Placing Autobiography in Geography
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Edmund Bentley said, "Geography is about maps/ But Biography is about chaps." Pamela Moss would disagree in every way. For her, human geography is also about biography, and autobiography, the study of which should not be confined to only half of humanity. To make her case, she asked nine human geographers at different stages of their careers, only five of whom are chaps, to write autobiographically.

The essays are mixed, and range from self-serving to humourous to emotionally charged. The prose is sometimes awkward, with a number of contributors at critical moments resorting to theoretical exposition rather than telling us about themselves. Indeed, Moss says in her summary chapter, "having read and re-read the collection several times over, I'm still unsure whether I know these contributors" (page, 195). Perhaps this is inevitable. Our socialization within the academy is often about expunging the personal, using third-person prose, and second-hand scientific rhetoric. If I had a dollar for every time an undergraduate asked me if they are allowed to use the first person in their term paper I would be a rich man.

But things are changing. As a result of work in cultural studies, anthropology, feminism, and science studies that challenge ideas of objectivity and rationality, there is recognition, as Sharon Traweek (1992: 435) puts it, that "the mythological abstract, absent, omniscient narrator must be replaced by other kinds of narrators and narratives, especially by stories about us finding sense in the mess of everyday life, about situated knowledge." One of those kinds of narratives is autobiography. Once the idea of "telling it as it is" is given up, it is necessary to say something about oneself, and one's place. This is the task of the essayists.

Following Moss's useful introduction, Anne Buttimer is up first. In spite of her own considerable accomplishments in documenting the lives and times of well known and lesser-known geographers, her essay is flat, and reads like an extended curriculum vitae rather than a life lived. A posting here, an award there, a conference presentation somewhere else: it is a chronology not a narrative. John Eyles's chapter that follows is again less a narrative than in his case a harangue about the sorry state of current human geography, and which he believes is "largely irrelevant" with "the world hav[ing] passed it by" (page 61). Given the collection's intellectual intent, one wonders why Eyles bothered to contribute. Kevin Archer's essay is the first that provides a real sense of a life lived. Propelling his narrative is the tension between "the oppressive … monklike [sic] existence demanded by … [an] academic career" (page 68), and real life including having children and a partner who is also an academic. In many ways, Archer's life is the 1990s version of the experiences of six mid-career woman geographers that Janice Monk recounts in her chapter, and which compellingly shows that you can't separate home life from work life, autobiography from the pages of scholarly journals. The same point is made in Larry Knopp's chapter that deals centrally with his sexuality, in particular, his coming out, and local gay activism in Duluth where he now lives. I enjoyed the essay, but it was one where theory fractured the narrative, disrupting the life rhythm told. In contrast, there was unbroken rhythm to Ian Cook's chapter, and which for me was the best in the book. You wouldn't have wanted to be his Ph.D. supervisor, but Cook's autobiographical account of writing

his “Grumpy thesis” (its title) is often hilarious, sometimes sad, and always compelling. The essay should be required reading for all entry graduate students everywhere, although it may well send enrolment plummeting. I also enjoyed very much Rachel Saltmarsh’s life as “a coal miner’s daughter.” It was the only chapter with edge and passion. You could see her seething as she remembered undergraduate encounters with youthful British middle-class twits. Michael Keith once wrote a paper urging “angry writing.” Saltmarsh’s piece is it. The other essay in the collection by a graduate student is Robin Roth’s. But it is barely autobiography, and is instead a theoretical exegesis on development research, and colonizing and less-oppressive spaces. Also mainly on development research, and with only a tad more autobiography, is David Butz’s paper about his work in Shimshal, Northern Pakistan. The chapter is interesting, especially his use of autoethnography, that is, how colonized subjects represent themselves in terms used by the colonizers, but the almost absence within the essay of the life of Butz itself makes me think it is in the wrong volume.

Darwin (1974: 68) wrote in his own autobiography “my mind has become a machine for grinding general laws out of a large collection of facts.” The essays gathered here belie that belief; there is always a ghost in the machine, and that ghost is the life history, memory, personality, and emotional deportment of the researcher themselves living out their lives in particular places. Far from exorcising such a spectre, the autobiographical essays in Moss’s volume show just how important it is to face up and write about such haunting.

References

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