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Martina Horáková

Inscribing Difference and Resistance. Indigenous Women's Personal Non-fiction and Life Writing in Australia and North America

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“Is the whole book really written in such a strange style?”, one of my colleagues remarked on having read excerpts of Australia’s most popular autobiography, Sally Morgan’s *My Place* (1987). This colleague took part in a university seminar on ‘history, autobiography and gender’ and the extract I chose to be read in the group was the only Indigenous Australian text and the only text, I hasten to add, that was not European. The strange style eventually confused all of my colleagues, at first because the text was conceived of as being too narrative, too dialogic and too fictional. Instead of having discussed the construction of gender and race in Morgan’s book, we embarked on a discussion of genre, history writing and form: “How is it possible to remember so many dialogues?”, asked one student. Another suggested reading it less as an autobiography than a piece of history. Yet another thought of it as a document of anti-colonialism that ought not be approached from a Eurocentric perspective.

Martina Horáková’s study, *Inscribing Difference and Resistance*, tackles such questions and would have proven a helpful guide not merely to our discussion on genre and form but also to the different thematic facets encountering readers of Indigenous non-fiction. The book compares Indigenous texts from the United States, Canada and Australia and falls into two major sections – textual claims to difference, on the one hand, and resistance, on the other hand. The former claim is analysed in non-fictional texts by Paula Gunn Allen, Lee Maracle and Jackie Huggins that rely heavily on personal experiences yet are not autobiographies in the narrow sense. In the section on resistance, the author directs focus on the more autobiographical texts by Doris Pilkington, Shirley Sterling and Anna Lee Walters. While the more autobiographical texts seem less experimental in genre than their non-fictional counterparts, Horáková argues, they are similarly communal, exhibiting dialogic rather than individual selves and hearkening back to personal and family experiences. Drawing on Philippe Lejeune’s theory of the autobiography as a conflation of the names of the author, the narrator and the protagonist¹, Horáková discusses the limitations of European genre definitions, preferring instead nomenclature that is more inclusive of concepts of inter-generational selves, the re-writing of history and the formation of theory – hence her reading of Indigenous autobiographies as life writing and non-fiction.

The author traces the complexity of Indigenous life writing through scriptotherapy (the efforts of individual and communal healing from colonial trauma through

1 Philippe Lejeune, *Le Pacte autobiographique*. Paris: Seuil, 1996, p. 26.

writing and publishing), the re-writing of history and the articulation of Indigenous feminism. Given the study's exclusive focus on women's texts, the actual relevance of gender becomes less evident for scriptotherapy and the rewriting of history. Although the author mentions particularly female experiences of colonialism described in the texts under study – for example strategies of naming white fathers as a means to highlight gendered aspects of colonialism – gender differences between Indigenous men's and women's life writing could have been analysed more rigorously. The ultimate strength of Horáková's study lies in her cogent analysis of reading Indigenous women's texts not primarily through feminist theory but to decipher them as autonomous formations of sovereign and utterly Indigenous forms of feminism. Drawing on the tensions between Indigenous female intellectuals and white feminists, the author understands Indigenous feminist tradition – however complex and innovative – as grounding in personal experiences of history and sociocultural contexts that function as the source of any Indigenous (feminist) theory. While the formation of feminism in Indigenous non-fiction is complex – ranging from conceptions of an Indigenous (pre-contact) gynaeocracy, the construction of female genealogy and claims to difference from white women – Indigenous feminism is deeply rooted in the autobiographical. As the author analyses, "in order to gain liberation, Native women [...] must critically examine the conditions of their lives and the internalization of racism and sexism. One of the ways to initiate this process is [...] to approach it from a deeply personal point of view and lived experience" (51). Indigenous feminism is neither considered merely oppositional to white feminism nor treated as homogeneous but seen as particularly *Indigenous* in the sense of relating to sovereignty, land rights and cultural difference, rendering Indigenous feminism also distinct from third world and Black (American) feminism.

The transnational comparison between writings from the United States, Canada and Australia also works extraordinarily well for the central arguments of re-writing colonial history, the tackling of trauma and theories of feminism. Anxious to differentiate between the individual sociocultural and historical contexts, Horáková shows the importance of comparative Indigenous studies to understand sovereignty and cultural difference in an intrinsically global colonial environment. *Inscribing Difference and Resistance* is a meticulous and careful study that evades simplistic dichotomies and moralising polemic but offers a nuanced, convincing and highly innovative reading of select Indigenous women's texts as exhibiting Indigenous feminist thought.