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INTRODUCTION

Why African Autobiography

Patricia Geesey

Even to the casual observer looking at the development of contemporary African writing, autobiography would certainly seem to stand out as a major component in the vast array of cultural productions from that continent. From Camara Laye's *L'enfant noir* (1953) to Assia Djebar's *Vaste est la prison* (1995), the third volume of her autobiographical quartet, autobiographical discursive practices have been at the critical crossroads of the theoretical, cultural, and historic implications of African writing. The study of African autobiography, as may be determined by the essays collected in this volume, intersects with the critical and theoretical "-isms" of our day, namely: postcolonialism, postmodernism, and feminism. At the core of each of these critical movements is the question of the subject, and the "first-person" speaking position. As Leigh Gilmore reminds us in her essay "The Mark of Autobiography: Postmodernism, Autobiography and Genre," postmodern theory allows us to view autobiographical texts as "sites of identity production"—they "both resist and produce cultural identities" (4). It is precisely within the parameters of "production" and "resistance" that African autobiographies, and the subjectivities they construct, are now being studied. Scholars who explore the postcolonial in all of its myriad manifestations also concentrate on the notion of the postcolonial subject and such related themes as "hybridity" and "multiplicity." The deeper understanding of women's subjectivity brought forth by feminist scholars of autobiography now influences virtually all readings of women's self-writing projects. Given the growing importance of feminist studies, it is perhaps not surprising that when the "call for papers" for this volume on autobiography was issued, the majority of papers submitted dealt with African women's writing and the question of the gendered subject.

In 1973, James Olney published *Tell Me Africa: An Approach to African Literature*. Today, this study may justifiably be considered a "classic" of African literary criticism. Olney was one of the first scholars to devote a book-length analysis to the specificity of African autobiography; he was also one of the first critics to examine the question of non-African readership and African self-writing. While Olney's initial project may have been superseded by more complex theoretical notions regarding self-writing and the constitution of subjectivity, many scholars and readers today continue to search for answers to the same questions Olney raised regarding the study of African autobiography. Indeed, as the essays collected in this volume

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show, Olney's influence is still felt, even if it is only as a faint shadow, whenever the critic examines tensions produced within the African autobiography, such as the portrayal of the autobiographer's singularity against or within the community, and questions, including: Is the ideal reader African, Western, or universal? Does the autobiographer's choice of language affect the construction of the textual self? Does fiction in autobiography make a difference? From which position does the African subject as autobiographer speak?

In his essay that serves as a useful introduction to the recent publication *Genres autobiographiques en Afrique*, János Riesz notes that in the past, the critical reception of African autobiography has suffered from two mutually exclusive prejudices: first, autobiography is inherently Western and has only been "grafted" onto African literary production; second, *all* African writing in European languages is, at some level, autobiographical and hence less "sophisticated" than European literature (9). The essays collected in the volume edited by Riesz and Ulla Schild demonstrate that looking at African autobiography from only one of the above-mentioned perspectives is totally inappropriate. Increasingly, scholars who study African autobiography are influenced by new directions in cultural and critical studies. Furthermore, current research on African autobiographical writing has greatly benefited from an interdisciplinary approach.

The nine essays presented in this special issue all share a basic concern with applying contemporary critical theory to African autobiographical texts. The resulting analyses are both informative and provocative and, I believe, shift the focus of the study of African autobiography from the thematic (where it was centered in previous studies) firmly into the arena of "postcolonial studies." This is not, however, to suggest that in the essays collected here African autobiography is studied *exclusively* in light of recent critical theory. In his essay published in *Genres autobiographiques en Afrique*, Stephen H. Arnold warns scholars of the dangers in succumbing to what he calls "Acute Post-Modernism Embrace Syndrome" (144). Keeping in mind Arnold's warning, it is of course still possible to examine African autobiography and discover the autobiographer's *own* expressed concern with the existence of a fragmentary subjectivity. The essays contained in this volume of *Research in African Literatures* successfully apply contemporary theories on the nature of the subject without losing sight of the cultural, linguistic, and historical specificities of the African authors studied.

The first three essays may be considered as a tripartite study of several crucial texts in the development of African women's autobiography. In "My Mothers/My Selves: (Re)Reading a Tradition of West African Women's Autobiography," Mary-Kay F. Miller examines notions of (self-)reproduction and construction in Catherine N'Diaye's *Gens de sable* (1984), and highlights the textual tension of N'Diaye's insider/outsider perspective toward her own culture. Nicki Hitchcott's essay "African 'Herstory': The Feminist Reader and the African Autobiographical Voice" reads three African women's texts: Aoua Kéita's *Femme d'Afrique* (1975), Ken Bugul's *Le baobab fou* (1984), and Nafissatou Diallo's *De Tilène au Plateau* (1975), and points to the textual and narrative strategies that enable these authors to rewrite

the paradigms of earlier, male-authored autobiographies to produce a “gendered” discourse on the “Occidentalization” process. Julia Watson also examines Diallo’s *De Tilène au Plateau* and considers this text in light of Diallo’s conscious efforts to blur the boundaries between autobiography and ethnography, producing a hybrid text that Watson refers to as “autoethnography.” Like the two essays that precede it in this collection, Watson’s article astutely analyzes the ambiguities of the female autobiographer/novelist/essayist’s subject position.

The next two essays, Carmela J. Garritano’s reading of Ellen Kuzwayo’s *Call Me Woman* (1985) and Irène Assiba d’Almeida’s study of Kesso Barry’s *Kesso, princesse peuhle* (1988), examine the inherent tensions and paradoxes in the autobiographies of two African women who are public figures. Their analyses highlight the autobiographers’ own “blind spots” concerning their multiple subject positions. “Reading” the trope of the public figure discussing her private life, Garritano and d’Almeida deconstruct the narrative strategies employed by Kuzwayo and Barry to both subvert and invent their female subject speaking positions.

In her essay “Autobiographical Subjects,” Lisa McNee challenges the reader’s preconceptions concerning African (women’s) autobiography, and hence subjectivity. She argues forcefully for a revision of the old binary: the West = individualistic, Africa = collectivist in her presentation of Senegalese women’s praise poetry called *taasu*. Mildred Mortimer’s perceptive essay on Assia Djébar’s autobiographical project that presently spans three published volumes sheds new light on the tightly interwoven strands of Djébar’s narrative and cinematographic web. Reading Djébar’s project in its extant totality, Mortimer notes the extent to which Djébar’s work manifests the principal concerns of postcolonial and postmodern theory.

Finally, two essays that do not exclusively focus on African women’s autobiography: David Buuck’s analysis of hybridity and identity in Dambudzo Marechera’s work and Judith Lütge Coullie’s study of South African worker testimonies and their relationship to resistance to apartheid. Buuck’s study will prove to be invaluable to scholars working on the notion of constructed identities in the postcolonial context. Lütge-Coullie’s essay reminds us of the potential political uses of African autobiography, as well as of the perceived relations of power between the autobiographical subject, the researcher, and the reader.

Why African autobiography? Because the autobiographical texts (fictional, nonfictional, or somewhere in between) discussed in the essays collected here represent what may be the most vibrant element in the African literary (and oral) corpus. In 1973, Olney wrote that “the shape” of African autobiography “is determined by the especial African-ness of the writer” (52). Today, after nearly 25 years of postmodern and postcolonial critical theory questioning national identities and subject positions, we now know that autobiographical writing is definitely *not* a text that reveals a unified, monolithic African identity. What we may know with certainty, and the essays presented in this issue reaffirm this, is that the corpus of African autobiography helps readers and researchers alike begin to ask the correct questions about the (re-)production and (re-)construction of gen-

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der, cultural, ethnic, and national identities.

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