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Eric D. Lamore (ed.)

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In her review of *African American Autobiography: A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by William L. Andrews in 1993, Maureen T. Reddy pointed out the two most important limitations of the collection: its lack of focus on the lesser known works, and the little attention devoted to contemporary African American autobiography, given that the most recent work analysed had been published in 1973 (179). Two decades later, the special issue of the journal *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* devoted to African American life writing in the summer of 2012 shows quite a different picture, even when it evidences the still neglected areas in critical studies on African American autobiographies.

Looking back on the earlier issue the journal devoted to African American life writing, published in the fall of 1986, guest editor Eric D. Lamore's introduction to this special issue echoes Reddy's own misgivings about the type of scholarly articles published in the eighties and nineties, which displayed an excessive concentration on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century autobiographies. In contrast, the issue being reviewed here focuses mostly on previously neglected works, coming from a variety of African American backgrounds and reaching up to the early years of the twenty-first century. Even in the case of the only canonical author included in this collection –the late Maya Angelou– the novelty resides in the approach chosen to analyse her culinary memoirs *Hallelujah! The Welcome Table: A Lifetime of Memories with Recipes* (2004) and *Great Food, All Day Long: Cook*

*Splendidly, Eat Smart* (2010). Lamore also underlines something all the essays in this special issue have in common: a preference for textual “acts of self-presentation performed by an Arctic explorer, a famous performer and public intellectual, multilingual African Muslims, transracial adoptees, and even a savvy, technologically literate entrepreneur/blogger/Hollywood producer” (3).

Arranged chronologically, the contributions bear witness to the many shapes life narratives can take, not only as regards formal aspects –from classical memoirs to blogs– but also concerning the chosen focus of each autobiography, which allows for a multiplicity of possible sub-classifications. Thus, together with the more classical autobiographical accounts of racial progress, such as Matthew Henson’s *A Negro Explorer at the North Pole*, the reader finds narratives of social syncretism in the autobiographies by African-Muslim slaves dealt with in Patrick E. Horn’s essay, hegemonic notions of manhood questioned in the accounts studied in the contributions by Daniel A. Holder and Jocelyn Moody, or the fascinating and troubling matter of hybridism, explored in the articles by Linda Furgeson Selzer and Marina Fedosia.

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Anthony S. Foy’s essay on Matthew Henson’s *A Negro Explorer at the North Pole* (1912) looks at the Arctic explorer’s memoir as a site of competing discourses of race and citizenship. On the one hand, he had been hailed as “the pride of black America” (21), while, on the other, he was prevented from being included in official narratives of the Pole’s discovery by, most effectively, “anti-black discourses of climate determinism” (23). Contrasting the somewhat dismissive answers Henson gave to reporters upon returning from Peary’s 1909 expedition to the North Pole with the self-fashioning he later displayed in his memoir, Foy places Henson’s work within the discourse of racial progress celebrated by Booker T. Washington, who wrote the foreword to the memoir. The chosen genre to vindicate his achievements allowed Henson to make use of the tradition of work, merit and recognition that Washington had championed as essential in autobiographical narratives of racial progress.

Challenging the extended practice of focusing on the Christian elements in African American slave narratives, Patrick E. Horn chooses to look at the accounts by African-Muslim writers Omar ibn Said, Mahommed Gardo Baquaqua and Nicholas Said, and debunk the frequent connecting of the movement from southern slavery to northern freedom with the slaves’ conversion to Christianity, in an attempt to link physical and spiritual liberations. Accepting that his chosen autobiographies comply to a certain extent with the convention of contemporary African American slave narratives, Horn sees enough points of departure to explain why they had failed to receive a much needed attention, namely their presentation of a the less-than-voluntary conversion to Christianity, revealing the interplay between the

“coercion and subversion” included in the essay’s title. Discarding the labels of “African Muslim narratives” or even “Christian conversion narratives”, Horn’s preferred term for autobiographies by enslaved Muslims –and, indeed, other non-Christian– is “narratives of social syncretism” (48). Tracy Curtis also looks into the role played by other spiritual creeds in his study on the use of Buddhism in the autobiographical narratives of Faith Adiele, Jan Willis and Angel Kyodo Williams, which becomes not only a spiritual path, but also a tool to make a political statement.

In his brilliant study of Paul Robeson’s *Here I Stand* (1958), Daniel A. Holder regards Robeson’s stigmatisation during McCarthyism as the main reason why his autobiography has not yet received the close, scholarly attention it merits (69); that is, before Holder’s contribution which, at least for this reviewer, is the *pièce de résistance* of this issue. Holder explores Robeson’s careful decision to construct his book as a resistance to McCarthyism by focusing on the materiality of his body as a site of contention; a body that is black, heteronormatively male and, since it embodies none of the threats posed by the “communist man” conceptualized by J. Edgar Hoover (70), a body that is also American.

Robeson’s is not the only case in which hegemonic notions of manhood have been used to counteract anti-black discourses. This is, indeed, the main argument in Jocelyn Moody’s analysis of early black men’s Christian narratives. Looking into the autobiographies of preachers John Jea and William J. Brown, together with a series of interviews of some African American Civil War veterans by graduate student Andrew P. Watson, Moody observes a construction of black masculinity that perpetuates male domination over black women even when it presents an overt rejection of violence. In the case studies, this masculinist protection of women stems from the Scripture-based perception of women as a sacred responsibility for the hierarchically superior men.

The materiality of autobiographical narratives is also central to the study of canonical author Maya Angelou’s culinary memoirs in the remarkable contribution by Nicole M. Stamant. Her point of departure is that Angelou is often misinterpreted as avoiding a political position in her works, arguing that most of this criticism stems from an insistence on comparing her memoirs with those by writers such as Malcolm X or Martin Luther King. Given Angelou’s commitment “to deconstructing traditional forms of autobiographical texts” (111), and seeing the necessary connection of the material aspect of food preparation and consumption to collectivity, Stamant magisterially locates in Angelou’s *Hallelujah! The Welcome Table: A Lifetime of Memories with Recipes* and *Great Food, All Day Long: Cook Splendidly, Eat Smart* the presence of the radical politics normally found in the life narratives of the men Angelou is frequently compared to.

Hybridism is the thread running through the contributions by Linda Furgeson Selzer and Marina Fedosia. Selzer explores the particularly hybrid nature of the digital sphere and the way it affects self-fashioning in her analysis of the life narratives of African American blogger turned Hollywood writer and producer Angela Nissel, observing the differences in tone between *The Broke Diaries*, which was first published as a blog, and *Mixed: My Life in Black and White*, in which she addressed her growing up as a child of a biracial couple. On her part, Marina Fedosia addresses the issue of transracial adoption in her comparison of two life narratives written by adult African Americans who were adopted by Caucasian parents: Jaiya John and Catherine McKinley. Despite the common elements in their adoption memoirs, the different solutions given to their identity problems –an essentialist search for the “authentic” self in the case of John vs. McKinley’s celebration of her “diasporic” nature leads to Fedosia’s conclusion that “transracial adoptees cannot be understood as a homogenous group any more than transracial adoption can be understood as an unequivocally beneficial or tragic experience” (226).

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A cursory glance at the table of contents –and, indeed, at this review– may give a first impression that this collection of essays has been somewhat randomly put together, given the miscellaneous nature of the texts subject to scrutiny. Far from it; the interdisciplinary nature of this volume reveals the long and fruitful road travelled in the areas of African American autobiography and literary criticism since the eighties. Nevertheless, there are gaping absences, issues that some readers would most likely expect to find addressed in a contribution of this nature (this reviewer misses, for instance, a contribution on any LGBT autobiography or memoir). This is, obviously, not a criticism of either the editors or the resulting volume, just a reflection of the many avenues still open to exploration for scholars working in the field of African American autobiographies.

## Works cited

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