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**Review of *A History of African American Autobiography*, edited by  
Joycelyn K. Moody**

Sarah Buckner  
*Allegheny College*, sbuckner@allegheny.edu

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## Review of *A History of African American Autobiography*, edited by Joycelyn K. Moody

### Abstract

A review of *A History of African American Autobiography* edited by Joycelyn K. Moody.

### Keywords

Autobiography, Life Writing, Black Studies, Literary Studies

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Joycelyn K. Moody, editor. *A History of African American Autobiography*. Cambridge University Press, 2021. 399 pp. ISBN: 9781108835541

Reviewed by Sarah Buckner  
Allegheny College

*A History of African American Autobiography* is a collection of critical essays which examines the contours, sinews, and complexities of Black autobiography from approximately 1538 into the contemporary period. Much like the genre of contemporary autobiography itself, which Moody explains “resists strict genre conventions” focusing instead on “expansion and experimentation,” *A History* is grounded in an unsettling of the parameters of African American life writing (4). Consisting of 22 essays by established and early career scholars, each essay ranges broadly in its textual engagements, from “a personal letter written in 1538 by Juan Garrido to the Black press’s advertisements of information-wanted about lost kinfolk during the Civil War and beyond Roxane Gay’s 2017 *Hunger: A Memoir of (My) Body*” (5). The volume’s essays make impressive and varied connections between African American life writing and a number of topics in the field, managing to discuss African American autobiography’s relationships to print culture, queerness, class and caste, transnational and postcolonial perspectives, biomedicine, celebrity, and beyond.

*A History* begins with a helpful and thorough chronology of African American life writing’s more visible contributions, tracing the genre’s movement from Briton Hammon’s *A Narrative of the Uncommon Sufferings* in 1760 all the way to Kamala Harris’s 2020 memoir *The Truth We Hold: An American Journey*. The structure and tone of the volume is accessible to both students and literary scholars. Split into two parts, “Origins and Histories” and “Individuals and Communities,” the first section moves chronologically from the sixteenth century to the contemporary moment, while the second focuses primarily on recent developments in the study of Black autobiography as well as on notable figures in Black life writing.

Moody’s essay, “Crafting a Credible Black Self in African American Life Writing,” begins the volume, charting the genre’s development through time and space. Moody uses Michelle Obama’s bestselling memoir *Becoming* as her jumping off point. Having amassed over \$20 billion dollars in sales across the United States, Germany, South Africa, the United Kingdom, France, Korea, and Australia, Obama’s memoir, Moody explains, is an example of the increasing popularity of the autobiographical genre (2). Even despite some critics’ insistence on considering autobiography as marginal, Moody suggests that this collection alone can attest to the “incontestable preeminence” of autobiography among African American readers, representing the “earliest forms of expression of African Diasporic peoples” (3-4). From there, Moody surveys a number of prominent figures in the genre, discussing the work of Amiri Baraka, Natasha Trethewey, and Audre Lorde among others.

Perhaps most interestingly, towards the end of Moody’s essay, she imagines the still developing possibilities of autobiography, gesturing towards the way that Black literary theorists like Christina Sharpe, Fred Moten, and Saidiya Hartman have begun to incorporate life writing into their theoretical landscape, continuing the tradition of “[blending] the analytical and scholarly with the aesthetic and autobiographical” (15). In addition to laying out a list of keywords for

African American life writing, the essay charts the contributions of prior volumes which center autobiography, noting the work of folks like Robert Stepto, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and most recently Eric D. Lamore. Moody's essay offers a grounding introduction to the collection, seamlessly moving between an analysis of where the genre has been and where it is going.

At the center of the collection is an insistence upon expanding our conception of what African American autobiography might look like, complicating both the terms "African American" and "autobiography." In Rhondra Robinson Thomas' essay "Black Life Writing and Print Culture Before 1800," for example, Robinson challenges the accepted narrative that Black life writing begins with narratives of the enslaved during the enlightenment. While scholars often cite Britton Hammon's 1760 *A Narrative of the Uncommon Sufferings and Surprising Deliverance of Britton Hammon, A Negro Man* as the first published piece of Black autobiography written by someone of African descent in the Americas, Robinson suggests that Black life writing begins much earlier with letters, petitions, and legal writings both written by and about Black folks in the Americas. To begin, she starts the chapter with a letter from Juan Garrido, a formerly enslaved African who had been trained as a conquistador by Spanish explorers. Written in the first person, the letter outlines Garrido's service to the crown in what turns out to be a successful bid for land. The letter disturbs clean narratives of freedom and enslavement, the colonized and the colonizer, and it asks readers to begin thinking about Black life writing as a broader, more layered field with an everlong archive of notes, diaries, and newspaper articles outside of normative autobiographical constructions. Additionally, Garrido's letter pushes readers to examine what African American autobiography might look like before and beyond the formation of nation states. The understanding of the historical record that Robinson communicates in her essay is also in line with the work of contemporary Black poets, theorists, and writers like M. NourbeSe Philip, Saidiya Hartman, and Sarah Haley who have begun to imagine ship logs, prison records, and legal documents as points in a broader story about the intimacies of Black life.

Moya Bailey and Whitney Peoples' chapter on biomedicine, "The Biomedicalization of Black Life Narratives," on the other hand, offers a provocative argument against situating science and biomedicine as reliable authorities on and narrators of Black life. First providing critical analyses of American science writer Rebecca Skloot's *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* and Henry Louis Gates's PBS series *Finding Your Roots*, the chapter both acknowledges how biomedicine has been incorporated into Black storytelling and problematizes the way Skloot, Gates, and other writers and critics use biomedicine to craft liberal narratives of uplift that neglect to consider both the legacies and ongoing harm of scientific racism. In doing so, they also emphasize the necessity of fleshly experience in the telling of Black stories. For instance, Bailey and Peoples point out that in her book, Skloot, whose aim is to investigate the story of the HeLa cell line which is derived from Lacks, is often at odds with the interests of Deborah Lacks, Henrietta's daughter, who is invested in learning about the intimate pieces of Henrietta's life: how she smells, her favorite color, her interest (or lack of interest) in the dance floor. As a science writer, Skloot's story of Lacks's life skims over the moments which compose it in order to focus on the scientific possibilities of her illness and her corpse. This is a move which objectifies Lacks and neither considers who she is nor the kinds of scientific racism she might have faced as she underwent cancer treatment. As an antidote to these narratives, Peoples and Bailey look towards Audre Lorde's *The Cancer Journals*. Lorde's text, they argue, manages a balance between an engagement with biomedicine and a reckoning with the more quotidian details of her life,

including the discomfort she feels with the medical industry as a Black woman. This chapter both compellingly expands the field of Black autobiography to consider biomedicine's role in it, while also highlighting its limitations.

As is perhaps clear from my description so far, *A History* is broad and diverse in its scope, analyzing African American autobiography as it relates to geography, space, and time. There is scholarship on poetry, visual and print culture, spirituality, and the role of children in Black life writing. There are chapters on mixed race life writing, contemporary Black women's autobiography, and Afro-Caribbean life writing. While the volume includes an analysis of Black queer life writing by Aliyyah I. Abdur-Rahman in part two of the collection, which provides a rich analysis of Black queer life writing outside the constraints of the coming out narrative, I would have liked to see a chapter that foregrounds a discussion of Black trans contributions to the field of African American autobiography. In a volume that emphasizes fluidity, an exploration of Black trans relationships to autobiography and the archives which help to construct it would expand the volume's reach and recognize the vital work of scholars like C. Riley Snorton, whose 2017 *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* is foundational in Black trans studies and literary studies. A chapter that explores Black trans narratives of self would have done the work of recognizing the long but oft elided history of Black trans life in the Americas, exploring how these narratives intervene in, augment, and construct the genre more broadly.

Nevertheless, Moody's *A History of African American Autobiography* represents an ambitious volume that stretches far and wide in its analysis. Its thoughtful organization and exhaustively researched essays strike the balance between intellectual rigor and accessibility. Filled with work that pushes the boundaries of what a self, an autobiography, or a written record might be considered, this collection is a welcome contribution to the study of Black life writing.