

A Generation of Memoir: *Soft Weapons: Autobiography in Transit*

Gillian Whitlock

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Reviewed by Dorothy F. Lane, Luther College, University of Regina

In an earlier book, Gillian Whitlock (Professor of English at the University of Queensland, Australia) explored the challenges of reading colonialist women's autobiography (2000). In this most recent examination, Whitlock focuses once again on autobiographical writing, but this time underscores the way recent life narrative have become "more implicated in history, politics and the conduct of a war than had seemed possible in previous ways of thinking about autobiography in the world" (200). Subaltern writing in particular cannot be critiqued without attention to the way these texts are marketed for and consumed by the West. Her honestly ambivalent and open-ended argument provides a valuable background for Western readings of life narratives, particularly in relation to the Western invasion and occupation of the Middle East post-2001. The study is eloquent, provocative, and accessible to a wide audience; indeed, it has already appeared on course syllabi at various universities. With its focus on multiple kinds of texts (many of which would be labeled as "popular") and its short chapters, the book's impact is both understated and profound.

Whitlock begins with the notorious "cyberlebrity" named "Salam Pax" (also known as the "Baghdad Blogger") whose web journal *Where is Raed?* was compiled and published under the title *The Baghdad Blog*. Its emergence in 2002 is noteworthy as a starting point for Whitlock, while she ends with the "autographic" text by Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis* and *Persepolis 2*. Between these "bookends," she moves smoothly through examinations of autoethnographies by Afghan women, especially those using the burka as a removable boundary co-opted by Western readers; to the narratives of trauma written by refugees and asylum seekers during the war on terror; to romance and so-called "harem literature;" to the popular memoirs later unmasked as false; to the possibilities and hazards of journalists' memoirs; to Azar Nafisi's *Reading "Lolita" in Tehran: A Memoir in Books*. Each chapter makes for discrete reading, while the interweaving of the sections, and the insights Whitlock brings to the study of life narratives in general, prove invaluable.

In her examinations, Whitlock distinguishes between the "peritext" (contained between and on the covers of the texts) and the "epitext" (interviews, correspondence, reviews, commentaries). This binocular attention emphasizes the "material processes and ideological formations surrounding the production, transmission, and reception" of the texts. For

instance, in “Arabliish,” she focuses on the new technologies associated with the internet, and their potential to facilitate testimony and witness accounts. In its examination of authoethnographies of Afghan women, “The Skin of the Burka” attends to peritext acknowledgements, dedications, covers, titles, pseudonyms, maps, and notes, as well as to epitext interviews, reviews, articles, readings, letters, and diaries. Most compelling to me was the examination entitled “Read My Lips,” which confronts the question of how refugee stories that are not appropriated by the West, or where the image of the asylum seeker is dehumanized or ignored, become increasingly attentive to “body language” in which trauma is inscribed on the body. Ironically, however, this “language of desperation and last resort” or “testimony incarnate” only confirms the revulsion of the Western witness. “Embedded,” a chapter that makes use of ethnographic theory to reflect on journalistic writing, is similarly powerful. In all these chapters, the seemingly-contradictory tugs of despair and possibility are tangible; for instance, Whitlock communicates her hope that the “sticky presence” of the victims of war will itself be “embedded” in the American experience of Iraq. Moreover, Whitlock does not avoid the irony and potential complicity of such a critical examination, or that readers of her book are tempted to notice the peritext and epitext of her own study. In this way, she builds on Graham Huggan’s *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (2001), yet ultimately retains the possibility of a narrative “that decenters us and allows us to think beyond ourselves, implicated in lives that are not our own” (13). The urgent call to scholars to take on the work of interrogating the “emergence and vanishing of the human” (14) is powerful indeed.

In general, Whitlock’s assessment of American attitudes is severe, though similar criticism could be directed at contemporary Australia; she does, in fact, incorporate anecdotes related to images in local bookstores and the media. Yet the almost-formulaic castigation of the “American story for an American audience” is particularly palpable in her examination of Anne Garrels’s *Naked in Baghdad* (2003), which tends to generalize “the American experience of Iraq” (160). Another potential limitation of the book is its necessary attention to the immediate and the selected: to texts that are multiplying rapidly, often with little or no critical review. As such, the book would be a different entity were it revised a year from now, or even if it examined other texts. The haunting questions, however, along with Whitlock’s hope that contemporary autobiographical forms can be “potent yet flawed weapons for cross-cultural engagement and the pursuit of human rights,” underscore the book’s importance in postcolonial theory and indeed in the examination of cross-cultural dialogue in general.