

polyglot West Indian society might have been described as a positive example of “multiculturalism.” Walcott has recently come to reject this term because, influenced by the forces of political correctness, it has taken on negative connotations along the lines of “racial victimization and separatism” (569). Walcott has also found cause to react against tenets of post-colonial theory, charging that the term itself has now been reduced in practice to meaning “anti-colonial.” He prefers to estimate the achievement of emerging literatures “on their own and not as part of, reaction to, or in relation to others” (583).

Seasoned critic that he is, King candidly admits that in undertaking *Derek Walcott: A Caribbean Life*, there was much he stood to find out beyond the life of a single man. “I would learn much about the arts and culture in our time. After all these years what did I know about how poets support themselves, what a literary career meant, how great publishing houses become great, how Nobel Laureates are chosen, what it would mean to try to live in the West Indies as a poet or dramatist?” (626). Midway through his book, King comments that in his essays Walcott’s prose style resembles “a series of evocations in which plot or narrative is hidden, ignored” (431). In comparison with the *bel canto* of Walcott’s “prose poetry,” King’s recitative maintains its steady rein on an explicit story line.

Robert D. Hamner

Kenneth Mostern. *Autobiography and Black Identity Politics: Racialization in Twentieth-Century America*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999. 276 pp. \$54.95; \$19.95 pb.

Autobiography offers obvious access to representation of identity, subjectivity, and conceptions of community, and Kenneth Mostern aims through the venue of life narratives to provide, in his words, “a genuinely radical analysis of political identities” (8). Mostern’s project is to recuperate identity politics from the suspicion in which it is held by infusing the concept with a Marxist structural analysis. Although Paul Robeson, bell hooks, James Baldwin, Barbara Smith, Michelle Wallace and others get respectful attention, Mostern selects the autobiographies of W. E. B. Du Bois, James Weldon Johnson, Malcolm X, Nikki Giovanni, and Angela Davis for the main focus of his argument, and it is his reading of these texts and their contexts that is the great

strength of this study. He names the three arguments that make up “the key political content of the book: the relationship of feminism to the contemporary revision of black identity politics; the bifurcation of race and culture and the confusion over terminology that results from this bifurcation; and the question of narrative as a fundamental moment of political action” (13). The promise of this assertion is sometimes muddled by Mostern’s theoretical entanglements, but the weight Mostern gives to specific historical contexts and to the particular elements at play in the narratives of his main authors makes the torturous reading of theoretical jargon worthwhile. Mostern really has constructed an alternate perspective on how to read identity and politics in autobiography, and the fine insight he brings to the texts shapes a new historical narrative in twentieth century African American life-writing.

The explosive development of autobiographical theory in the last two decades has produced a range of reading practices that allow multiple perspectives on multiple subjectivities. Mostern reviews this history with a refreshing admission of his reliance on feminist thought, inflecting his discussion of each major theorist with his own critique. Some aspects of this conventional strategy are highly effective as he exposes tensions among theoretical positions. Here is one example, regarding critical treatment of Rigoberto Menchú’s autobiography, using Doris Sommer’s position to correct Sidonie Smith’s: “the text, far from being permeable and having unstable identity categories, as Sidonie Smith claims that many minority and women’s texts have [...] in fact sets up intentional and highly specific political and national boundaries” (44). Mostern is at pains to demonstrate that the individualism at the root of any subjectivity-based theory will be inadequate in recognizing or theorizing the “content of solidarity, or why it might be typical of certain groups” (48); and he does (barely) acknowledge that others have addressed the *I/we* dialectic in diverse feminist and African American autobiographical theory. At the conclusion of his long introductory section, Mostern rather diffidently attests “as with Gilroy, it needs to be investigated how race remains an always present and nearly always self-chosen sign [...] What we must confront when looking for racial identity in an autobiography is not so much difference itself (which is always there) but ‘what difference that difference makes’” (51). That Mostern should choose to set his key thesis or position in words already used by Paul Gilroy and Michel Eric Dyson suggests an uncertainty in his ability to articulate forcefully his own theoretical ground.

Fortunately, the convolutions of his opening discussion are almost completely dispensed with in the two remaining sections of the book. In Part II, “The politics of Negro self-representation,” sixty-odd pages present an informative and illuminating treatment of African American or (as Mostern says, in

respect for the language used by Du Bois, Ida B. Wells and others of the time) Negro political thought. In careful steps Mostern demonstrates his claim that “books by African Americans about race theory are often written in the form of autobiography” (59). Using Du Bois’s autobiographies, Mostern discerns “three theories of the race of W. E. B. Du Bois:” the liberal individualist, the pan-African Marxist, and the internationalist communist. Provocative gems, such as Mostern’s observation that “Du Bois [... has been trying] to show the ‘full psychological meaning of caste segregation,’ which made the invention of the Negro race necessary and useful for the African Americans who participated in it (quite regardless of the racial projects of white people) and which sustains this racial formation without reference to biology” (69–70), make the reader’s task of following his argument a pleasure.

Mostern then shifts his attention from autobiography to the politics of black responses to lynching, contrasting Du Bois, Walter White (a founder of the NAACP), Ida B. Wells Barnett (the great journalist and crusader against lynching), and James Weldon Johnson, each of whom articulated Negro racial identity in relation to lynching. And finally, Mostern provides a concise analysis of Negro proletarian politics, making a powerful argument for the specific role African American theory and practice played in the shaping of the American Communist Party. While the support the CPUSA gave to various causes (the Scottsville trial for example) and the commitment of Paul Robeson and Richard Wright to Marxist principles are well-known, Mostern’s is the first to make a coherent narrative asserting the essential role of African Americans to leftist policies and praxis, not just in the USA but in Marxist anti-imperial struggles internationally. Mostern’s understanding of the perspective of Marxism is almost completely free of ideological jargon. Instead he offers openings to thought: “Since Marxism derives class not from ‘discourse’ but from the economy, when a Marxist notices that race and gender, like class, are centrally important political categories, s/he asks what structure or system of material determination produces these categories as discourses” (9–10). While this may seem an odd stance for a writer whose concern is identity politics, Mostern’s approach is so multidimensional that even if he loses a thread occasionally, his connections hold steady.

The third section of “Autobiography and Black Identity Politics” consists of a wonderful chapter on Malcolm X, his autobiography, and his political framework. Again, Mostern brings an intense reading to the text and meshes it into America’s race politics of the 1960s and links it to the present. One strategy he uses is to offer “four ways of reading the Autobiography [of Malcolm X] as a bildungsroman” which will include sexuality, race, education, the politics of black masculinity, and the presentation of truth (143,

my paraphrase omits various quotation marks). The book concludes with two chapters focussing on black feminist thought. The segment dealing with Nikki Giovanni and Angela Davis is again splendid in its contextual reading of the autobiographies, but in the last chapter Mostern struggles a bit. Because his reading and reference to African American (and white) women/feminists is so broad, and because he seems loathe to omit anyone, the argument seems rather scattered. I was rather sorry to find the now obligatory gesture toward self-reflexivity, since, as usual, it deflects attention away from his material, although in itself the sentiments are salutary: Mostern is properly concerned that white male scholars resist the tendency to “spend [their] research lives theorizing the subjective marginality of [their] socially empowered position” (209), and he concludes with the statement that whites shouldn’t feel proud of themselves for teaching African American studies, that whites must learn to see themselves as “a problem,” and that we must chose our ethical battles with the ability to objectify ourselves in “the mirror of our particular others.” On the other hand, his closing discussion of bell hooks’s failure to distinguish class origins from class position, and his response to Anne DuCille’s view that black feminist scholars must escape the domination of autobiography inflect his whole argument and invite one to continue chewing on his ideas. Mostern’s scholarship is exemplary, and this study is a promising approach to reading class through the ferocious entanglements of sex, gender, colour, and race.

Jeanne Perreault

George Bornstein, *Material Modernism: The Politics of the Page*.
Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001. Pp. xii, 185, £35.00.

Material Modernism: The Politics of the Page integrates modernist scholarship and editorial theory in an argument that contests how modernists are “often abused as being politically rightwing rather than leftwing, and culturally upholders of authority rather than challengers of it” (33). Rather than engaging such criticism directly, however, Bornstein’s book attempts to debunk by demonstrations of editorial theory’s utility for modernist scholarship. Each of *Material Modernism*’s chapters attempts to add to current demystifications of the notion of an apolitical modernism by demonstrating how reading the politics evident on the originally published pages of modernist literature against subsequent republications (in anthologies, collected works, and schol-