

## Introduction

Marie-Claire Barnet and Shirley Jordan

*C'est dans une maison qu'on est seul. Et pas au-dehors d'elle mais au-dedans d'elle. [...] Ma chambre ce n'est pas un lit, ni ici, ni à Paris, ni à Trouville. C'est une certaine fenêtre, une certaine table, des habitudes d'encre noire, de marques d'encres noires introuvables, c'est une certaine chaise. Et certaines habitudes que je retrouve toujours, où que j'aille, où que je sois, dans les lieux mêmes où je n'écris pas, comme les chambres d'hôtel' (Duras, 1993, 13, 15-16).*

Women's identities are frequently linked with a sharp sense of spatial awareness. We could begin, in feminist terms, with the stark binary: confinement/freedom. From Virginia Woolf's seminal "room of one's own" (1929) and "les lieux (d'écriture) de Marguerite Duras" (1978, 1993), to progressive re-conceptualizations of the domestic and public spheres or liberating creations of fictional landscapes and utopias, the history of female-authored theory and fiction is strewn with examples of the re-appropriation and re-imagining of space. Intellectually invigorating concepts such as the *entre-deux* and the nomadic subject<sup>1</sup> continue to challenge spatial norms, providing new cognitive places to inhabit and renewing women's sense of situatedness. In sum, developments in feminine spatial thinking and practice are an integral element in much of the most influential women's writing of the twentieth century and beyond.

As the title of this special issue suggests, the essays collected here are attentive to theories and ideologies of space and place,<sup>2</sup> as well as to the landscapes that are encoded and developed in great detail in much contemporary French and francophone women's writing. They draw out some of the most salient examples of spatial reconfiguring, exploring a cross-section of the experiences, imaginings and representations which have emerged in the wake of post-modern, post-feminist, post-colonial and post-Holocaust currents, both in and beyond metropolitan France. They suggest new kinds of experience and new forms of both empowerment and constraint. They remind us that space is an especially fertile category to think with. Importantly, they cover assessments of and anxieties about space that are generic in emphasis, as well as numerous spatial perceptions that are markedly inflected by gender: in other words, these are writings whose meaning is intimately connected to, but cannot be reduced to, explorations of feminine identity.

"Spaces" and "places" are defined broadly by our contributors, and by the authors they study. They may be physical, social, textual, linguistic, or a combination of these, and they often incorporate "home" as a reference point. Evolving conceptions and ideologies of home are accordingly analysed here and the concept is problematized and presented as inevitably elusive. As Worton highlights, **Nathalie Rheims's** work, unexpectedly fused with mysticism and esotericism, brings a new resonance to dwelling, echoing philosophical concepts of home and linked to the unconscious and feminine identity, as revisited by feminist psychoanalysts. Rheims's female protagonists inhabit

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1 See Braidotti (1994). See also Simon and Lasserre (eds) (2007).

2 As Rye's essay in this volume points out, distinctions between place and space are not consistently drawn. Where, for example, Marie-Claire Ropars-Wuilleumier (2002) sees place (but not space) as invested with subjectivity, for Michel de Certeau (1990) space is palimpsestic, associated with experience and memories, or 'practice'.

personal spaces which are simultaneously strange and culturally recognizable and which defy or extend our view of the house as a safe refuge.

The possibilities for dwelling “at home”, considered in several essays, are contrasted with un-homing, homelessness and exile. Holmes on **Nancy Huston** argues that if displacement is a contemporary theme for international writers of both sexes, representations of exile by French speaking women writers who live outside their country of origin bring out a particular emphasis on exile’s ambiguity as both life-affirming and extremely painful. The advantages and multiple paradoxes of a self-imposed exile are affirmed in fictional and non-fictional works and Holmes shows that for Huston heredity and place of origin are not regrettable geographical limits, or cultural and linguistic constraints, but exhilarating (if ambivalent) sources of renewed creativity, signifying gain as well as loss. The outsider/insider and periphery/centre dichotomies of exile are seen in Jordan’s essay to underpin much of the writing of **Marie NDiaye**, whose investigation of space, home and un-belonging is imbued with ethical undertones as well as drawing on and re-working traditions of presenting space in fantastic literature. C. Jones’s essay on **Régine Robin** focuses on exile and analyses Robin’s often painful self-reinvention through physical space as well as through the spaces of language (Yiddish, Québécois, German, French). Journeying and mobility are freshly conceptualized through re-appropriations of travel and, as K. Jones shows in her essay on **Leïla Sebbar**, through a new and explicitly postcolonial focus on women’s travel narratives. Simon’s essay further expands concepts of mobility in her wide-ranging study of Deleuzian *déterritorialisation*, of “décentrement” and “réorientation”, in the writings of **Marie Darrieussecq**.

**Marie Desplechin**, as Barnet argues, brings out mental maps and a whole patchwork of reworked metaphors in order to charter old and new territories of the unconscious, while questioning the very place and status (quo) of men’s and women’s relationships in our (double, dubious) postmodern world. Boundaries between life and death, here and there, the real and the phantasm, may, if a sense of “liquid modernity”<sup>3</sup> prevails, be more fluid than ever. Moreover, as **Rheims and Desplechin** point out through their unusual “à contre-courant” texts, such categories cannot be confined any longer by our old configurations, or relegated to Freudian corners or fantastic folk tales.

The spaces of the body and of the text are also considered in this collection. Rye analyses the ways in which **Christine Angot** re-works an established binary of particular importance to women - that of the public/private divide - in texts which are seen to occupy an uneasy space between private and public, and which inscribe and make public that most private (because most shameful) of sexual acts, incest. She explores the ways in which Angot creates theatrical sites of performance. She also investigates the necessity of our reading “under” and “between” to determine the meaning of the text. Jordan teases out **NDiaye’s** very different, but also ever-present, preoccupation with the spaces of taboo “beneath” language; K. Jones and Jordan explore in their respective essays the meanings generated by the spatialized text-objet which incorporates visual as well as verbal material.

Places and landscapes are never background details or mere settings in the works studied: they are also critical to the trajectories envisaged for women. They are numerous. They include highly specific geographical places, often weighted with historical or subjective meaning: for instance, **Angot’s** insistence on non-fictional spaces (Sicily, Paris, Nancy, etc.) which bolster the wavering sense of veracity of her writing; or **Robin’s** evaluation of Montréal and its spaces of cultural pluralism. As Worton shows in his analysis of **Rheims’s** “metaphysical thrillers”, they include significant buildings –

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3 See Zygmunt Bauman on ‘Liquid Modernity’ and other precarious, ‘liquid’ concepts such as time, space, life and love.

notably the “refuge”, discussed by Heidegger and Blanchot, and questioned by Irigaray. The subtle traces of the construction and preservation of the refuge are subject to various interpretations which Worton discusses.

Recent explorations of place are seen to re-address familiar concepts such as *non-lieux* and *lieux de mémoire*, both of which are questioned and powerfully re-aligned by several of the writers studied here. **Leïla Sebbar’s** emphasis on trans-national spaces, for instance, are shown by K. Jones to displace national narratives and turn “non-spaces” such as shantytowns or housing estates into personalized and highly charged Algerian and Franco-Algerian spaces of memory. **Sylvie Germain** too brings us to ask how we can rewrite and where we can locate another story of memory (between mnemosis and amnesia), or another (un)common history of Europe. Murphy explores how **Germain’s** themes, as well as her strategic, irregular usage of the written page, help to create multidimensional texts, which reshape all fragments and *non-dits*. The author’s many-layered narratives and principle of active disconnection echo the oscillation between subjectivity and objectivity which lies at the heart of Nora’s *lieux de mémoire*.

A number of new women writers develop particularly elaborate visions of landscape, sometimes, like **Maryline Desbiolles**, linking it closely to identity. Desblache analyses Desbiolle’s unusual focus on the natural world, underscoring certain risks run by the author: that of being suspended in history, or caught up in nostalgia or in a Hegelian sense of pre-aesthetic, natural beauty. She demonstrates how **Desbiolles’s** remarkable take on environmental themes renews representations of nature, re-aligning the feminine and the natural environment in the process, and demonstrating a special connection to the non-human.

Rodgers’s study of **Paule Constant** provides a further instance of the ways in which women writers develop fantastic environments and elaborate symbolic landscapes in order to give accounts of contemporary unease - in this instance unease about perceptions of the Outsider. She detects a Foucauldian emphasis on disciplinary space in *Sucre et secret* (Constant 2003) as well as following feminist geographers in her emphasis on both the interconnection between space and patriarchal power, and the ongoing need to interrogate established boundaries. The issue of boundaries re-emerges as **Marie Desplechin** invites us to explore anew the local, but socially distant and (un)popular, *banlieues* as (ideally) uneasy territories of self-discovery and unexpected *lieux d’entente et d’écoute* of others. Questioning her own subjective (and literary) intentions, she revisits our all too familiar clichés, reassesses urban pasts and myths of planning strategies, and leads us closer to the lived experience of the present inhabitants. She also urges us to go beyond the socio-cultural and political constraints of our private/public spaces and to outgrow our dated sense of “national” subjectivities. Finally, as Simon shows, **Marie Darrieussecq’s** fiction explores the ways in which individuals in contemporary settings seek to orientate themselves. Darrieussecq demonstrates a detailed phenomenological concern with being in space, a scientific fascination with spaces of the body, and a global spatial consciousness, her landscapes ranging from Paris to Australia to Argentina to the South Pole.

It is intended, then, that this special issue of *Dalhousie French Studies* will attest to the fertile experimentation with spatial paradigms that is such an integral part of recent literature in French by women authors and that serves to mediate our understanding of the world we inhabit. The interview with which we conclude gathers together important reflections on our theme from conversations held with Marie Darrieussecq in 2006. Of the authors studied here Darrieussecq is perhaps the most consistent in her spatial situating of women (and, as she insists herself, of men), as well as in her broader preoccupation with space and the global scope of her reflections on our shared environment. Her thoughts echo the threads of investigation that run through many of the

preceding essays and lead us to consider what further issues pertaining to space, place and landscape are beginning to impose themselves as the new millennium gathers pace.

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