
Chinosole. *African Diaspora and Autobiographics: Skeins of Self and Skin*. New York: Peter Lang, 2001. Pp. xv, 187. \$29.95.

This is a useful and fascinating book. The diaspora to which it refers is “the forced displacement of Africans that was initiated by the European slave trade, perpetuated through colonial governments, and continued through global economic and military control by the United States and other Western powers,” with a consequent “proliferation of distinct African-related cultures” (136). The volume’s sub-title expresses both Professor Chinosole’s view of “skin as representative of racial consciousness . . . that taut . . . site . . . on which is tapped individual and communal expression of self” (152), and Harriet Jacobs’ cry, “what tangled skeins, are the genealogies of slavery” (*African Diaspora* 157). Its nine chapters analyze nine important autobiographies by writers of the African diaspora, five men and four women, from Equiano and Harriet Jacobs (in 1789 and 1859) to Agostinho Neto in 1963 and Evelyn Williams in 1993. Most of these autobiographies were written in English prose, but one (Neto’s) was written in Portuguese poetry.

The eleventh volume in the San Francisco State University Series in Philosophy, whose general editor is Anatole Anton, *African Diaspora and Autobiographics* is a handsome, slim paperback designed both for general readers and for students and teachers “in African American and African diaspora studies, cultural studies, anti-colonial discourse, literary theories of autobiography, Black womanist theory, and modern multicultural philosophy” (xi). It should also be useful for courses in American literature and narrative. Although the work includes sophisticated and original theoretical analysis, it is also an attractive introduction to the history of Black autobiography, a refreshing view of American (as well as other diasporic) literary history, and an excellent companion to the nine texts Chinosole analyzes. Students of literature, politics, gender, and culture will find in each chapter a revealing history of criticism and a fresh critique of one author, with constant sharp comparison to the other eight authors, their life conditions, diasporic experiences, relation to racist systems, “thematic motifs” (46), “tropes and narrative strategies” (47). “The underlying similarity among all of the texts,” as the author points out, lies “in their combination of art and politics” (xiii); all nine autobiographers being political activists as well as literary artists, their work is/was “directed toward historically inclusive emancipations” (159).

The book begins with the autobiographies of five men, with Equiano’s “the first full-length autobiography by a captured African recording the Middle Passage from memory” (12). Chinosole sees Equiano, with his multiple names

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and attitudes, as a survivor, a shrewd and powerful spokesman against slavery in spite of being partially colonized and brainwashed by what he experienced. In opposition to “many establishment critics” (15) she sees Richard Wright as the poetic and visionary shaper of “both fictional and non-fictional Black militant writing in the United States and abroad” (15), although she criticizes his brutalized sense of the Black community and especially of Black women. She shows the influence of Wright’s *Black Boy* (1945) upon Peter Abrahams’ *Tell Freedom* (1954) and the use by Abrahams of themes prominent in the autobiographies of Equiano and Frederick Douglass. *African Diaspora and Autobiographics* continuously relates the texts under analysis to one another, creating a history of autobiography in the African diaspora. So, for example, Neto’s journey “from enslavement to freedom” is compared to those of “Equiano, Jacobs, Wright, Abrahams, and Shakur” (59).

The second half of the volume, about women’s autobiographies, emphasizes “matrilineal diaspora,” that is, the influence of Black women autobiographers on one another and on other women of the African diaspora. Chinosole begins by connecting the autobiographies of Harriet Jacobs (1861) and Assata Shakur, the latter “a contemporary runaway slave narrative” (117), “a mighty shout” (121) responding to the former. Both works, as expressions of Black women, are contrasted with *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and with some recent Black feminist novels influenced by “the cult of white womanhood” (104). Of Evelyn Williams’ *Inadmissible Evidence* (1993), a “docu-narrative,” (131) Chinosole observes, “No more lucid analysis of the balancing act required of the Black middle class can be found in Black autobiographical writing” (132). The last analysis is a celebration of Audre Lorde’s work, “a pinnacle in the poetic expression of matrilineal diaspora” (135).

Throughout, the book probes and illuminates the sense of self and society in Black autobiography, asserting that by adopting the autobiographical narrative, African ex-slaves, whose sense of self was communal, defied and redefined the meaning of *self* in Western society “as both individual and collective, singular and multiple, and multifaceted, inclusive of race, sex, gender, class, and ethnicity” (156), so that their autobiographies are “the ultimate textual re-enactment of subjectivity for Africans throughout the Americas” (108). Chinosole contrasts Abrahams and Wright in their understanding of the self as individual (Wright) and communal (Abrahams). Lamming uses “multiple voices” and “shifting perspectives” (72) to express the collective self, “a communal presence” (72), in “one of the most complete dissections of internalized racism found in Black literature” (82).

The volume reveals, especially in its citations, bibliography, and last theoretical chapter, the author’s thorough study of African and African-relat-

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ed cultures, literary, anthropological, social, and philosophical theory, and literary criticism. It embodies primary research, including conversations with contemporary writers, and a broad knowledge of European and Euro-American literature as well as the literature of the African diaspora. Two of the essays included appeared in earlier form in collections (Sekora and Turner 1982, and Braxton and McLaughlin 1990), and one in Chinosole's dissertation (1986). Interdisciplinary, cross-cultural, and eclectic in analytic method, the author utilizes, for example, new criticism, structuralism, and post-structuralism, suiting the method to the texts under analysis in what she calls "a functional aesthetic" (xiii).

Layout and printing are attractive and accurate, with perhaps an exception on page 126 where there seems to be an inadvertent use of italics. An exquisite cover by Evelyn Williams "exemplifies the use of ideographics central to oral literature" (xiv) and complements the book's frequent analysis of metaphor and iconography in these autobiographies.

Works Cited

- Braxton, Joanne and Andrée Nicola McLaughlin, eds. *Wild Women in the Whirlwind: Afro-American Culture and the Contemporary Literary Renaissance*. New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers UP, 1990.
- Sekora, John and D. T. Turner, eds. *The Art of Slave Narrative: Essays in Criticism and Theory*. Macomb, IL: Western Illinois UP, 1982.

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Dean Irvine, ed. *The Canadian Modernists Meet*. Ottawa: U of Ottawa P, 2005. Pp. xvi, 368. \$35.00 pb.

A renaissance of sorts has taken place over the last two decades in Canadian literary scholarship, particularly in its reassessment of modernist texts. Significant studies by Brian Trehearne, Glenn Willmott, Clarence Karr, Colin Hill, and others have shed new light on what was previously assumed to have been well-illuminated territory. The most recent addition to this research is a collection of critical essays, *The Canadian Modernists Meet*, edited by Dean Irvine, the latest installment in the Reappraisals: Canadian Writers series, which shines over both familiar and unfamiliar writers and texts of the mid-twentieth century and provides an informative if not necessarily comprehensive view of the new developments in this area.

In his introduction to the collection, Irvine compares two different versions of F. R. Scott's canonical poem "The Canadian Authors Meet," to argue that