

Belonging to Place and Space

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Carol Leon. *Movement and Belonging: Lines, Places and Spaces of Travel*. New York: Peter Lang, 2009. 255 pages. ISBN 978-0-8204-7254-6.

Leon's *Movement and Belonging: Lines, Places, and Spaces of Travel* is a timely and refreshing study of concepts of space, place and borders in the context of travel, movement and belonging. Beginning with her own personal reminiscence of place, Leon launches into a theoretical survey of concepts of space, place and borders to trace how spaces perpetually "gesture" towards places, which are transformed through the imprints of the subject/Other. While her study acknowledges the underlying importance of the "imagination", she underscores the pivotal importance of the "real" sites, however temporary, which own us and to which we belong.

Of particular significance in Leon's argument is the role of the travel motif in the search and construction of identity. She argues that self and place are intimately interlocked in the construction of self and identity and that through negotiating place the self accrues "embodiment" which empowers the self and enables writing/rewriting of identity. In the travel encounter, belonging is negotiated through the encounter with the spatial configurations of space and the experiential contours of place, negotiated through the mutual gifting of self and Other. The "traveller", Leon argues, "attains self-knowledge in the encounter with both the human and natural other and in the mingling of difference, feels belonging" (205).

Both place/space and travel lines are seen as sharing a reciprocal relationship. [...] only when space is continuous and dwelling and travel meld in a seamless movement from one space to another can representations of self and the Other be free from limiting paradigms and the self attains at least a degree of self-knowledge (36).

In framing her study, Leon brings into focus concepts of space and place that have in recent years privileged ideas of fluidity, flux, fragmentation, discontinuity against the background of postcolonial and postmodern theories of self and place. The elliptic signs of the self-in-transit are traced in this study with a vigour that returns us to an understanding of place/self that is mutually grounded in the Other. In this sense, Leon's study moderates the imaginaries that continually defer our sense of "home" by drawing on the experience of place as integral to being and identity.

In foregrounding theories of space and place, region as opposed to “concept” of regions, Leon establishes a coherent trajectory to her overarching argument that the self can “belong to place in a vital, dynamic sense”. Given the emphasis on the loss of roots and the construction of imagined geographies in current scholarship, Leon’s study challenges the impulse to overlook the fundamental value of belonging in a metaphysical and elemental sense to the experience of places through which we live and move, places through which we are defined and which are defined by our personal pilgrimage and encounter with difference and movement.

Leon’s choice of texts here incorporating Naipaul’s *An Area of Darkness*, Ondaatje’s *Running in the Family*, Lawrence’s *Kangaroo* and White’s *Voss* demonstrates her deliberate attempt to celebrate the blurred distinctions between fact and fiction and enables this study to speak to the current discourses on narrative/memoirs/life-writing through the travel motif. The value of this study is in its emphasis on the “real” sites by which we are marked and changed through her incorporating and opening up for investigation the psychological and spiritual terrain of the travel motif. By valuing the “real” sites and the “travel-lines” between place and the embodied subject, Leon reconciles the modern condition of the “passenger-in-transit” to value his/her travel/migratory roots moment by moment.

There is surely something to be valued in turning to the experience of the body reconciled to its environment because to privilege the dialectic of self and place/space is to endow the self with presence, offering possibilities for self-understanding(203-204).

Leon’s study invites us to enter into the “interstitial” spaces negotiated through the textual voices and labyrinth the author/characters/travellers must negotiate, to demythologize the binaries by which we are divided to interrogate fixed notions of place and borders and overcome essentialist notions of belonging.