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Book Review: Geography and the art of life

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Geography and the art of life. By Edmunds Valdemārs Bunkše. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press. 2004. xvii + 122 pp. $36.95 cloth. ISBN 0 8018 7722-9.

It should come as no surprise that autobiography has become an increasingly common genre in academic geography. Why should geography be immune from the cultural forces that celebrate the self in all areas of contemporary life? Also, current methodological orientations in the discipline give added legitimacy to such work. The best examples include those providing personal insights into the creation and formation of different schools of thought or the intersections of self, place and landscape. At the other extreme are attempts to mask revenge as criticism and indulgence as insight. The work under review thankfully fits within the first group. Edmunds Bunkše has written a graceful and engaging story of his search for both hearth and cosmos, or, in his terms, his experience of both home and road. He describes this work as a geography of heart and soul that gives witness to his childhood experiences during the Second World War and explores the artistic side of geographical sensibilities. The result is a thematic narrative of place, space and self that is both erudite and accessible.

The narrative begins with dramatic moments of impending peril during the later stages of the Second World War, and provides a moving account of his family's experiences in the chaotic wartime conditions of his native Latvia. Descriptions of his family's flight from their home, refugee camps, tense encounters with advancing and retreating Soviet and German armies and a pervasive sense of physical threat are framed by a child's view, an undifferentiated mix of innocence, fear, bewilderment and curiosity. Bunkše's retelling of these events includes vivid geographical settings, suffused with an adult's understanding of landscape and nature. The author then takes the reader through equally geographical descriptions of his experiences as a refugee and his struggles to find the security of home in the foreign landscapes of North America.

His later return as an adult to Soviet-controlled Latvia illuminates the contradictions inherent in the experience of exile, that is, a longing for 'home' confounded by a confusion about its location and a complex identity as a 'spatially fractured being'. A quest for re-creating the remembered harmony of landscapes that exhibit both the closed secure places of his early childhood and the open expanses of the Latvian countryside leads both to a wanderlust and to an urge to remake places. The thread that connects the various parts of the narrative is the search for 'protected intimacy within immensity', or what could be viewed as a desire for the experience of secure enclosure amid open spaces.

The final chapter brings together the themes of travel, a brief mention of an early interest in architecture and the desire for creating places of 'protected intimacy'. Bunkše describes here the building of an ideal house, one based in the abstract poetics of Gaston Bachelard. This curious project of materializing Bachelard blends the exile's search for home, the architect's interest in the enclosure of space and the humanist geographer's concern with place-making. It is the most conceptual part of the book,

but, curiously, also the most personally revealing section of an otherwise somewhat distanced memoir.

The book is a pleasure to read, modest in expression and large in its scope. It reinforces the association of humanism with the search for universals in human experience, but the nuances of the narrative belie the cliché about geographical humanism as an uncomplicated nostalgia.

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The past is not dead: facts, fictions, and enduring racial stereotypes. By Allan Pred. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press. 2004. 280 pp. £49.50 cloth; £16.50 paper. ISBN 0 8166 4405 5 cloth; 0 8166 4406 3 paper.

The past is not dead continues Allan Pred's excoriating critique of Swedish racism, begun in his previous work, *Even in Sweden* (2000). His new book focuses on two interlocking montages: a study of an African-Caribbean slave, Badin, who was brought to the Swedish court from St Croix in 1758 and who died in Stockholm in 1822; and a (shorter) study of present-day racial stereotyping, illustrated by the public exhibition of Hartkopf's Wax Cabinet, originally displayed in Stockholm in the 1890s, at the National Historical Museum in December 1999. Pred uses the techniques of montage and juxtaposition throughout the book, with comments from contemporary refugees and immigrants set alongside fragments from Badin's nineteenth-century recollections and other historical extracts. The author has made great demands of his publisher through the use of different typefaces and font sizes, indented passages and italics – and they have responded with aplomb.

This is a scholarly work, with over 60 pages of notes, infused with a quiet rage as Pred relentlessly demonstrates the persistence of earlier styles of racist thinking in the present day. While Pred has scoured the archives to establish as much as can reasonably be deduced about his subject's biography, Badin remains a somewhat ghostly figure (also known as Adolph Ludvig Gustaf Albrecht Couschi, his birth date never accurately established). Badin featured in a play by Strindberg and in a number of popular novels. His portrait hangs in the National Portrait Gallery in Stockholm. He was a contemporary of Linnaeus and participated in contemporary debates about racial character and climatic determinism. But, with so little hard evidence to hand, much of the book relies on historical reconstruction and conjecture, signalled by the repeated use of interrogatives ('Was it not more than likely that . . . ?', 'Is it not very possible . . . ?'). Yet it is precisely such ambiguity that is central to Badin's place in the racist imaginary, where the combination of desire and dread, fear and fascination, play off these 'fictionalised facts and factualised fictions', reinforcing the power of collective memory and selective amnesia. The book closes with a discussion of the lack of public outcry over the 1999 exhibition which included the horrifying display of the skin of a black African 'native' and an encased 'Negro penis', evoking memories of the 'Hottentot