

Carol E. Leon, *Movement and Belonging: Lines, Places and Spaces of Travel*. New York: Peter Lang, 2009. 255 pp. ISBN 978-0820472546.

The movement and migration of people as a result of political conflict, decolonisation, economic hardship, and career and social advancement set the tone for the twentieth century and also the present. Everyone seems to have a relative, a friend or a neighbour who is studying, working or living “overseas,” in the Malaysian manner of speaking. Today, in an age when practically anyone can travel (to borrow the famous tagline of a certain well-known budget airline), home is no longer as attractive as the world out there. One’s identity is no longer dictated by geographical boundaries; one can always become a citizen of the world.

The condition of the “constant traveller” is enabling to some, disabling to others. Reading this book during the unfolding of the “refugee swap” issue involving Australia and Malaysia, I found myself reflecting that the act of travelling involves grievous dangers and risks. The traveller-writers featured in this book are middle-class, educated, male, and have the choice of travelling where they please – privileges that set them apart for introspective journeys to interrogate the notions of “identity,” “home,” “sense of belonging” and their relations with space/place. For them, travelling outside their normal geographical boundaries does not involve a choice between life and death, freedom and oppression.

Leon’s approach in her book is to juxtapose texts by well-known migrant writers writing about South Asia – namely V.S. Naipaul and Michael Ondaatje – with travel texts about Australia by D.H. Lawrence and the Australian writer Patrick White. This selection of texts is curious and promising. Each writer’s representations of the travel experience in the Indian subcontinent and the Australian continent are then read with the aim of exposing the “travel lines” that run through them and how these lines are a means of negotiating identity and home via space/place. Leon defines “travel lines” as follows:

The whole idea, indeed the very act of travel is, to a great extent, encoded in geometrical figures of lines, surfaces, contours, triangulations, in short, arrangements in a spatial context. The most fundamental aspect of travel is the movement or motion that inheres in these lines of travel. The lines can be mobile and fluid, constituting what I would call “real” or “actual” travel or they can be fixed and divisive like fault lines. Travel lines bring places and spaces into being. These lines can integrate self to a place/space creating dynamic, vital connections between the two or they can alienate by subjugating place/space and appropriating people. (22-23)

Thus Naipaul's and Ondaatje's narratives – *An Area of Darkness* and *Running in the Family*, respectively – represent the different ways in which such travel lines intersect their journeys and establish each man's place in the world. Ultimately, the achievement of Naipaul's text, according to Leon, is to claim "the 'passage' to India as... homespace... not the point of arrival nor the point of departure" (66), whereas Ondaatje's genre-bending narrative is a text that undoes the European conventions of mapping via its lack of conclusive answers to Ondaatje's search for his family. The emphasis here, Leon argues, is to look at the lines or passages between the points of departure and arrival to obtain a more creative perspective at issues such as selfhood, a sense of belonging and home.

However, there is a nagging sense of discomfort with the "neither-here-nor-there" worldview of the postmodern condition exemplified by Naipaul and Ondaatje that the reviewer cannot quite discard. While *Running in the Family* succeeds in re-making the colonial map of Sri Lanka, the text's alternative vision of "swirling signifiers of words and images [which] constantly defer and displace the quest for knowledge, understanding, and, ultimately, identity" (83) seems hollow. Naipaul and Ondaatje come across as orphans constantly in search of home and a place/space to belong to but never really finding it.

The Australian half of this book yields more interesting readings. According to the author, *Kangaroo* by D.H. Lawrence and *Voss* by Patrick White are narratives that are ahead of their time, already concerned with identities-in-travel long before Naipaul or Ondaatje. These were written at a time (or about a time) when Europe was consolidating its domination of the "empty" spaces of Australia. Australia itself confounded colonial efforts at defining it; it was "imagined and Othered as the inverse image of the northern hemisphere, which was only confirmed when European explorers discovered its oddities, such as the egg-laying platypus" (107). The Englishman in Australia faces an Other – the white Australian settler – who resembles him and is yet, also *not* him; this unsettling experience in such an unconventional territory radically alters his notions about identity.

Where *Kangaroo* treats Australia as an Other space, *Voss* reclaims it from the former's colonising view. The desert, rather than an "empty" or "blank" space, is transcendental, where the journey of the fictional nineteenth-century explorer, Voss, takes him into a new mode of viewing space and selfhood. The narrative "examines the idea of boundaries and how they must be simultaneously acknowledged and surmounted before the self can glimpse the truth of itself" (168). One feels that Leon's book is on firmer ground here, as the implosion of fixed boundaries and centres of power is shown as shaping the purposeful traveller and the rewards of travel.

Movement and Belonging is recommended to readers and researchers looking for alternative frameworks for understanding and experiencing space – among others, the author uses concepts such as “ethical travel,” rhizomatic space and the nomadic worldview. At a time when travel has become the new mode of living, this book makes one re-consider one’s relations with home, the world, and with one’s Others.

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