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Memoirs

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The terms "memoir" and "autobiography" are often used interchangeably to describe first-person life writing. But formal distinctions are important, not only for the sake of literary analysis, but also for charting the continuities and discontinuities among modern African American memoir, the larger canon of African American autobiography, and Western autobiography in general.

Generic Distinctions and the "Memoir Boom."

Memoir—a subgenre of autobiography, along with essays, diaries, and letters—differs from autobiography in terms of narrative scope and notions of self-identity. Whereas Western autobiography chronicles the life arc of the self-interested individual, usually male, from sinner to saint, rags to riches, memoir is a collective story, with the narrator situated within a particular historical moment, among a community of people, using the self simply as a lens through which to view broader histories and concerns. Memoir's understanding of the self as collective, as opposed to individualistic, and historically contingent, as opposed to universal, reflects notions of identity found in the African American autobiographical tradition. Since the slave narratives, black autobiography has been a place where selfhood and humanity could be asserted not only to counter Enlightenment claims of black inferiority—thus the insistent subtitles *Written by Himself* and *Written by Herself*—but also to secure a public voice on the issues of the day.

Given the similarities between memoir and African American autobiography, what, then, distinguishes African American memoir from its mainstream counterpart? Certainly black memoirs are not new. Susie King Taylor's 1902 Civil War memoir, *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp with the 33^d United States Colored Troops, Late 1st S.C. Volunteers*, was one of the first. However, since the late twentieth century and extending well into the twenty-first century, there has been a "memoir boom," with demographic changes sparking both popular and academic demand for "true life stories" that explain America's changing face and political reality.

Celebrity memoirs by public figures, from politicians and entertainers to journalists and academics, constitute a large percentage of this literary output, with African American memoir no different from the mainstream. In recent years, there have been memoirs from former secretary of state Condoleezza Rice; NPR correspondent Michele Norris; poet and musician Gil Scott-Heron, posthumously; Professor Cornel West; and singer and civil-rights activist Harry Belafonte, to name a few.

It is in the public-private nexus of the neoconfessional, another contemporary narrative style in which once-private issues—child abuse, depression, addiction, domestic violence—are made public, that African American memoir distinguishes itself from the black autobiographical canon and the mainstream. Though canonical texts presented personal narratives on behalf of communal goals, they maintained "strategic silences"—whether Frederick Douglass's or Assata Shakur's refusing to disclose how they made their escapes from slavery and prison, respectively, or Harriet Jacobs's underreporting the sexual abuse she suffered for fear of alienating her Northern female audience. In

contemporary black memoir, there has been a shift from silence to disclosure, reflecting the broader cultural trend. But fears that the neoconfessional has monopolized the market, stoking the proliferation of solipsistic stories that prevent the publication of more political narratives (Gilmore, 2010, p. 658), have, by and large, proven untrue for black memoir.

June Jordan's *Soldier: A Poet's Childhood* (2000) is a case in point. In chronicling how this only daughter of West Indian immigrant parents became a "dissident American poet" in the tradition of Walt Whitman and Phillis Wheatley, *Soldier* traffics in contemporary tropes of the traumatized child as she describes growing up with a physically abusive father and a mother whose abject meekness was as devastating as any malice. Jordan, however, takes pains to situate this domestic drama within a global context—World War II waging abroad, Joe Louis fighting stateside—to stress the universally political nature of childhood; her literary self-portrait, the child-poet "June," becomes a figure for the world's dispossessed.

Characteristics of Contemporary African American Memoir.

This representation of the self as connected to material conditions and to communal, even global, histories is a hallmark of contemporary African American memoir, as it is with the larger black autobiographical tradition. In this regard, the more prevalent modes of modern black memoir are the following: (1) movement memoirs by people involved with the Civil Rights and Black Power movements; (2) post-civil rights memoirs that deal with a changed racial landscape and its new subjectivities and realities, including immigration and mass incarceration; and (3) hip hop memoirs that track a shift in generational politics and poetics.

Movement Memoirs. A spate of such memoirs immediately follows the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s: Daisy Bates's *The Long Shadow of Little Rock* (1962); Anne Moody's *Coming of Age in Mississippi* (1968); Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul on Ice* (1968); Gwendolyn Brooks' *Report from Part One* (1972); Huey P. Newton's *Revolutionary Suicide* (1973); and *Angela Davis: An Autobiography* (1974). But the memoir boom beginning in the 1980s witnesses a cavalcade of texts that are significant not only as first-hand accounts but, at thirty and forty years removed, also as "cultural memory": familiar stories that communities use to imagine themselves, given their shared past and linked fates.

Memoirs of the Civil Rights movement often challenge the dominant narrative of its "classic" phase (1955–1965) to broaden understanding of the movement's scope and significance, such as Rosemary Bray's *Unafraid of the Dark: A Memoir* (1999), which chronicles her life from the welfare rolls to the masthead of the *New York Times Sunday Magazine*. In the classic movement narrative, the year 1960 conjures student sit-ins spreading across the South and African nations waging independence struggles across the Atlantic. In Bray's retelling, the event that momentous year marks is her mother hauling her children to the Cook County Department of Public Aid. Set in Chicago and focused on the issue of social welfare, Bray's *Unafraid* not only presents the Northern face of a movement too often seen as solely a Southern fight, but also reminds that everyday survival was as much a part of the black freedom struggle as mass protest and radical action.

Indeed, to show that everyday people made the movement possible, these memoirs often relegate well-known leaders to the periphery of their narratives. For instance, *Freedom in the Family: A Mother-Daughter Memoir of the Fight for Civil Rights* (2003), by Florida activist Patricia Stephens Due and her novelist daughter Tananarive Due, uses alternating chapters to highlight local and intergenerational traditions of protest. At times, the narrative displacement serves a political argument, as in Melba Beals's *Warriors Don't Cry: A Searing Memoir of the Battle to Integrate Little Rock's Central High* (1994). Rather than Martin Luther King Jr. as the movement's messianic martyr, as is the customary portrayal, the sacrificial lambs are the teenagers on the frontline of that desegregation campaign, who came to be known as the Little Rock Nine. *Warriors'* inverted martyr imagery serves to interrogate notions of sacrifice in political theory about citizenship and rights—from the notion of "citizenship as sacrifice" to the "unshared sacrifice" that traditional civil-rights discourse demands—as Beals weighs the cost of integration in the wake of *Brown's* lost promise.

Like Beals's text, movement memoirs frequently note the passing of a bygone era and what was lost with integration—

Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s *Colored People: A Memoir* (1995), Clifton Taulbert's *Once Upon a Time When We Were Colored* (1995), and Carlotta Walls LaNier's *A Mighty Long Way* (2009) come to mind—even as they seek to inspire revolutionary politics in a reactionary age. For instance, in charting the development of radical consciousness, explicitly political memoirs like David Hilliard's *This Side of Glory: The Autobiography of David Hilliard and the Black Panther Party* (1993) and Elaine Brown's *A Taste of Power: A Black Woman's Story* (1993) try to persuade readers to embrace the same stance to address contemporary issues, from attacks on welfare and affirmative action to the collapse of public schools and the growth of prisons.

Post-Civil Rights Memoirs. A half-century after the Civil Rights movement, black communities, never monolithic, are increasingly varied, as questions of gender, class, and sexuality, in addition to ethnicity and generation, complicate old paradigms based solely on race. Post-civil rights memoirs provide diverse re-articulations of black identity and struggle.

Closely linked to movement memoirs are narratives by the “children of the Dream,” beneficiaries of movement gains who found the uncharted territory of integration surprisingly treacherous, as suggested by the title of Lorene Cary's *Black Ice* (1991), which chronicles her two years at the formerly all-white, all-male St. Paul's School in New Hampshire. Jennifer Baszile's *The Black Girl Next Door* (2009) elaborates on how being “the only” or “the first” to integrate an affluent suburb or Ivy League department can be as damaging and enraging as outright discrimination.

The growing class divide in black America has been explored in narratives structured around the trope of “contrasting destinies” introduced by novelist John Edgar Wideman's *Brothers and Keepers: A Memoir* (1984), about two brothers, one an award-winning novelist, the other a fugitive wanted for robbery and murder. Editorial writer Brent Staples uses the trope to similar effect in *Parallel Time: Growing Up in Black and White* (1995), and *The Other Wes Moore: One Name, Two Fates* (2010) extends the linked-fates metaphor as it meditates on the diverging trajectories, not of two brothers, but of two black men with the same name, born blocks apart in the same Baltimore neighborhood.

Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name—A Biomythography* (1982) was the forerunner for contemporary “coming-out” stories, such as Jamaican-American performance artist Staceyann Chin's *The Other Side of Paradise: A Memoir* (2009), as well as immigrant narratives exploring the diasporic dimensions of black identity. For instance, Haitian-American Edwidge Danticat's National Book Award-winning memoir, *Brother, I'm Dying* (2008), details her own immigrant odyssey and evolving black identity even as she chronicles the lives of her uncle and father, brothers who die on the soil of the government that occupied their country at their births. And Barack Obama's 1992 memoir, *Dreams from My Father*, also speaks to twenty-first-century questions of African American cultural formation, for as the son of “a mother from Kansas and a father from Kenya,” as the story has come to be told, Obama is literally both African and American.

However, musings about a “post-racial” America in the wake of Obama's historic election are belied by the reconfiguration of racial caste systems through mass incarceration, what legal scholar Michelle Alexander calls “the New Jim Crow.” Today, more African Americans are under correctional control than were enslaved in 1850, and an increasing number of prison memoirs address this reality. R. Dwayne Betts' *A Question of Freedom: A Memoir of Learning, Survival and Coming of Age in Prison* (2009) recalls Douglas' 1845 slave narrative and *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* in its description of literacy as the route to spiritual and physical freedom. And in the *The Prisoner's Wife: A Memoir* (1999), Asha Bandele recounts the difficulty of sustaining family under state surveillance.

Hip Hop Memoirs. Perhaps no narrative has so thoroughly inverted the politics and poetics of the civil rights movement as hip hop, the Bronx-born youth culture now gone global. Much has been written about hip hop as an extension of the black musical tradition, but it is an extension of the black autobiographical tradition as well, serving as a forum for both self-assertion and social commentary. Hip hop has a primarily masculine aesthetic, with many of its coming-of-age tales echoing the life trajectory presented in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (Cobb, 2007, p. 130), arguably the most defining autobiography about contemporary blackness. Despite the prevalence of life stories in rap lyrics, however, complete memoirs on wax have been rare. In this regard, *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* (1998) is truly

groundbreaking, winning the multi-talented rapper a then-unprecedented five Grammy awards. Like Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), the first slave narrative by a black woman, Hill's album introduces a counter-narrative through its examination of the unique perspective of women within the culture.

For many hip hop artists, the transition from writing lyrics to writing memoirs was only a matter of time. The instructional tone of Hill's *Miseducation* is emblematic of many memoirs penned by women. Several can be likened to manifestos in the ways they use lived experience to critique the industry or advise young women within it. Sistah Souljah's *No Disrespect* (1996) and Queen Latifah's *Ladies First* (2000) recall nineteenth-century club women as they challenge stereotypes that demean black women (Pough, 2004, p. 114). And journalist Joan Morgan's *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: My Life as a Hip-Hop Feminist* (1999) explores feminism's "gray areas," the space between equality and equity, objectification and desire, sexism and complicity, as it seeks to empower a generation averse to the "f-word." It is in "tell-all" narratives like Karrine Steffan's *Confessions of a Video Vixen* (2005)—part exposé, part cautionary tale—that black memoir resembles the neoconfessional currently monopolizing the market. In fact, *Vixen* has topped the African American Literature Book Club bestseller charts every year since its publication.

In 2010, Jay-Z, aka Shawn Carter, released *Decoded* with ghostwriter dream hampton. A rags-to-riches tale, *Decoded's* redemptive arc structures several recent memoirs by male hip hop artists: *One Day It'll All Make Sense* (2011) by Common with Adam Bradley; *Ice: A Memoir of Gangster Life and Redemption—From South Central to Hollywood* (2011) by Ice-T with Douglas Century; and *My Infamous Life: The Autobiography of Mobb Deep's Prodigy* (2011) by Albert "Prodigy" Johnson with Laura Checkoway. That many hip hop memoirs are ghostwritten, that they voluntarily relinquish the hard-won authorial voice that early slave narrators insisted upon, raises questions about autonomy, market influence, and authenticity. However, these texts also provide intriguing studies for literary scholars interested in evolving representations of the collective, contingent self in contemporary African American memoir.

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