

AUSTRALIAN AUTOBIOGRAPHY: THE POLITICS OF MAKING POSTCOLONIAL SPACE

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In this paper, I want to argue that postcolonial settler-invader autobiography is a textual negotiation of-and-on an ambivalent site of utterance. That ambivalent space is a physical and discursive space between indigeneity and empire. In order to make this argument, I need to mobilise a number of different theoretical arguments, so I am going to do this in an abbreviated form, trying briefly to mark out the positions through which I need to move.

The main argument of this paper is that postcolonial space is both a physical and discursive space; and that it enables the production of a particular type of subject, or rather it provokes the articulation of a seemingly different subject position. Autobiography, I will argue, is a genre in which postcolonial strategies of representation are particularly evident, and those strategies of representation are invoked not only through the *subject* of autobiography, but also in and through the forms of its coming into textualisation. This paper will concentrate solely on the autobiographies of settler subjects because I believe that very different issues and political agendas are at stake in indigenous autobiographies.

Subjectivity: The Ambivalence of the Settler-Invader Subject

Given that we are all practiced postmodern/poststructuralist interpreters of texts and cultures, we can readily assume that the postmodern subject is inevitably split or fissured, that fundamental divisions between what may once have been called reality and representation are self-evident. However, I would argue that the postcolonial environment engenders its own particular split in settler-invader subjects.

This is because the space occupied by the settler subject is ultimately situated between empire and indigene, between these two boundary markers of ideology and history. The intrusion of the settler subject into the postcolonial space of Australia, for example, both physically and discursively places settler subjectivity between empire and indigeneity. In doing so it lays the foundations for settler claims for authenticity to each of these positions. These opposing poles of indigene and empire are perhaps best conceived of as textual and intellectual markers of boundaries or territory. By this I mean to suggest that these are not implacable concrete structures of cultural difference, but rather that they are positions of considerable cultural authority, against which and through which the settler subject must make alternative identifications and identify *its* alterity.

I am grappling here with a problem that faces settler-invader theorising as a whole. It is tempting to reiterate glibly that colonialist invasion *produced* this split in the previously stable imperial subject. However, this perspective would depend on the simplistic assumption of a reified European self that is inherently unified and unproblematic.

I think we can theorise the particularity of the postcolonial split in two ways. Firstly, I

would suggest that the moment of imperial invasion produces a profound crisis in prior imperial certainties, certainties of empirical technologies and of self-knowledge. In this way it provides the space for imperial anxieties and uncertainties to emerge. In postcolonial space, European assumptions and controls were not reinforced by social structures, or other technologies for managing subjectivity. Combined with the unnervingly close proximity of pre-existing indigenous peoples and social organisations, this produced a confused, interstitial space, where renegotiations of the self are not only possible, but urgently necessary. And in this context, renegotiations of the modes of representing the self become crucial.

Secondly, I would go on to argue that it is in the textualisation of imperial anxieties about the self that genuinely different and difficult manoeuvres must be made. The point at which the imperial subject attempts to textualise itself in the new colonial environment is the point where questions of representation, of identity, and of colonial difference collide. This textualisation of colonial identity is explicitly at stake in autobiography, where the newly colonial self is under discursive construction.

The settler subject's difference from these two opposing positions of indigeneity and empire means that the representation of settler subjectivity is inevitably a project to find a voice or form in which to express this difference. That is, caught between two different (if problematic) claims to authenticity and cultural authority, settler identity must continually assess its own worth, continually rehearse and perform itself on the stage of colonial encounters. And it continually looks to appropriate the authority of these appealing binaries of indigene and empire. These binaries provide comforting or *dis*-comforting limits to the space in which settler subjectivity can play itself out: bumping between the apparently fixed poles of self and other, empire and indigene, the settler self might hope to produce or find meaning.

Settler-invader articulation is therefore inextricably bound in with the 'old' modes of discursivity and subjectivity, the subjects and forms of empire, given its genealogical heritage. However, it is also bound with a definition *against* or claim *to* the indigenous. Settler subjects have always tried to 'indigenise' themselves in order to claim legitimate possession and domination of colonial land, in the twin processes of denial and displacement. Of course, this is not to imply that the cultural power of these two positions has ever been equivalent—given the physical and psychic force of imperial invasion, indigenous modes of subjectivity and culture have only gradually and recently gained much 'cultural capital'.

Autobiography: An Explicit Textual Negotiation of Settler Ambivalence

Autobiography is essentially a process of writing the self. It is therefore explicitly a way of finding out how to talk about subjectivity. The self-reflexive nature of the autobiographical genre continually calls into question the suitability or the capability of form to hold the story of a life. In contemporary autobiographies, this meta-autobiographical questioning has almost become an essential, structural (or more cynically, a gestural) part of writing autobiography. Robert Dessaix's *A Mother's Disgrace*, for example, carries an epigraph from Jeanette Winterson—'I'm telling you stories. Trust me'. This highlights the narrativity and fictionality of his autobiographical text. Thus the narrative is continually self-interrogative, the structure questioned by the speaker of that ultimate tall tale—the life narrative. Boundaries between subject and narrative break down—the way of telling stories about one's self is to ask how adequately to speak about such a subjectivity. In other words, the subject becomes the narration itself. In the discursive space of postcolonial autobiography, the two imperially discrete structures of narrative and form collapse into each other.

I would argue that this is particularly the case in settler-invader autobiographies, because these autobiographical subjects are peculiarly concerned with making a discursive space, whilst struggling to delineate a physical space. In this way, settler autobiographies can be read as attempts to produce a physical space through a discursive construction of appropriate settler space.

It is in that 'settling in'—the attempt to inscribe individual (settler) lives into the colonial environment of land and discourse that the struggle for representation and authority

occurs. The postcolonial 'I' must re-present itself through the interpolation of imperial activity and indigenous dispossession.

This move into discursive subjectivity is where the real cultural work of settler invasion is carried out. This is particularly so in the textualisation of the autobiographical subject. Here, the self is literally being navigated through the treacherously unstable grounds of colonial difference. It is in settler autobiography that the imperial subject can be seen working out or working through its identity and its politics.

So What?

Having manoeuvred my way through these questions of subjectivity, narrativity, and form, I'd like to spend the final part of this article contextualising my argument.

Given the current explosion of the 'autobiography industry' in publishing houses and in popular reading, it seems reasonable to suspect that some important cultural work is being done here. Autobiographies are published and sold in vast quantities, from the political self-moments of Bob Hawke and Graeme Richardson to such 'literary autobiographies' as those by Patrick White and Drusilla Modjeska. These latter types form my primary research focus. Autobiographies such as these, I would suggest, perform important cultural activities, particularly in postcolonial nations such as Australia and Canada, where they in fact continue an established tradition of central autobiographical works.

Autobiographies have always occupied an important cultural position in postcolonial 'second world' nations. The centrality of Susanna Moodie's writings in Canada, for example, is mirrored in New Zealand by the writings of Lady Barker; and in Australia by the writings of Mrs Aeneas Gunn and by more recent autobiographies such as those by Henry Lawson, Hal Porter and George Johnston. These autobiographical texts are important to national self-fashioning, providing the historical 'clothes' for the modern nation to inhabit.

I see autobiography as a genre which is central in the construction of nations. Individual autobiographies inscribe individual life-narratives, which accumulate to inscribe a national discourse. This 'imagined community' reverberates in the national consciousness, providing a set of texts and subjectivities which identify a nation. In Australia, this is particularly evident in the range of 'Aussie battler' autobiographies, including A.B. Facey's *A Fortunate Life*, Jill Ker Conway's *The Road to Coorain*, and, one could argue, any number of recent political memoirs, particularly those by Labor politicians. These texts find their mode of autobiographical identification through the mobilisation of a whole series of cultural mythologies inherited from nineteenth-century Australian stereotypes. Often it is evident that the autobiographical subject is explicitly trying to fit their personal narrative into these pre-existing narratives of national subjects.

These national subjects and narratives now become the 'imperial' genre to be troubled by a new crisis in self-representation. As I will go on to argue, this issues in anxious representations of difference in recent settler autobiographies.

As a brief example of these kinds of 'national narratives' and the way that they are played out on and in individual life narratives, I would like to focus quickly on two recent autobiographies. The first of these is A.B. Facey's *A Fortunate Life*; the second is Merv Lilley's *Gatton Man*.

A.B. Facey's *A Fortunate Life*, first published in 1981 by Fremantle Arts Centre Press, has become part of publishing folklore, as Patti Miller's article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* magazine pointed out recently. Selling over 600,000 copies, this autobiography has had real cultural agency. As a textual touchstone for the 'little Aussie battler', Facey's life-story has circulated extremely widely and successfully. Facey lives and works on the land in various properties throughout Western Australia at a variety of manual labouring tasks. He fights both in the travelling boxing troupe and in the famous Australian campaign at Gallipoli. Returning to Australia, he attempts a return to a rural lifestyle; marries a good Australian Girl Guide; and lives the rest of his life working for the Tramways. The proportions of his life-text, though, don't exactly match with the chronological sweep of his 83 year life: the first 21 years of

Facey's life are represented by 280 pages of text (in the Penguin edition), the next 62 years by merely 52 pages. Facey represents his youthful self through a discourse of narrative and 'character' which is so particularly Australian, and so immediately recognisable to readers familiar with the Lawson/Paterson/Furphy narratives of Australian masculinity, that 'chicken and egg' arguments start to enter my mind. Which did come first: Facey's 'life history' or the form in which he was able to make narrative and personal sense of it? The story of the young man travelling and working throughout the hardship of rural Australia occupies over 4/5ths of this 'life story'—the next story of the 62 years spent with his wife and young family in urban Australia, working at a series of different jobs within the Tramways department, and attending formal education for the first time in his life, is virtually absent. Why?

I would suggest that Facey's text can be read as an exemplification of the type of national subject or narrative that I have been discussing above. The 'appropriate' portion of Facey's history is fashioned by and constructed through narratives of Australian identity which permeate both literature and popular consciousness. The 'inappropriate' 62 years of Facey's life form a mere coda to what is portrayed as the 'real' story of A.B. Facey as textual subject. This final, marginal section is even entitled 'Another Life' (279). The extreme narrativity of this autobiography, though, is concealed through modes of realism. Conversational language and forms of story-telling produce an effect close to oral history. The Penguin edition reprints maps throughout the text to trace Facey's travel and work through rural Western Australia and Gallipoli, providing additional effects of verisimilitude. After Gallipoli, however, there are no maps—Facey's 'other' life is both virtually unspeakable and off the map. Facey literally does not know how to tell his life-narrative outside of the national narrative.

Merv Lilley's *Gatton Man* was published in 1994, and is something of a generic hybrid. I am here claiming it as autobiography, although it is also either a psychological biography or work of investigative journalism about his father, William Lilley. Merv Lilley is convinced that his father was the perpetrator of the Gatton murders in his youth. Just as a quick note of historical background: on Boxing Day 1898, Michael, Ellen, and Norah Murphy, twentysomething brother and sisters of a local family, were murdered in a paddock in Gatton, a rural centre about two and a half hours drive from Brisbane. The two sisters had also been raped. A lengthy investigation and much community speculation failed to uncover the murderer, although a travelling worker, Thomas Day, was suspected. Merv Lilley is sure that his father was this 'Thomas Day', and his autobiography attempts both to historicise his contention and to convince the reader.

Lilley tells the story of his life with his family in rural Queensland, and sketches in as much of his family history as he has access to. A tea-traveller and farmer, William Lilley probably appeared to those outside the family as another A.B. Facey—a physically strong and resourceful country boy. Like Facey, he served his country in war-time (here, the Boer War) and returned after a short period in Africa to his rural lifestyle, married and had a family. In his son's telling, however, the narrative of Aussie Battler, of the man on the land, is violently deconstructed. The physical and emotional violence of farm life is portrayed repeatedly and graphically, and the forms of abuse—emotional, physical, and sexual—apparently relished by William Lilley spelt out. Lilley's awareness of the male-dominated brutality engendered by rural life results in the renaming of his father—William Lilley is rarely named in the text, but instead referred to as He or Him.

Lilley in this way attempts to ascribe to his father a subjectivity which could have been mis-recognised as that of the Aussie battler. His textual strategies are not disingenuous, though. He explicitly highlights his dissatisfaction with that kind of national narrative:

What I'm saying about the sadistic life on dairy farms is not of an isolated nature in these times depending, I believe, on the nature of the head of the family, though not a lot has been written about it as yet. Writers are probably not coming from those areas, don't have the wish to put it down or someone up there in the publishing world is protecting the Australian image they want to endure and have nurtured in a literary fashion since the onset of colonisation. Inevitably home truths will be told to

some degree sooner or later and I hope to be doing my bit, in fact or fiction, Barbara Baynton-style. My belief in mateship and the brotherhood of man finds it hard to stand up to searching scrutiny... (15).

What I am wanting to demonstrate through this text is the alternative that Lilley provides to Facey. Faced with the same question—how to represent rural male settler subjects—they come up with very different subjects and solutions. Lilley explicitly wrestles with the lure of the national battler narrative. The inadequacy of this narrative to express his father-subject, despite its pervasive appeal, means that Lilley must constantly wrest this life-story from the over-bearing national one, and in doing so he significantly rewrites monolithic structures of nation-ness. For Lilley, this story is not an isolated transgression—he writes:

I see it as a folk story. I see this book as a series of folk stories. Learning is for a lifetime. We are taught to become deceitful little boys and girls whose folk stories have already been written for us. In our case...we didn't have any knowledge of folk stories, but they have a way of making themselves up from real life (17).

Imperial invasion undoubtedly had an immediate effect on the 'pioneering' autobiographer. I would also suggest that the modes and tropes of representation articulated and explored in early postcolonial autobiographies still operate. Many of the discontinuities, fissures and generic restrictions experienced in early autobiographies at the point of the discursification of the subject continue to trouble modern autobiographical texts. Many of these modern texts continue to articulate a different subjectivity—whether it be one of ethnicity, sexuality, or gender. Autobiographies such as those by Robert Dessaix and Eric Michaels explore the articulation of a gay male subjectivity, openly 'outing' the problems of traditional asexual autobiographical subjects. These texts, like many others, continue to reconfigure ideas of the imagined community, adding alternative subjectivities to the national vocabulary.

The negotiation, then, of postcolonial identity and inscription are played out in very specific ways in settler autobiographies. For me, the most interesting aspects of these texts is their discursification of the settler subject. The ambiguous political positioning of settler subjects in second world colonies produces extremely anxious negotiations of the self and of its representation in text. Through these rehearsals of self-fashioning and self-portrayal, the postcolonial nation emerges, these 'flaws in the glass' mirroring the ongoing search in settler colonies to establish authenticity and authority.

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