourses and not others, certain languages and not others. The located autobiographical subject produces utterances that could not have the same meaning elsewhere. This does not mean, however, that particular locations – say, nations – produce singular, homogeneous identities. Indeed, a variety of discourses interact with the discourse of space, so that the located subject is figured at the intersection of multiple meanings.

Two post-colonial autobiographies that speak to the differences of subjects located within the same nation space are Hal Porter's *The Watcher on the Cast-Iron Balcony*¹⁵ and David Malouf's *12 Edmonstone Street*.¹⁶ Both are Australian autobiographies that inscribe the peculiarly ambivalent identity common to the settler colony – the subject as de/colonized in relation to England but as colonizer in relation to indigenous peoples.¹⁷ However, in terms of the codification of Australian national identity, they are perhaps

atypical. Both refuse what is perhaps *the* paradigmatic narrative of Australian male national identity – the story of the battler in the bush. That story has been told by another autobiographer, A.B. Facey in *A Fortunate Life*.¹⁸ Porter's and Malouf's texts are urban stories, about writers' identities formed primarily in the cities of Melbourne and Brisbane.

What I offer here is not a detailed topographical analysis of each text, but a reading of the 'I-in-place' in a couple of key passages. Although each narrator moves over time, and, thus, the scene of identity shifts, the first childhood home figures prominently in each text. The house is an important trope in post-colonial writing particularly settler colony writing, for, as Helen Tiffin has argued, it is a figure of indigenization.¹⁹ The house is also a noisy place, discursively speaking, for it is one of the key sites where first messages about the world and one's place in it are received. The house distinguishes between internal and external space, and marks off the supposedly safe space of 'home'. Each room, corridor, wall, door, and object in the house signifies meanings to the child.

Hal Porter's autobiography opens with a description of the suburban Melbourne house at 36 Bellair Street that seems to be a completely appropriate setting for the story of an 'I' that we might think of as a paradigmatic white, middle-class Australian male of European ancestry. It is from the cast-iron balcony of this house that the narrator 'watches', directing his masterful gaze upon the scene, claiming all he sees as his own special territory. What he observes is a world heavily inflected by Europe, in fact, *seen* through objects and features of landscape that refer to a geographically distant but culturally present European order of value and knowledge.

The house is filled with items that confirm that European presence: a 'richly fringed saddlebag and Utrecht velvet suite', 'Nottingham lace curtains', a 'Venetian double bed' (14) and other markers of Empire:

small silk Union Jacks, a red-blotched map of the world, Pears' Soap, Epp's Cocoa, Lea and Perrins' Sauce, a chromo-lithograph of Edward VII and Queen Alexandra, Beecham's Pills, Mazawattee Tea canisters and stamped in purple inside wardrobes and drawers, the assurance *Manufactured by European Labour Only*. (21)

Figured here is an economic structure that in part forms Australian society: Australian products, such as wool, are 'raw' and are exported; European products, which represent the finest of human achievement and define the domestic space of the middle-class Anglo-Australian home, are imported. Nothing appears to be made in Australia, including, implicitly, culture.

Similarly, the scene that the 'watcher' surveys from his balcony is identifiably European in impression. His gaze takes in the Zoo, Prince's and Royal Parks (their very names signifying their allegiance), the University, and the Exhibition Buildings, but

[t]his prospect is less colonial Australian than eighteenth-century English in quality: billowy green trees, misty towers, even a shallow winding stream that starts and ends in obscurity like a painter's device. Southern Hemisphere clouds pile themselves up, up above, and take on Englishy oil-landscape tones.... (12)

Staged here is *not* the immigrant misreading an unfamiliar New World landscape through foreign eyes, but a resident of Melbourne whose home town has been constructed and named according to English design.

The observable world of the 'watcher', then, is a world in which space has been framed and filled up in very particular ways. The 'I' occupies a central position in this world, which is, in part, constituted by the others it excludes – Aboriginal peoples or non-Anglo-Celtic immigrants with the exception of one 'Dago' homosexual who is quickly rejected. This special, self-contained world is also the only one that will allow the budding young writer to emulate European models and choose poetry over football, wine in a café over beer in the pub.²⁰ Porter's Australia is a circumscribed Australia, defined by its relations to the 'mother country', England, and to its majority white Anglo population. It is an Australia that he can comfortably occupy because he 'fits'.

David Malouf's autobiography, on the other hand, presents an 'I' whose position within the nation space is a good deal more ambivalent. Like Porter's, Malouf's text opens with an extended representation of the remembered childhood house, but this time the house is a somewhat shabby, weatherboard building situated in a disreputable part of Brisbane. The city itself is less central than Porter's Melbourne since Queensland has never defined Australia in the same way that the southern coastal regions have. And to be in the wrong house in the wrong neighbourhood in the wrong city is to be automatically marked.

The house at 12 Edmonstone Street stands in the no-man's land between train tracks. It is 'too close to the derelict, half-criminal life of Stanley Street where the abos were and to Musgrave Park with its swaggies and metho-drinkers' (4). This marginal space is where many immigrant families live, and Malouf's grandparents, non-English-speaking immigrants from Lebanon, had settled there as others had before them. Even the architectural features of the house – the verandah with its 'evocation of the raised tent flap ... a formal confession that you are just one step up from nomads' (11) and the curious space under the house that the narrator associates with exotic objects, such as a Chinese dictionary, and erotic experiences – suggest that the narrator's life contains elements that are foreign and unmentionable.

On the first page, the narrator also draws attention to the fact that the house actually stands on top of a former Aboriginal burial ground. This is an acknowledgment that his own family story covers up and writes over an/other history an/other occupation of territory. Here, then, the autobiographical 'I's' relation to his specific site is self-consciously

established: he is implicated in a process of settlement and colonization of Australia which displaced and dispossessed indigenous peoples, even while he himself is marginalized by a primarily white, Anglo-Celtic population because of his Middle Eastern origins.

The final section of *12 Edmonstone Street* dramatizes the narrator's sense of being Other, out-of-place, in his own home. As a child at a train station in 1944, the narrator observes a crowd clustered around a wagon that holds three Japanese POWs. The Japanese soldiers are both magnetic and repulsive. Everyone gathers and stares, but as they move away, they utter curses that 'were meant to express what was inexpressible, the vast gap of darkness they felt existed here – a distance between people that had nothing to do with actual space, or the fact that you were breathing, out here in the still night of Australia, the same air' (131). The narrator makes the connection here between the Japanese prisoners and his own non-English-speaking Lebanese grandfather who, in 1941, had been arrested by the Commonwealth police as an enemy alien. Those same Australians who curse the Japanese once cursed the narrator's own family – and, by implication, him. This heritage, this precise awareness of non-paradigmatic language and race, disallows a secure sense of national identity. The narrator's Lebaneseness, his difference (a difference that cannot be obliterated despite its being diluted by his English mother's blood) mark the autobiographical 'I'. And the comfortable fit between subject and place, between inscape and landscape, evident in Porter's text is not available in Malouf's.

Australian autobiographers are concerned with issues of location, for they, and other post-colonial subjects, are acutely aware of the particular colonialist project that seeks to erase the specificity of place. Always aware that in the representations of world power systems they occupy 'peripheral' locations, these writers are more likely than Europeans to describe and define their particular places because their homes can never be mistaken as the 'universal home of man'. Moreover, in the Australian context, the particularly ambivalent position of the settler in what has always been occupied, not empty, 'New World' space forces the issue of belonging. This ambivalence has fostered an industry of identity-inventing, which could be read as a will to citizenship, a desire to define the land as one's own. However, as Richard White has argued,²¹ the construction of Australian identity has generally worked to secure the interests of the dominant group. Malouf's autobiography reminds us that there is no simple overlap between the 'I' and its location. There is, however, a *necessary* relation, especially in post-colonial contexts; for subject, place, and language form a nexus that is bound up with other political issues that have to do with appropriation and abrogation of both physical and psychic spaces. The I-in-place is always a negotiated subject.

If 'mainstream' autobiography theory has not considered the subject as a *located subject*, then this forgetting is a foundational problem that points to the persistent refusal of Euro-American theory to adequately address

the imperatives of specific, local, material, historical, and geographic differences. A single poetics, a global theory, of autobiography will never be adequate. Rather, any reading of autobiographical texts must begin from the ground up and be alert both to the idiosyncratic and to the shifting nature of that ground. I am arguing that the particular geographic and micro-spatial location of the autobiographical 'I' must be read as an important element of textual identity, for all autobiographical subjects are located subjects (even European ones). Recognizing this will help us to understand that the location of the speaker – and that includes the critic – shapes all utterances and the meanings they produce.

NOTES

1. I would like to acknowledge the valuable criticism of this paper offered by Stephen Semon, Jane Watt, Dan Coleman, Kwaku Larbi Korang, Romita Choudhury, and Gerry Hill.
2. Mary G. Mason's essay 'The Other Voice: Autobiographies of Women Writers' in *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, ed. James Olney (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1980), pp. 207-35 is pivotal. See also Sidonie Smith, *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography: Marginality and the Fictions of Self-Representation* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1987) and two important collections of essays, Shari Benstock, ed., *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women's Autobiographical Writings* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1988) and Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck, eds., *Life/Lines: Theorizing Women's Autobiography* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1988). For studies that consider both gender and race issues, see Joanna Braxton, *Black Women Writing Autobiography: A Tradition Within a Tradition* (Philadelphia: Temple Univ. Press, 1989) and Françoise Lionnet, *Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self-Portraiture* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1989). For critical analyses of women's autobiographical writings from diverse cultural locations see Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, eds., *De/Colonizing the Subject: The Politics of Gender in Women's Autobiography* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1992).
3. James Olney, *Metaphors of Self: The Meaning of Autobiography* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1972).
4. Roy Pascal, *Design and Truth in Autobiography* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1960).
5. Paul John Eakin, *Fictions of Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self-Invention* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1985).
6. Egan, Susanna, *Patterns of Experience in Autobiography* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1984).
7. Paul de Man, 'Autobiography as De-facement', *MLN*, 94, 5 (December 1979), pp. 919-30.
8. Jeffrey Mehlman, *A Structuralist Study of Autobiography: Proust, Leiris, Sartre, and Lévi-Strauss* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1974).
9. Michael Sprinker, 'Fictions of the Self: The End of Autobiography' in *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, ed. James Olney, op. cit. pp. 321-42.
10. One exception to this generalization is Richard Coe's *When the Grass Was Taller: Autobiography and the Experience of Childhood* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1984). Coe does devote a chapter to a discussion of the 'small world' that is the special

habitat of the child; however, as far as Coe is concerned, the relation of the 'I' to place is primarily a function of and limited to childhood. I would also argue that Coe's formulation of the child as sovereign of his special territory is a distinctly male paradigm. Recently, American critics have begun to consider how place might influence the representation of the autobiographical 'I'. See especially the collection of essays edited by J. Bill Berry, *Located Lives: Place and Idea in Southern Autobiography* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1990).

11. Olney, *Metaphors of Self*, op.cit., p. vii.
12. Paul Carter reads the narratives written by explorers and early settlers in Australia and argues that the country was made available and inhabitable through the act of naming, through linguistic mapping. See *The Road to Botany Bay: An Exploration of Landscape and History* (New York: Knopf, 1988).
13. See Martin Leer, 'From Linear to Areal: Suggestions Towards a Comparative Literary Geography of Canada and Australia', *Kunapipi*, 12, 3 (1990), pp. 75-85 and 'Imagined Counterpart: Outlining a Conceptual Literary Geography of Australia' in *European Perspectives: Contemporary Essays on Australian Literature*, eds., Bruce Clunies Ross and Werner Senn (St. Lucia: Univ. of Queensland Press, 1991), pp. 1-13.
14. Graham Huggan argues that the construction of a conceptual map was an important means of disseminating colonial discourse, and that post-colonial writers deconstruct the map in the process of decolonization. See 'Decolonizing the Map: Post-Colonialism, Post-Structuralism and the Cartographic Connection' in *Past the Last Post: Theorizing Post-Colonialism and Post-Modernism*, eds. Ian Adam and Helen Tiffin, (Calgary: Univ. of Calgary Press, 1990), pp. 125-38. For Huggan's analysis of the map trope in two autobiographical texts, see '(Un)co-ordinated Movements: The Geography of Autobiography in David Malouf's *12 Edmonstone Street* and Clark Blaise's *Resident Alien*', *Australian and New Zealand Studies in Canada*, 3 (Spring 1990), pp. 56-65. Aritha van Herk writes of the 'Person map' constructed by the Canadian child of an immigrant family in 'Space and Landscape: A Personal Mapping' *A Sense of Place: Essays in Post-Colonial Literatures*, ed., Britta Olinder (Gothenburg: Gothenburg Univ. Press, 1984), pp. 64-71.
15. Hal Porter, *The Watcher on the Cast-Iron Balcony* (1963; London: Faber and Faber, 1986). Further references are to this edition, and page numbers will appear in parentheses in the essay.
16. David Malouf, *12 Edmonstone Street* (1985; Ringwood: Penguin, 1986). Further references are to this edition, and page references will appear within parentheses in the essay.
17. Stephen Slemon argues that the radical ambivalence of settler colony literary writing foregrounds the mediated and compromised position of post-colonial writers in their various resistances to First World master narratives. See 'Unsettling the Empire: Resistance Theory for the Second World', *WLWE*, 30, 2 (1990), pp. 30-41.
18. A.B. Facey, *A Fortunate Life* (Ringwood: Penguin, 1981).
19. See Helen Tiffin, 'New Concepts of Person and Place in *The Twyborn Affair* and *A Bend in the River*', in *A Sense of Place in the New Literatures in English*, ed. Peggy Nightingale (St. Lucia: Univ. of Queensland Press, 1986), p. 23.
20. I would also argue that Porter's models for his autobiography are European. Significantly, critics have tended to read *The Watcher on the Cast-Iron Balcony* as a local Australian version of the 'great' texts of the European tradition. John Colmer, in *Australian Autobiography: The Personal Quest* (Melbourne: Oxford Univ. Press, 1989), pp. 50-70 makes numerous connections between Porter's text and such classics as *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, *A la recherche du temps perdu*, and *Sons and*

Lovers. And Don Anderson reads Porter in relation to Joyce in 'Portraits of the Artist as a Young Man', *Meanjin*, 42, 3 (September 1983), pp. 339-48.

21. Richard White, *Inventing Australia: Images and Identity 1688-1980* (Sydney: George Allen & Unwin, 1981).