

LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

Eveline Kilian and Hope Wolf, with the assistance of Kathrin Tordasi (eds) (2016) *Life Writing and Space*. Oxford: Routledge 230 pp., £115.00 (hardback) ISBN 9781472427946.

Eveline Kilian and Hope Wolf have put together an astonishingly varied and fascinating collection of essays, featuring a range of authors writing about different genres and time periods, focusing on the importance of space – real and imagined – in the production of life writing. The book is a response to the dominance of time in theories of life writing and in the introduction, the editors argue that ‘space acts as a node around which experiences can cluster’ (2). The essays have been organised into four sections, each exploring a particular aspect of the spatial dimension in life writing.

The collection opens with the section ‘Relocating and Reimagining the Self’, a selection of essays that explore ‘the ways in which relocation might enable or force a reimagining of the self’ (8).

Matthew Ingleby’s study, ‘Multiple Occupancy: Residency and Retrospection in Trollope’s *Orley Farm* and *An Autobiography*’, begins with a discussion of the ‘relatively common phenomenon in the nineteenth century’ of writers using autobiographical spaces ‘to house characters in their novels’ (26). Ingleby reads *Orley Farm* alongside *An Autobiography* to illustrate the importance of spatiality in Trollope’s work and argues that Trollope’s novel is even more spatially autobiographical than his autobiography suggests.

In ‘Lost Cities and Found Lives: The “Geographical Emotions” of Bryher and Walter Benjamin’, Andrew Thacker explores the British writer Bryher, who legally changed her name from Annie Winnifred Ellerman to ‘Bryher’, one of the Scilly Isles. He argues that ‘to identify one’s new name with a place rather than a person indicates the strength of Bryher’s affective attachment to geography’ (42). He reads her autobiographical writings on Berlin alongside Walter Benjamin’s, and suggests that both were writing ‘from a position of geographical distance’ which ‘parallels the temporal distance of many autobiographical narratives’ (42). Thacker closes the chapter with a fascinating look at the relationship between the two writers.

Finally in this first section, Neil Vickers reads Hilary Mantel’s memoir *Giving Up The Ghost* as an exploration of the relationships connecting body and space/place, and provides a sensitive reading of Mantel’s growing awareness of her womanhood alongside the importance of key places at this time in her life. Vickers writes ‘More than once [*Giving Up the Ghost*] suggests a link between the dangers of spaces and those of men. At the same time’, Vickers argues, ‘women seem more aware of the dangers of open spaces and in some cases this expresses itself as a preference for the home’ (57).

Section II, ‘Traversing Spaces and Texts’ features the ‘common denominator’ of ‘movement. Essays here ‘deal with narratives that are structured by the mobility of their protagonists and their traversing of physical spaces as well as literary texts and genres’ (9).

One of the great strengths of the first essay in this section, ‘Literary Configurations of the Peripatetic’, is the considerable time period it covers. Helga Swalm begins her reading of ‘the connection of the peripatetic and “autobiographical geopoetics”’ with Wordsworth’s *Prelude* and demonstrates the importance of walking in establishing a ‘spatio-temporal nexus of biographical and poetic meaning’ (87). She moves on to Wordsworth’s contemporary Thomas de Quincey, and then examines Laurie Lee’s *As I Walked Out One Summer Morning*, before concluding with a section on Robert Macfarlane.

In “‘The mystery-magic of foreignness’: Mr Isherwood Changes Places’, Eveline Kilian argues that Christopher Isherwood’s ‘autobiographical texts refuse closure and present a subject that is elusive, deliberately ambiguous in its referentiality to the author and under permanent (re)construction (89)’. Kilian’s exploration of Isherwood’s work is organised by specific places – London, Berlin and America—and she highlights the unreliability of Isherwood’s multiple autobiographical selves across his writing.

Martin Klepper and Alexandra Wagner’s chapter ‘Critical Topographies in Depression Era Lives’ focuses on life writing either produced during, or reflecting upon, the Great Depression, and the two authors examined are Richard Wright and Jerre Mangione. They argue that for both writers, ‘the context of the Great Depression was instrumental in their choice of career’ and that ‘the act of writing also entails the effort to open, to re-define and to (symbolically and materially) appropriate spaces, which had been traditionally closed to the ethnic and racial other’ (108).

Section III, ‘Contested Spaces, Precarious Lives’, takes us on a journey from Algeria, to New Zealand and London, and on to the trenches of World War I. The authors in this section engage with ‘gender, ethnicity, migration and/or the condition of (post)coloniality in life-writing texts in different historical and cultural contexts’ (12).

In ‘Postcolonial Literary Cartography: Writing the Self in Contemporary Algeria’, Elizabeth H Jones examines Fredric Jameson’s and Brian Jarvis’s work on postmodern cartographies, which both focus on Western spaces, and argues that ‘citizens of the margins are clearly also prone to experiencing disorientation and alienation in contemporary space’ (124). She brings together work by Caren Kaplan and Jarvis to read texts by two Algerian women writing in French, Maïssa Bey and Malika Mokeddem, thereby providing an interesting insight into the intersections of space, self, identity, and gender.

Katrin Tordasi explains in ‘Inhabiting the In-Between: (Mis)placing Identity in Katherine Mansfield’s Notebooks’ that Mansfield’s notebooks defy categorisation and that it is ‘near impossible to decide which real-life accounts are fictionalised and which story drafts are autobiographical’ (138). She also explores the errors made by the various editors of the notebooks in relation to Mansfield’s views on her home country of New Zealand; this sequence of error-correction-further correction serves to heighten the fragmented nature of Mansfield’s own sense of place. In the analysis of Mansfield’s formative years and travels in New Zealand, and her adult life in England, Tordasi suggests that the notebooks create ‘a multiply determined narrator who – much

like a figure composed of many shifting atoms – develops a kaleidoscopic approach to life writing’ (148–9).

In the final essay of this section, ‘Isaac Rosenberg’s Life in Letters: Between the ‘coil of circumstance’ and a ‘place for poetry’, Anna-Julia Schoen argues that in Rosenberg’s letters written between 1911 and his death in World War I in 1918 he ‘created spaces for writing and responding to poetry in a cultural context that was socially and ideologically structured to prevent him from doing so’ (151). Rosenberg’s letters show an attempt to negotiate his spatial and societal circumstances; Schoen suggests that the material act of writing ‘about the physical situations he is in’ (162) seem ‘crucial’ to his well-being and ‘sanity’.

The final section, ‘Space and the Form of Life Writing’ features essays which ‘show how a focus on space, rather than time, has impacted upon the form of life writing’ (14). The chapters here are all very different from each other, and feature life writing practitioners as well as scholars.

Frédéric Regard’s thought-provoking essay, ‘Spaces of Intervention: Hélène Cixous’s *Portrait of Jacques Derrida as a Young Jewish Saint*’, centres around his idea of a ‘corpus’ – archival matter, which has ‘a life of its own’ (169) and which becomes a subject itself in life writing. Cixous’s *Portrait* features an example of a ‘corpus’, with the inclusion of an unpublished Derrida manuscript: a handwritten autograph. Plates from the original texts are helpfully incorporated into Regard’s chapter and they demonstrate how Cixous engages with Derrida’s text with the publication of her annotations.

While digital technologies have provided new spaces for life writing, Hope Wolf points out some of the pitfalls of the digital archive in ‘*Strandlines: Eccentric Stories, Thoroughfare Poetics and the Future of the Archive*’. Wolf’s chapter details a fascinating project, *Strandlines*, organised by King’s College London, which sought to bring together a collection of life writing focused on the Strand. Contributors could upload stories, images or videos to the website, although Wolf points out that many contributors did not interact with the website itself; some participants agreed to have their ‘story’ uploaded after taking part in outreach sessions. She writes ‘the contributions that most markedly contested the questions, taxonomies and spaces provided by the project organisers were gathered through face-to-face discussions (193), a much-needed reminder that the digital space is not necessarily accessible for all.

James Attlee takes a different approach to life writing in ‘The Columbus of the Near-at-Hand: The Author as Traveller’. As an author, Attlee examines his own experiences of moving through space and the impact this had on the writing of *Isolarion: A Different Oxford Journey*, *Nocturne: A Journey in Search of Moonlight*, and *Station to Station: Searching for Stories on the Great Western Line*. These books all involved Attlee putting himself ‘physically somewhere else: moving through space, whether locally or internationally, propelled in a variety of ways from walking to high-speed trains’ (198).

The collection concludes with Clare Brant’s ‘There’s No Space Like Home’, a moving, third person account of a house fire and the subsequent grief. Brant’s fascination with etymology is evident here, in her exploration of words beginning with home, and with the prefix ‘re-’. The most evocative section is the visit of the loss adjuster, to whom she has to describe the contents of the house: ‘How mad this is: I am describing things not here, phantoms, ghost objects’ (218). Brant’s

chapter is enriched with references to spatial theory and literary texts to make an intertextual exploration of the meaning of home.

The weakness of this collection is the lack of a concluding chapter, or at least a brief piece to tie it all together. The essays featured here are all so different that a conclusion would usefully allow the reader to reflect on the impressive scholarship on display. The final section of the book, 'Space and the Form of Life Writing', is also the loosest in terms of adherence to the overall section heading, which does have a rather dizzying effect. However, this book is an impressive achievement in its range and diversity, and makes an important contribution to debates on the importance of space in life writing.

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