

Not-Quite-Forgotten Modernism: The Life Writing of Neith Boyce

Julie Rak

Carol DeBoer-Langworthy, ed. 2003. *The Modern World of Neith Boyce: Autobiography and Diaries*. Albuquerque: Univ. of New Mexico Press. 360 pp + xvi. Illus.

THE activity of reading, collecting and then publishing so-called “minor genres” of writing by women, including diaries, letters and unpublished autobiographies, is itself a feminist act that recognizes how some women’s lives—and their life writing—can so easily be forgotten (Kadar 1982). This has been the case with Neith Boyce (1872–1951), who at the height of her career was a very successful American modernist writer and journalist. Boyce also helped to found one of the first theater collectives in the United States, the Provincetown Players, which encouraged experimental stagecraft and play writing, including the early work of Eugene O’Neill. With her husband, the writer Hutchins Hapgood, Boyce moved in avant-garde intellectual circles in Greenwich Village; in Europe, she counted Gertrude Stein and Mina Loy among her friends. Although she published several novels, several collections of shorter fiction, three plays, poetry, and dozens of stories and articles for magazines like *Vogue*, *Harper’s Weekly*, and *Scribner’s Magazine*, today Neith Boyce is remembered—if at all—according to DeBoer-Langworthy, more for her unconventional marriage to Hapgood than for being a

female modernist and New Woman making her living and supporting her large family by writing and thinking as independently as she could. Although some feminist scholarship in theater studies seeks to restore Boyce's importance in the development of the American theater (Black 2002; Tancheva 1997; Radel 1990), DeBoer-Langworthy's contribution focuses on Boyce's life and writing as exemplifying a type of modernism that deserves to be remembered. DeBoer-Langworthy does not stress Boyce's marriage as central to understanding her, as Ellen Kay Trimberger did in her edition of Boyce and Hapgood's writing titled *Intimate Warriors: Portrait of a Modern Marriage, 1899–1944* (1991).

The Modern World of Neith Boyce itself could be called an act of life writing: it is the result of Carol DeBoer-Langworthy's effort since 1975 to bring Boyce back into public view in light of what she calls "the ongoing reassessment" of modernism and the role its minor figures played in the movement's politics and cultural life (1). It is also an act of love. DeBoer-Langworthy clearly is fascinated by Boyce and wants others to see why her life and writing are worthy of consideration. To this end, DeBoer-Langworthy has chosen to publish a short autobiography by Boyce about her early life and two short diaries Boyce kept while she was in Italy, in 1903 when she traveled with Hapgood and again in 1914 when she traveled with some of her children at the onset of World War I. DeBoer-Langworthy precedes these works with a lengthy and detailed introduction to Boyce's life that aims to provide context for her writing as it argues that Boyce's work deserves serious consideration. DeBoer-Langworthy concludes that "I no longer see her [Boyce] as a tragic, 'forgotten,' or second-rate writer" (35). Neither, she suggests, should we, but I am not so sure that is how or why Boyce should be remembered now.

I heartily agree with DeBoer-Langworthy that Neith Boyce's life was exceptional for a woman of her time. Named by her mother after Neith, an Egyptian goddess, Boyce was born in 1871 in Indiana, the second of five children born to Henry and Mary Boyce. At the time, Henry Boyce was working as a literary agent and the young family enjoyed a comfortable, upper-middle-class lifestyle. In 1880 when Boyce was only nine years old, all of her siblings died in a diphtheria epidemic. This catastrophe completely changed the course of her family life: as Boyce writes in her autobiography, her mother never really recovered from this loss, remaining ill for years and traveling with Neith from one family member's house to another until Henry bought a ranch in California and sent for them (DeBoer-Langworthy

65). Boyce herself was haunted by guilt because she was the sole surviving sibling. According to Boyce in her autobiography, her parents never directly discussed this loss with her, even though she felt it deeply and longed to share in it. She writes that “it was impossible to say anything about what she felt, they could not be reached. It was all part of the thing which had befallen, which was never explained and could not be” (49). Although they had two more children afterwards, Boyce felt that the bond she shared with her parents was deep, if unspoken. As a result, she felt cut off from them and deprived of their love and affection. As an adult, she saw this lack as the source of her reserved nature as well as her desire to write about other people’s emotional entanglements rather than have any of her own (DeBoer-Langworthy 49–50, 76).

At her new home on the ranch, Boyce enjoyed three years of outdoor life with minimal supervision. She was allowed to read any books she pleased and rode her horse anywhere she wanted. During this time, she began to write and to nurture what would become her lifelong love of independence. Boyce idolized her father, who had served as a captain in the American Civil War. In 1884, he moved his family to Los Angeles—then a booming town where the Gold Rush era was still within living memory—and started a successful newspaper, the *Los Angeles Times* (DeBoer-Langworthy 78). Henry Boyce published many of his daughter’s first stories, and as DeBoer-Langworthy takes care to point out, Mary Boyce also encouraged her daughter to publish her work (11). This time of prosperity for the Boyce family came to an end in 1886 when Henry Boyce left the *Times* after a disagreement with his partner, went into real estate speculation and was forced into bankruptcy after a poor real estate deal. In the same year, Boyce’s attempt to run for public office was foreclosed by a scandal when it was discovered that he had had another wife and child, and that he had committed bigamy. Henry Boyce was cleared of the bigamy charge, but still faced a scandal: in 1887 he went on trial for financial impropriety. Although the case was thrown out, Boyce’s career in Los Angeles was at an end, and so the family moved to Boston in 1891 (DeBoer-Langworthy 10). There, Boyce’s mother became associate editor of *The New Cycle* (later *LOTOS*), the official magazine of the General Federation of Women’s Clubs, a women’s rights organization. Boyce published poetry in this magazine. When the family moved again to New York City in 1896, Boyce got her first job in journalism at Lincoln Steffens’s muckraking magazine *The Commercial Advertiser*. As she recounts in her autobiography, Boyce lived on her own for the first

time in New York, thoroughly enjoying the independent life she led as a journalist. She began to publish short stories and nonfiction pieces in major literary magazines, many of which promoted modernist ideas. In New York, Boyce lived as a New Woman of the time: single, self-supporting, with a developing writing career and free to roam one of the most vibrant cities in the world, Boyce looked back on this period of her life as the time she was most able to pursue her own career goals and explore new ways of thinking and being (DeBoer-Langworthy 151–55).

In 1898, Boyce met Hutchins Hapgood, a coworker on *The Commercial Advertiser* who was also a writer. Although Hapgood pursued Boyce romantically, Boyce had reservations about love and marriage because she did not want to lose her independence and had no desire to live a conventional life. Hapgood also wanted to have an egalitarian, “modern” marriage and promised Boyce that she would be able to pursue her career and keep her surname. Influenced by the ideals of companionate marriage as a partnership of loving equals, Boyce decided that she could marry Hapgood, and they began a life together in 1899. As Trimberger discusses at length, Boyce and Hapgood were attracted to the bohemian subculture of Greenwich Village in New York, which at that time consisted of activists like the anarchist Emma Goldman as well as intellectuals and artists, including Boyce and Hapgood’s friends Mabel Dodge, Susan Glaspell, Eugene O’Neill, and Theodore Dreiser. Before World War I, the community in Greenwich Village was “caught up in an intense period of political, social, and personal change” (Trimberger 1991, 3). Its members were interested in alternative political movements and social experiments, often at the same time. Many of them, including Boyce, were interested in psychoanalysis and helped to popularize it, using Freud’s ideas to argue against puritanism in social and sexual life. They eagerly read the work of Edward Carpenter and Havelock Ellis on the importance of sexual pleasure for both partners in marriage. Some, like Hapgood, were writers who were interested in immigrant cultures and the life of the American underclass. Therefore, it was no surprise that Boyce and Hapgood decided to have (at least in theory) an open relationship where all opinions and emotional issues were discussed, and to have a sexually open marriage as well. In the marriage’s early years, when both were building successful writing careers and raising a family of four children, Boyce and Hapgood’s model for marriage worked very well. Boyce published four books from 1903 to 1908 to critical acclaim, and Hutchins published three books of what he called

“human interest” stories about the lives of immigrants, convicts, prostitutes, and political radicals. Together and separately, Hapgood and Boyce traveled frequently to Europe, where they met and befriended major writers and intellectuals, especially when they stayed in Italy. In 1910 with many of their Greenwich Village friends, they began to spend summers in Provincetown, Massachusetts, where they founded the experimental theater collective the Provincetown Players. Eugene O’Neill got his start in this group: as Nicholas Radel has observed, Boyce’s own plays were a source of inspiration for O’Neill (1990, 33–34). In its early stages as a theater group, members of the Players professed feminist principles and were unusually supportive of women as organizers, performers, and writers: Boyce was among those who provided the most leadership, particularly before the Players relocated to New York City. She even wrote the first play for the group, a one-act called *Constancy*: Boyce and Hapgood’s front porch was the group’s stage for that first performance (Black 2002, 2–4).

But, as Trimberger explains, the Boyce-Hapgood marriage began to deteriorate partly because the high ideals of the Greenwich Village community about love and marriage were in themselves inconsistent and not (in the end) supportive of women. By the end of the nineteenth century, birth control was widely used by the American middle-classes, sparking debates about the “decline” of the white race on the one hand, and opening up the possibilities of the separation of sexual pleasure from the “necessity” to reproduce on the other. Ideas about marriage began to shift towards the idea that one could marry for love and not just for duty, culminating in the ideal of companionate marriage, in which couples could participate equally as friends and lovers (Trimberger 1991, 10). Partly due to the influence of relationship novels like Boyce’s own *The Bond*, the model for companionate marriage began to shift away from an articulation in spiritual terms—spouses understood their partnership romantically and expressed their sense of undying love in terms which suggested timelessness and eternity (Trimberger 1991, 10; Fletcher 1995, 395)—to the psychological, which stressed the need for couples to communicate and express themselves sexually within the marriage itself, not outside it. In Greenwich Village, feminists joined groups like the working women’s association Heterodoxy, and in them, sought to link these psychological ideas about intimacy with the need for autonomy and creative work for women (Trimberger 1991, 10–11). But the ideal of companionate marriage proved to be almost impossible to balance with developing ideas about

women's rights to sexual freedom and equality. The work of European sexologists, which was so liberating for the men and women of Greenwich Village at the beginning of the twentieth century, also included conventional ideas about gender difference and the comparative rigidity of gender roles. Even though women were in theory able to participate equally in relationships, many progressive men at the time also argued that women had an innate capacity to mother, and so were more suited to the domestic sphere. Thus they viewed women who wanted to work outside the home as unfeminine (Trimberger 1991, 10–13). The result was that “the feminist vision failed for many of these [Greenwich Village] intellectuals as their conflicted relationships broke down” (Trimberger 1991, 13). Hapgood and Boyce were among those who experienced deep conflict in their marriage as a result: although Hapgood encouraged Boyce to have affairs to reinvigorate their marriage—a type of sexual experimentation called “varietism” (DeBoer-Langworthy 16)—when Boyce tried to do this, Hapgood became very jealous and told Boyce to end these relationships. Hapgood, meanwhile, had affairs with many women and told Boyce about them. Boyce would pretend that she did not care, but she did and subsequently became very depressed. In passionate letters to each other, they argued constantly about the division of domestic labor, and whether Boyce had the right to be independent. Although he struggled hard to be “liberated” in this regard, Hapgood was never able to let go of his need for Boyce to be like a mother to him, as well as a breadwinner and lover (Trimberger 1991, 20–21).

As Trimberger points out, Boyce and Hapgood were very unusual among radicals in that, despite these stresses which were a regular feature of their marriage, neither one of them ever left the other, both of them took turns raising their large family, and both of them turned the complexities of their relationship into creative work, Hapgood in *The Story of a Lover* (1919) and *A Victorian in the Modern World* (1939) and Boyce in all of her novels, most of her stories, and her plays after about 1903 until about 1923, a few years after the death of her oldest son. Boyce and Hapgood even acted out their conflicts in two plays they cowrote for the Provincetown Players, the unpublished *Dialogue* (1916) and *Enemies* (1921). Clearly the conflict between Boyce and Hapgood sustained them creatively, even though it also caused great pain in their lives: despite the pain that his affairs caused her, Boyce did not divorce Hapgood, and sometimes lived with him until his death in 1944. As DeBoer-Langworthy points out, the death of their eldest son in 1918

brought the couple back together, in a way. Boyce purchased a farm in New Hampshire in 1925 and lived there with her children and pets, but when Hapgood could no longer stand living apart from Boyce and his children, he would go get the family and they would stay in rented houses in New York, on Cape Cod and in Key West, Florida, until Boyce herself needed to get away for awhile (DeBoer-Langworthy 23–24).

There is no doubt that Neith Boyce led a fascinating life that has much to tell us about the struggles of women during an early period of American feminist development, before the advent of the women's liberation movement. But, with the exception of her autobiography, there is not much writing in *The Modern World of Neith Boyce* that convinces me that she should be remembered as one of modernism's more talented writers, particularly of nonfiction. DeBoer-Langworthy's claim in her introduction for Boyce's importance clearly stems from her esteem for Boyce herself and, perhaps, her desire to defend Boyce from all comers. For example, DeBoer-Langworthy asserts that Boyce is only remembered for her marriage, a clear reference to Trimberger's book, but she neglects to discuss in much detail the other work about Boyce (especially about her plays) and the extended treatment of Boyce in a recent book, Cheryl Black's *The Women of Provincetown* (2002). Although she professes not to want to define Boyce by her primary relationship, DeBoer-Langworthy goes on to discuss Boyce's marriage in detail, returning to it repeatedly throughout her introduction (2–3, 5–6, 13–14, 17, 20, 28). This is all the more remarkable because, as DeBoer-Langworthy observes, Boyce's nonfiction writing hardly mentions her marriage at all (28). Since DeBoer-Langworthy is interested in Boyce's marriage (and with good reason, given its unusual character), she then has to account for its lack of prominence in Boyce's autobiography, which ends with her marriage to Hapgood, and for the minimal role he plays in both travel diaries. Since no reason for this is ever given by Boyce, DeBoer-Langworthy indulges in speculation, saying at one point that Boyce did not write about her marriage in her nonfiction because "she [Boyce] may have been overwhelmed by the saga" of her marriage (13) and at another that "perhaps if Fate had not dealt her the particular cards revealed in these autobiographical documents, she would have written about other, larger themes" in her fiction as well (28). DeBoer-Langworthy even says that because Boyce did not write about her marriage in the documents published here that she finds them "ultimately sad, in part because the gaps in her narrative may be a profound commentary on her

disillusionment with marital happiness” (8).

At points such as these, I sense that the problem here may not be Boyce’s, who in letters and in her fiction was not shy about expressing her feelings about her marriage, but is DeBoer-Langworthy’s alone. There may be more prosaic reasons why Boyce chose not to write about her marriage in these documents. The autobiography itself may not deal with Boyce’s marriage because Boyce may have wanted to use it to work out other issues in her life. As it exists in this form (it is not clear if it was ever finished), this narrative is a sustained effort by Boyce to work through the trauma of her childhood and understand how it influenced the development of her personal and professional commitments as an adult. The autobiography is the best thing about *The Modern World of Neith Boyce*: in a laconic style that often has dark, humorous twists, much like some of the early work of Gertrude Stein, Boyce creates sharp images like this story about a pan of fish she discovers on the kitchen steps when she was a young girl:

About the fish, it occurred to her [Iras] to get a shovel full of hot coals from the kitchen fire and drop them one by one on the fish, to see what they would do, and the result was satisfactory, but soon interrupted by someone who was cross probably Grandma. (58, spacing in original)

Later, Boyce describes her life on the ranch in California in vivid prose: “what a marvelous new world! Bright sunlight, flowers, wide space to live in, instead of stuffy houses; the land spread away on every hand towards the mountains and oh, the sweet air that blew over it” (67). Boyce links that outdoor life with the development of independence that as a New Woman she would come to value. Not coincidentally, the ideal of the New Woman involved physical exertion and outdoor freedom. She does much the same thing with her vivid descriptions of Los Angeles as a frontier city, and of New York City at the beginning of the twentieth century: Boyce’s developing sensibility, freedom, and sense of herself become intimately related to the developing possibilities of American cities. She becomes a modern woman at home in rapidly modernizing urban environments. Boyce tells this story so well that I am left wishing that she had written more than the 150 pages published in *The Modern World of Neith Boyce*, and that she had published this account herself.

But Boyce left this autobiography unpublished and, given its

length, possibly unfinished, for reasons that she never shared. Therefore, DeBoer-Langworthy includes the two travel diaries as a way to argue that Boyce is an excellent nonfiction writer, but unfortunately, the diaries are filled with discussions of social visits and gossip, which does not make for very interesting reading, even when some of the people mentioned, like Gertrude Stein, Mabel Dodge, or Mina Loy, are well known. The diaries included here may not mention the larger issues about relationships because they are concerned with daily trivialities like these or, in the case of the 1914 diary, Boyce's worries about how to get herself and her children out of Europe as World War I began. The diaries are included in *The Modern World of Neith Boyce* partly for biographical reasons rather than for literary ones, since DeBoer-Langworthy mainly discusses them for their mention of well-known modernist writers and intellectuals (4). They are richly illustrated with photographs from Boyce's stays in Italy, a testament to DeBoer-Langworthy's meticulous archival work.

In fact, DeBoer-Langworthy's interest in archival detail and in Boyce's life story is so pronounced that I wish she had gone all the way and written a biography of Boyce. Instead, she attempts to prove that Boyce is an important writer who helped to invent the contemporary genre of creative nonfiction, but this attempt is largely unsuccessful. Boyce's most popular works were her earlier novels, all of which were written in a realist style that was not experimental. Her most major work of nonfiction, her autobiography, was unpublished and possibly unfinished until DeBoer-Langworthy edited and published it. DeBoer-Langworthy speculates that only a fraction of Boyce's output was published because "perhaps the world's editors were not ready for all her literary innovations and themes" (6), but I suspect that there might have been other reasons (DeBoer-Langworthy 26). Strangely, DeBoer-Langworthy argues that Boyce was an innovator as a nonfiction writer because, in her diaries and autobiography, she "transformed the diary and autobiography into something truly New. She bent time (by omitting most of her life), obscured identities, experimented with form, and yet produced something 'true'" (7-8). However, neither of the two diaries is particularly innovative stylistically, and Boyce's decision to write as Iras is prefigured by other authors who wrote autobiographically in the third person, including Henry Adams and Gertrude Stein, whose works Boyce certainly would have read.

Although the introduction is uneven, *The Modern World of Neith Boyce* is a valuable book for its presentation of Neith Boyce's life in

a much more complete way than it has ever appeared before, and for its publication of Boyce's autobiography, an interesting example of a life within modernism recalled in a thoroughly modernist style. Like other female writers of her time, Neith Boyce clearly struggled for—and at times won—an independence and freedom that had not even been imagined a generation before her. Carol DeBoer-Langworthy's introduction to *The Modern World of Neith Boyce* honors this struggle with its attention to detail and passion for the life of Boyce. This important work contributes much to our critical understanding of Boyce and the modern world she sought to live in and write about. As its editor intended, it ensures that the life and lifewriting of Neith Boyce will not be forgotten this time.

Works Cited

- Black, Cheryl. 2002. *The Women of Provincetown, 1915–1922*. Tuscaloosa and London: Univ. of Alabama Press.
- Fletcher, Anthony. 1995. *Gender, Sex and Subordination in English, 1500–1800*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Kadar, Marlene. 1992. "Whose Life is it Anyway? Out of the Bathtub and into the Narrative." In *Life Writing: From Genre to Critical Practice*, ed. Marlene Kadar, 152–61. Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press.
- Radel, Nicholas. 1990. "Provincetown Plays: Women Writers and O'Neill's American Intertext." *Essays in Theatre* 9 (1) (November 1990): 31–44.
- Tancheva, Kornelia. 1997. "'I Do Not Participate in Liberations': Female Dramatic and Theatrical Modernism in the 1910s and 1920s." In *Unmanning Modernism: Gendered Re-Readings*, ed. Elizabeth Jane Harrison and Shirley Peterson, 153–67. Knoxville: Univ. of Tennessee Press.
- Trimberger, Ellen Kay. "Introduction. Boyce, Neith and Hutchins Hapgood." 1991. In *Intimate Warriors: Portraits of a Modern Marriage, 1899–1944*, ed. Ellen Kay Trimberger, 1–38. New York: Feminist Press at CUNY.