

## Book Reviews

### GIVING MEANING TO THE TECHNOLOGIES OF THE FEMALE SELF

*Women, education and the self: a Foucauldian perspective.* Maria Tamboukou, 2003. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan; ISBN 1403901236, xii + 202 pp., £45.00 cloth.

I welcome the opportunity of reading and reviewing this book for a number of reasons. First, I have become fascinated by the use of autobiography as a research source, and its possibilities and limitations; in particular, how it may be challenged by concepts of shattered personhood and fragmented subjectivities that form the core of postmodern and post-structural scholarship. A writer such as Maria Tamboukou, who attempts to put the two together, is therefore particularly appealing, even more so as she has taken women's autobiography as the focus of her study.

To get the main judgements out of the way and before I go on to comment more specifically about the book, this is an impressive, scholarly, well-written work by a writer-researcher who has a particularly extensive knowledge of the work of Michel Foucault. She also has a love of, and playfulness with, the written word, which comes out in the many artful turns of phrase that lighten the script; 'unbearable heaviness of intimacy' (p. 114) and 'dangerous "liaison" of maternal nature and teaching' (p. 140) being two such instances. One of the interests of the volume is to see how it turns out, that is to say, how a narrative style can be employed (narrative here referring to how meaning is characterized) within a framework that itself denies the coherence of narrative! Another interest is in the outcome of a work that so openly and forcefully ties itself to one theoretical source, however rich. A third is of seeing how concepts of theory are handled by someone whose main research subjects engage mainly with the practice of, for example, teaching, living, loving. In short, can the book deliver on its ambitious promise of identifying and giving meaning to the 'technologies of the female self' as evident in selected women teachers' autobiographical texts by means of a particular (Foucauldian) methodology, that of genealogy?

The book is divided into five chapters. The first maps the range of Foucault's theoretical and empirical work, drawing on this to outline the intellectual and methodology trajectories taken by the research. The second and third chapters identify particular emergent themes; first, the personal and social spaces represented in the women's writing, for

example, in their wish to escape the restrictions of home and in their imagining a new form of living, here termed heterotopias; and, secondly, their engagement with sexuality and passion of one kind or another. Chapter Four turns towards the present in constructing what Tamboukou terms the dispotif of genealogy, in order to trace the different heterogeneous elements that illuminate and specify women educators' position more recently, while Chapter Five returns to the more theoretical emphasis of the first chapter to document what technologies of the self might mean for women.

Tamboukou uses the 'female self' of the women teachers, first, as a theoretical hypothesis for analysing the process of specification and problematization of women in discourse; and secondly, as a political hypothesis to support women's real and multiple struggles, historically and today. More specifically, she asks who or what were the first women educators and university and college students, and how did they envisage themselves so that they were able both to live within and yet, in their heterotopias, beyond the limits set by society? She positions the women as imagining and actively seeking a future outside the conventional boundaries of late nineteenth-century (English) womanhood.

The Victorian era was saturated by a multiplicity of discourses, many times juxtaposing and contradicting each other. It was amidst this war of discourses that the female self sought to forge a place for herself, to negotiate subject positions, make life investments, create new patterns of existence (p. 104). Tamboukou's aim in using genealogy is to avoid a systematization of its characteristics; rather she focuses on genealogy as a set of methodological strategies for research that are 'attentive to detail, many of them having remained unnoticed and unrecorded in the narratives of mainstream history' (p. 10) and that 'depend on a vast accumulation of source material' (Foucault, 1986, quoted on p. 11). The life writing and autobiographies of the women in her study are viewed as expressions of being, imagining and resistance, rather than as a means of conveying a lived reality. Moving within, but also beyond the textual realm, genealogy places the autobiographical practices of writing the self in a cartography [Tamboukou also refers to herself as a cartographer] of polyvalent and multifarious historical transformations, depicting the conditions of possibility for the 'figure' of the woman to emerge (p. 34).

The conclusions that Tamboukou comes to regarding how the women in her study governed themselves concern, not unexpectedly, the multifaceted and complex nature of their lived and imagined lives. Grappling with the fragmentations of her experience, she uses, among other strategies and practices, the technologies of the self to weave together different patterns of her existence and form temporary unities and parodic coalition.

The self she creates is fluid and nomadic. It is a self in a non-stop process of becoming (p. 178).

So did the book deliver on its promises? In some sense, yes but also, no. It certainly gives us an insight into Foucauldian scholarship and the kind of theorizing that lies behind doing history from a genealogical perspective. It also offers us an interesting insight into the lives of a range of women educators who were feminist innovators and activists of their time, and whose influence is still with us today. But, while I enjoyed to some extent the theoretical bits, my interest was much more engaged with the more conventional historical employment and discussion of the autobiographical texts, particularly inevitably perhaps, concerning their loves and obsessions. I became not a little irritated sometimes with the continual reference to what Foucault might have thought in the context of the specific study, and the implication that there is a right way to think about and 'read' the texts. In this regard, the book goes against the principles of Foucault's work, one might think, which is to open up rather than close down interpretation. There are also minor editorial irritations, such as a tendency towards repetition (e.g., Foucault's failure to engage with women in his work), and generalization (e.g., 'it is well known that ...'), overuse of italics as emphasis, and editorial omissions (e.g., absence of reference to Noddings in the index).

However, this is a very rich source, and the limitations of a short review have not allowed me to pick up on a number of other issues and ideas that were stimulated for me by the book. For this, I am most grateful to the author and this must also stand as a testimony to the book's value and quality.

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#### **AUTONOMY, BENEFICENCE AND JUSTICE IN LIFE WRITING**

*Vulnerable subjects, ethics and life writing.* G. Thomas Couser, 2004. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press; ISBN 08148863X, 256 pp., £10.95 paper.

The vulnerable subjects, who are the focus of this work, are vulnerable to harm through the writings of others. Their vulnerability to misrepresentation often arises through specific internal impairments that render them unaware of how they are being represented and incapable of either consent or protest. An example of such a vulnerable subject would be the novelist Iris Murdoch, and the portrayal of her in the books (and film) by her husband John Bayley.

Other subjects may be vulnerable through external circumstance or situation, and the ethical issue centres on betrayal of trust. The underlying