

2011

Review of: Laura J. Beard, *Acts of Narrative Resistance: Women's Autobiographical Writings in the Americas*

Jeanie Murphy
Goucher College, jeanie.murphy@goucher.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.asphs.net/bsphs>

Recommended Citation

Murphy, Jeanie (2011) "Review of: Laura J. Beard, *Acts of Narrative Resistance: Women's Autobiographical Writings in the Americas*," *Bulletin for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies*: Vol. 35 : Iss. 1 , Article 11.
<https://doi.org/10.26431/0739-182X.1024>
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.asphs.net/bsphs/vol35/iss1/11>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Association for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Bulletin for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies* by an authorized editor of Association for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies. For more information, please contact jesus@udel.edu.

Beard, Laura J. *Acts of Narrative Resistance: Women's Autobiographical Writings in the Americas*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009. 199 pp.

In this cross-cultural study of women's life writing, Laura Beard affirms that autobiographical expression can be a politically emancipating act. Particularly in the case of those who are writing from the margins of the dominant culture, the development of one's own voice on the written page allows for an intersection between political discourse and artistic creation. With this perspective as a starting point, Beard explores how women writers from Argentina, Brazil and Canada have reinterpreted the genre of autobiography in order to construct and assert their own identities in opposition to imposed ideologies and cultural expectations.

The text is organized into three parts; each section pairs two female writers whose work reflects an innovative approach to autobiography. Through the forms of the meta-fictional autobiographical novel, the family saga as national history and the testimonial account, the authors included in the study demonstrate an ability to challenge preconceived notions of what constitutes autobiography and, in the process, create a literature of resistance.

Part one, entitled "Addressing the Self", is an analysis of Helena Parente Cunha's *Woman between Mirrors* and a series of three novels by Luisa Futoransky. Beard focuses her reading of the texts on the way in which they reflect on the process of writing. She asserts that this meta-fictional approach to the writing of a fictionalized life story allows for self-reflection on the part of the authors as they explore the ambiguities and contradictions of identity. The resulting self in each of the narratives is not unified but rather fragmented and malleable. Through their fictionalized autobiographies, Parente Cunha and Futoransky problematize self-representation and demonstrate the many ways in which identity can be changed and modified, thereby questioning the traditional conventions of autobiography. Furthermore, Parente Cunha's novel and Futoransky's trilogy also examine the issues of gender construction and the role of women in patriarchal societies. In this way, their works combine inner reflection with sociopolitical critique.

Ana Maria Shua's *The Book of Memories* and Nélide Piñón's *The Republic of Dreams* are paired in the second section. Straddling the border between autobiography and family saga, the two works also offer a new

perspective on national history. While Shua's text highlights the importance of maintaining traditions among Argentina's Jewish community, Piñon's story traces a family history from Galicia to Brazil. The focus on immigration in each of the texts and the inclusion of the politics of the newly adopted country, allows for a blending of both private and public stories. As a result, Shua and Piñon create narratives of resistance; they challenge the dominant narratives of their respective nations and overcome the exclusion of particular groups' experiences. Their family sagas explore the question of national identity at the same time that they emphasize the importance of memory and storytelling in the creation of self. Additionally, the multiple narrators in both texts confirm the role of community in the construction of one's own sense of being.

The final section of Beard's text focuses on two Indigenous Canadian texts, Lee Maracle's *Bobbi Lee: Indian Rebel* and *My Name Is Seepeetza* by Shirley Sterling. Understanding the term "testimonio" as it refers to those life narratives that expose the oppression suffered by certain groups and their struggle for sociopolitical change, Beard places the works of Maracle and Sterling within this genre. Their stories are personal yet also reflect the collective memory and identity of an entire community. Maracle's text describes how writing has enabled her to work through the pain of a troubled childhood while Sterling tells the story of a Native American girl forced to renounce her cultural identity through the experience of the Indian residential school system. Both texts present a different view of Canadian history and offer private stories as representative of broader sociopolitical issues.

The fact that the texts studied by Beard in *Acts of Narrative Resistance* are not autobiographical in the strictest and most traditional interpretation of the genre is essential to the author's reading of them. She ably explains how the texts challenge and, therefore, expand and enrich the established notions of autobiography. The questioning of the genre along with the exploration of topics such as the construction of identity and gender, the role of alternative voices in history and the struggle against racism allow for the texts to be read as instances of resistance literature as well. Beard's approach has a very solid base in literary criticism drawing on the theories of Barbara Harlow, Sidonie Smith and Phillipe Lejeune, among others. Moving beyond this framework, Beard's comparative study of women's autobiography in the Americas is an insightful and important addition of the fields of literature, Latin American and Native American Studies and Feminist Theory.

Jeanie Murphy
Goucher College