



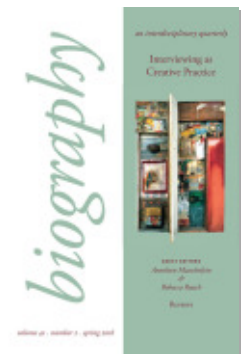
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*Reading African American Autobiography: Twenty-First-Century
Contexts and Criticism* ed. by Eric D. Lamore (review)

Roland Leander Williams Jr.

Biography, Volume 41, Number 2, Spring 2018, pp. 435-438 (Review)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press



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scholarship on them: Justin Green's *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary*; Robert Crumb and Aline Kominsky-Crumb's collaborations collected in *Drawn Together*; Harvey Pekar's *American Splendor*; Keiji Nakazawa's *Barefoot Gen*; Art Spiegelman's *Maus*; Phoebe Gloeckner's *A Child's Life* and *The Diary of a Teenage Girl*; Joe Matt, Chester Brown, and Seth (the "Toronto School"); Lynda Barry's *One Hundred Demons*; Craig Thompson's *Blankets*; Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*; and Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*. As much as the earlier chapters point to other works, and indeed Kunka himself critiques some of the canonizing tendencies of comics studies, this "Key Texts" section installs the US underground and indie comix of the 1960s as the origins of today's auto/bio comics and situates contemporary cartoonists as inheritors of their legacy. Readers hoping to go beyond this Americanized canon will need to comb the rest of the book to gain a fuller picture of the field.

At the end of chapter three, Kunka writes, "One of my goals with this book is to provide readers with a wide variety of examples—from the usual suspects to lesser-known but accessible web and self-published comics, as well as a range of subjects and critical approaches" (80). As much as he cannot avoid the centripetal force of US alternative comics history, Kunka pushes against it as much as possible within the parameters of his task to write an authoritative textbook. The endnotes, glossary, and extensive bibliography highlight the author's deep knowledge of the field and are indispensable tools for further scholarship. As a studying and teaching tool, *Autobiographical Comics* is a superb introduction to the field that achieves accessibility without diminishing scholarly rigor. Even if Kunka has neither the space nor the mandate to dislodge the dominant US-centric narrative of auto/bio comics fully, he opens up space for other scholars to pick up this work. Ultimately, *Autobiographical Comics* is the best study guide available, and Kunka's generosity of scholarship and tone provides a robust platform for teaching and researching graphic life narratives.

Candida Rifkind

Eric D. Lamore, editor. *Reading African American Autobiography: Twenty-First-Century Contexts and Criticism*. U of Wisconsin P, 2017, 278 pp. ISBN 978-0299309800, \$74.95.

African Americans have had powerful life stories to tell since 1661 when they were sentenced to slavery in a land sold on liberty. They have produced a long line of narratives recording their fortunes. Academic publishers have printed reams of criticism on the genre, and the University of Wisconsin Press recently added *Reading African American Autobiography* to the list. Edited by Eric

D. Lamore, the new book contains a collection of scholarly studies that take fresh looks at the tradition of African American autobiographical expression from the vantage point of the twenty-first century.

The practice of telling Black life stories took root in the colonial era of US national development, germinating works such as *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African* (1789), which recounts how the author freed himself from slavery through the use of learning. A host of life stories relating clever escapes from enslavement came out of the antebellum era; the number includes *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom; Or, The Escape of William and Ellen Craft* (1860) as well as *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845) and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) by Harriet Jacobs. In the wake of the slave system, through the time of Jim Crow, the line of Black life stories extended from *Behind the Scenes: Or, Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House* (1868) by Elizabeth Keckley to *Up from Slavery* (1901) by Booker T. Washington and *Black Boy* (1945) by Richard Wright, telling how the writers beat long odds through deft exercises of ingenuity. Displays of resourcefulness that improve lots have distinguished the genre of Black life stories produced in every era of African American history. The motif marks *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965) and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969) by Maya Angelou, besides *Dreams from My Father* (2004) by Barack Obama.

Reading African American Autobiography pays an implicit tribute to each of these oft-cited narratives, and a couple of the works receive special attention. First, in the essay "Olaudah Equiano in the United States," Lamore inspects the 1829 abridgement of Equiano's book by Abigail Mott. He resolves that the particular edition, allied with other versions, gives cause to treat it as an indicator of historical conditions. Then, "Richard Wright's Environments" by Susan Scott Parrish calls into question scholarship that ascribes the worldview behind *Black Boy* to theories of human development encountered by the author in Chicago. Instead, Parrish ties the origins of the perspective shared in Wright's life story to impressions made by his upbringing in rural Mississippi. Along with Lamore, Parrish presents a case that raises fresh issues for consideration in relation to the production and reception of African American autobiographical expression.

The greater part of *Reading African American Autobiography* covers an array of forgotten or neglected Black life stories. Spreading knowledge of the ample iterations of this genre is a great service performed by this collection of essays. One explores *The Life and Dying Speech of Arthur* (1768), the confession of a Black man charged with rape and condemned to death for the offense, treating the eighteenth-century narrative as a recollection of a fatal

struggle to overcome oppression. Another study complicates the concept of autobiography with a review of Samuel Delany's graphic novel *Bread & Wine* (1999) based on his personal history. The essay "Born into This Body" leaves the future borders of Black life writing open with a study of stories akin to Faith Adiele's *Meeting Faith: The Forest Journals of a Black Buddhist Nun* (2004). Subsequently, "From Blog to Books" renders the prospective media of the practice provisional with references to Angela Nissel's *Mixed: My Life in Black and White* (2006). "Grafted Belongings" turns the identity of twenty-first-century Black life writers into a point of contention with a survey of Jiaya John's *Black Baby White Hands* (2002) about the life of an African American adopted by white parents.

In the introduction, the editor credits *Reading African American Autobiography* to a determination to assess Black life stories with criticism stamped by the "age of Obama." Joycelyn Moody's work "Early Black Men's Spiritual Autobiography" makes a significant contribution to the project using an application of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's theory of "homosexuality." It conveys an exceptional reading of neglected antebellum narratives like *The Life, History, and Unparalleled Sufferings of John Jea, the African Preacher* (1811). Anthony Foy's essay "The Visual Properties of Black Autobiography" stands to quicken interest in visual literacy by how it weighs the social value of photographs in the forgotten memoir of William Edwards, entitled *Twenty-Five Years in the Black Belt* (1918). The analyses of Foy and Moody offer a measure of developments in African American literary criticism, and they affirm the tendency of African American autobiography to feature displays of resourcefulness employed to preserve dignity.

An oversight of this motif that marks Black life stories represents a shortcoming that diminishes the magnitude of most essays collected by Lamore. The collection places an emphasis on the oppression that Blacks have endured, but also sometimes obscures the genius with which African Americans have overcome demeaning circumstances instigated by the establishment of Black bondage. Nevertheless, the volume concludes with an article concerning an autobiography that renders the use of ingenuity critical to the success of a Black performer in Hollywood. *Foxy: My Life in Three Acts* (2010) is the subject of the final essay. Titled "Reading Signs of Crazy," this text indicates that Pam Grier, the pioneering star of blaxploitation action films, made out against long odds by keeping her wits about her with an eye to her advantage. It strikes a chord that touches the heart of Black life stories.

Reading African American Autobiography is a very noteworthy addition to the list of studies on African American autobiography. The book is the "age of Obama" equivalent to *African American Autobiography: A Collection of Critical*

Essays (1993) edited by William Andrews. It complements groundbreaking publications on Black life stories. The text possesses an affinity to *Witnesses for Freedom* (1948) by Rebecca Chalmers Barton and *Black Autobiography in America* (1974) by Stephen Butterfield. It is connected likewise to *Black Women Writing Autobiography* (1989) by Joanne Braxton, *My Father's Shadow* (1991) by David Dudley, and *African American Autobiography and the Quest for Freedom* (2000) by this reviewer. Lamore has put together a book that enriches anew the study of Black life stories.

Roland Leander Williams, Jr.

Alan T. Levenson. *Joseph: Portraits through the Ages*. U of Nebraska P, 2016, 312 pp. ISBN 978-0827612501, \$32.95.

The biblical story of Joseph, one of the gems of world literature, has been the subject of long and fascinating scholarly inquiry. Rabbis and other Jewish scholars have squeezed every letter and cantillation mark for interpretive clues and signposts. Christian commentators, working from Greek and Latin translations before the Renaissance and from Hebrew and modern languages ever since, as well as Muslims, who know the story from its retelling in the Qu'ran, have also contributed to this discussion, now in its third millennium. Lastly, modern scholars of literature and the ancient Near East have not been idle; books, commentaries, and articles on the Joseph story would fill many a shelf. This is an impressive body of work, one that can only be navigated through years of patient language study, wide reading, and indefatigable interest. Even the simplest survey of such a mass is beyond what most interested readers of biblical literature could seriously contemplate. Fortunately, there is now a guidebook that allows us a look at a few important paths through this literary labyrinth.

Alan T. Levenson, chair in Judaic history and director of the Schusterman Center for Judaic and Israel Studies at the University of Oklahoma, is the author of *Joseph: Portraits through the Ages*, almost too much of a good thing for those interested in the history of biblical interpretation. The original Joseph story, comprising most of the final thirteen chapters of Genesis, has long been recognized as a remarkable, weighty, and yet sometimes perplexing account of Joseph's trials and triumphs. He is no cardboard hero: the Hebrew account is nuanced and beautifully told but also challenging, perhaps not always intentionally so. The original author's use of Biblical Hebrew, the terse, economical, literary dialect of ancient Israel, is both provocative and enticing, inviting the reader to ponder each detail, a veritable feast for commentators.