CHAPTER 1

Crafting a Credible Black Self in African American Life Writing

Joycelyn K. Moody

> The thought of only being a creature of the *present* and the *past*, troubled me, and I longed to have a *future* – a future with hope in it.
>
> —Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*

> And so, because our youth are entitled to the facts of race history which only the participants can give, I am thus led to set forth the facts contained in this volume which I dedicate to them.
>
> —*Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells*[1]

Becoming, Michelle Obama, and Owning a Black (Woman's) Story

> Your story is what you have, what you will always have. It is something you own.

These words appear in the center of the "Preface" of Michelle Obama's memoir, *Becoming*. In the case of the African American former First Lady, however, her particular story is what she *and* African Americans *and* the rest of the world will always have.[2] Millions of people – many of them African American women – who have each invested hundreds of dollars to attend a book tour event featuring Obama in person, generally claim *Becoming* as not merely Obama's story, but theirs, too, and a considerable portion of the rest of the world owns material copies, as confirmed by purchases in hardcover, audio, and digital versions to establish *Becoming* as one of the bestselling life writing texts in recorded history.[3] In its measure of the leading book genres of July 2015, *Statista* surveyed 2,273 adult respondents to find that 31 percent of readers ranked biography as their preferred genre, notably hard on the heels of history, which 33 percent of them preferred over all other genres.[4] Within this context of generic preferences, then, even before *Becoming* could actually be accessed, Amazon reportedly sold 750,000 pre-

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print copies, and Crown Publishers, a division of Penguin-Random House, nearly doubled its first edition hardcover order to meet the rising expected demand in the weeks before the official release date on November 13, 2018. All told, *Becoming* debuted as a bestseller in the United Kingdom, Germany, France, Korea, Australia, and South Africa, and within five months, it had sold more than 10 million copies worldwide, leading the *LA Times* to speculate that *Becoming* is destined to become "the most successful memoir ever [published]."[5] By March 2019, Obama's book had helped Bertelsmann SE, the German company that owns Penguin-Random House, earn $20 billion.[6] Readers the world over, then, continue collectively to exalt both Obama and her life story as worthy of their leisure, attention, and capital.

A hunger for knowledge and discussion of *Becoming* and the inspiration Michelle Obama offers through her body, comportment, and self-representation have followed the trend in generating college courses featuring African American superstars led by Beyoncé (whose *Lemonade* album fans read as an autobiography) and Obama herself.[7] Such courses have met with international acceptance and adoption. The rise in sales of *Hidden Figures*, a print book of three African American women scientists' biographies categorized as "History," has enjoyed great success, bolstered by the debut of the film version of the scientists' story. *Publishers Weekly* reported it was the second bestselling book in 2016 in History, having sold 417,000 copies.[8] Sales of auto/biography books rose by 8 percent in the same year within the juvenile nonfiction category, "the most of any segment in the year." Significantly, the children's edition of *Hidden Figures* was the second highest seller in its category, "with approximately 115,000 copies sold."[9]

Yet, there is an irony, a paradox – and one complicated further, and perhaps separately, by collectivized African diasporic identity and African American cultural contexts. Readers' desire for greater familiarity with life writing as a genre and their deeper pleasure while reading about (African American) auto/biographical subjects still do not inherently engender academic authority or respect. Despite being the third most preferred genre among readers, life writing is nonetheless deemed by conservative literary scholars – the same critics who esteem, say, *Pepys's Diary* and *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* – as trivial and thus unfit for scholarly attention; they marginalize personal narratives in English studies for their very popularity among the reading public. Nevertheless, remarking on the longevity of life writing in academic studies in *Life Writing in the Long Run*, white feminists Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson call attention to work they

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and many others have done "to bring stature to a field long considered 'sub-literary,' 'marginal,' and 'untheorized.'"[10]

Still, the rule of autobiography as the preeminent genre for African American readers is incontestable, as this volume demonstrates. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., has remarked upon the "astonishing numbers" of texts Black Americans have generated in response to the autobiographical impulse to tell both individual and collective stories providing "a key to unlock the madness of American racism, and strategies for [one's] own survival of it."[11] The genre of Black life writing has persistently appealed to African American writers telling life stories promoting all types of causes, with an endless variety of purposes, and from a wide range of African-descended ethnic backgrounds. The power of story, of a life story and lived experience, is immeasurable in impact, sincerity, mischief, glory, and tragedy. As the financial success of *Becoming* attests, and its record of empowerment reveals, African American readers look to each other for life narratives of diverse Black experiences that enable the construction, constitution, and promulgation of a credible Black self.[12]

The Persistence of African American Auto/biographical Writing

> I knew that I wasn't so much bound to a single biological "race" as to a group of people, and these people were not black because of any uniform color or any uniform physical feature. They were bound because they suffered under the weight of the Dream, and they were bound by all the beautiful things, all the language and mannerisms, all the food and music, all the literature and philosophy, all the common language that they fashioned like diamonds under the weight of the Dream.
>
> —Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*[13]

> *Too good*, I am thinking. The stuff I make up is *too good*.
>
> —Jacqueline Woodson, *Brown Girl Dreaming*[14]

As the most expansive literary canon of African diasporic peoples, African American autobiographical writing consists of texts that range from the talking books, freedom petitions, and captivity narratives of the 1600s to today's digital and virtual forms Black people adapt to construct selfhood to tell their lives. This volume tells a story about time: that canons of African American autobiographical writing predate such usual suspects as the 1760 print publication in Boston of *Narrative of the Uncommon Sufferings, and*

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Surprizing Deliverance of Briton Hammon, a Negro Man and the 1783 petition to the Commonwealth of Massachusetts filed by an enslaved woman named Belinda Royall (Sutton) against the estate of slaveholder Isaac Royall. Such life writing documents are being ever more voluminously published, including in digitized forms such as *Slave Voyages: The Early Caribbean Digital Archive*, by Nicole Aljoe and Elizabeth Maddock Dillon; and "The Family Tree of Michelle Obama, the First Lady," an article by Gabriel Dance and Elisabeth Goodridge published in the *New York Times* one year after President Barack Obama was elected.[15] Another story that *A History of African American Autobiography* tells is the range of life writing figures who captivate readers: from Frederick Douglass to Malcolm X, from Maya Angelou to Miles Davis, from Joe Louis to Serena Williams, from Anna Julia Cooper and Angela Davis to Booker T. Washington and Barack Obama. Their stories enthrall in myriad and multimodal forms, and thereby inspire the recording of our own stories: books for children and youth, scrapbooks, Bibles, cookbooks, family reunion bulletins, home-going (funeral) programs, personae poems, diaries, diverse archives, and the narratives of formerly enslaved persons even to the present day. *A History of African American Autobiography* uncovers the centrality of genealogy, cultural creativity, race consciousness, intersectional identities, linguistic playfulness, trauma, resistance, resilience, and self-portraits that permeate virtually every African American life writing text.

Twenty-first-century African American life writing resists strict genre conventions; expansion and experimentation supersede conventional limits and genre parameters. To a degree, claims of a right to free self-representation date back to the earliest forms of self-expression for African diasporic peoples. Especially in the young United States, in the swirl of discourses declaring independence from Britain, articulations of the self by people of African descent reflect efforts to establish a Black self and a Black nation, to proclaim self-determination, freedom from tyranny, and freedom to live according to the cultural norms of the collective. Eventually, people of the African diaspora would struggle "to tell a free story" and to manipulate what Frances Smith Foster called the "cultural matrix" of the early American and antebellum eras, to individualize the Black self and also express allegiance to other African diasporic peoples in political and cultural units.[16] Further, in diverse autobiographical forms, diasporic Africans would protest the collectivized injustices perpetrated against them based on hate and prejudice. From the beginning, Black American self-articulation assumed a variety of print forms. In "A Narrative of the Interesting Origins and (Somewhat) Surprising Developments of African-American Print Culture" (2005), Foster enumerates

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some of these forms: "constitutions and bylaws, minutes of meetings, convention resolutions, lectures, and commemorations. . . . poems, songs, eulogies, and essays in broadside, pamphlet, periodical, and book forms."[17] Honing in chiefly on records of nineteenth-century Colored Conventions as unacknowledged life writing documents, Foster reminds us that along the US eastern seaboard, Convention members valued the organizational and political records they kept, and they "also worked to communicate physical and metaphysical realities and to develop their moral, spiritual, intellectual, and artistic selves."[18] We now have free and open access to the records of these conventions, under the auspices of the Colored Conventions Project, which specifies its mission as detecting "the many leaders and places involved in [nineteenth-century Colored Conventions] – bringing them to digital life for a new generation of students and scholars across disciplines and for community researchers interested in the history of activist church, civil rights, educational and entrepreneurial engagement."[19] Even before Africans and their descendants began meeting in the organized formal structures that became known as the Colored Conventions and therein recording their collective experiences, self-authored and self-*authorized* documentation of Black lived experience, both individual and collective, had already become African Americans' oldest and most generative literary mode. One example is encapsulated in the very name deliberately chosen by Samuel Cornish and John Russwurm, editors of the earliest known African American newspaper, *Freedom's Journal*, the 1827 opening editorial of which proclaimed: "We wish to plead our own cause."[20] Before making the case for freedom in *Freedom's Journal* and after 1827 on their own terms and in numerous print and more recently digital spaces, African Americans have turned to life story for empowerment and resilience, for innovation and drive. African American auto/biographical texts – and Black life writing studies – both form the focus of this book.

This volume identifies hundreds of life writing texts by African Americans ranging 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*. The chapters below identify shifts in the representation of African American life in all of the multivalent forms that African American expressivity currently assumes, manifesting beyond print layouts to dramatic performances, to art installations, and even to the music Amiri Baraka, author of *The Autobiography of Leroi Jones* (1984, 1997) dubbed as "the biography of jazz." In tandem, the contributors examine the most

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distinctive characteristics of Black life writing; collectively, they trace how African American autobiography has developed over the centuries.

Another function of *A History of African American Autobiography* lies in expert discussions of African American life writing as an historical phenomenon and the cultural shifts of the genre as documented in academic, often theoretical, studies over time.[21] Thus, this book specifies significant and persistent types of Black life writing across its history in the United States, from its early North American context.[22] Furthermore, it indicates directions scholars of the field have taken in the formation of significant approaches to the study of Black life writing texts. Notably, the very word "autobiography" holds significance for people of African descent in the US context, chiefly for its linguistic association with selfhood, agency, subjectivity, textuality, historiography, and naming one's self rather than being named, or sometimes renamed, by arrogant, adversarial, and/or colonizing others. In 1982, for example, Audre Lorde subverted conventional aesthetics of life writing with her publication of *Zami, a New Spelling of My Name*.[23] Not only did she reconceptualize the genre of autobiography – and, moreover, the less conventional autofiction – but Lorde renamed it as well by labeling *Zami* a work of "biomythography."[24] As Frances Smith Foster has noted, "[eighteenth-century North American] people of African descent used their print culture to help reinvent themselves as African Americans and to construct African America."[25] That is, the autobiographical impulse has always been strong in people of African descent. Even in texts in which a fully developed identitarian narrative does not dominate, one can find autobiographical traces, rhythms, and notes in the life writing register, what Cheryl Wall has called "the stylized 'I,'" in much Black literature.[26]

One discerns the performative difference of Blackness at every turn. It is apparent, on the one hand, in *Beyond Katrina: A Meditation on the Mississippi Gulf Coast* (2010), in which Natasha Trethewey yokes her photograph-inspired poetry, her brother's prison missives, the siblings' recollections of their childhood pre-demolition home, and interviews with numerous Gulfport survivors of both the 2005 catastrophic hurricane and the years of rapacious casino industry plunder preceding it, and on the other hand, in any personal narrative by Maya Angelou.[27] Rather, there is arguably no one Angelou narrative. Critics generally regard Angelou's prose books published between 1970 and 1986 as a five-part autobiography; one has suggested "what distinguishes Angelou's autobiographical method from more conventional autobiographical forms is her very denial of closure."[28] As if to prove the point, in 2008 and 2013, respectively,

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Angelou published two more autobiographies: *Letter to My Daughter* and *Mom and Me and Mom*.[29] Not only did she come to match Frederick Douglass as an autobiographical author, over one hundred years later, but through her numerous life writing texts – from hardcovers to essays to journals to poetry and more – Angelou caught the very spirit of critic Richard K. Barksdale's theorization about one "school of critical thought" respecting African American life writing. Barksdale explains: "Having been excluded from involvement in the creation of history as history is defined by Western tradition, black people have, through their autobiographies, provided their own histories – stories of their journey from 'can't to can' and their flight from oppression to an ever elusive quasi-freedom."[30]

Aside from authors of (posthumously) published diaries – among women, for example, Rebecca Cox Jackson, Emilie Frances Davis, Charlotte Forten Grimké, Alice Dunbar-Nelson, Audre Lorde, and Kathleen Collins – serial African American life writers are relatively few.[31] From the 1700s, African Americans have created and disseminated collections of illustrious, inspirational Black lives – from church rosters to mutual aid society membership lists to newspaper editorial board catalogs.[32] In antebellum America, supplementing the print culture of such newspapers as Thomas Hamilton's *Anglo-African* and the African Methodist Episcopal Church's *Christian Recorder*, anthologies of biographies and other collected portraits of distinguished or quotidian Black life undercut slavocrats' representation of northern Black people as penurious and miserable. During Reconstruction, for example, William Wells Brown produced the multimodal *The Rising Son; or, the Antecedents and Advancement of the Colored Race* (1874).[33] Praising Brown's historiography in *The Rising Son*, Stephen G. Hall notes Brown's "truly diasporic" scope: "It [*The Rising Son*] encompasses the black experience in Africa, Latin America, and Europe as well as the United States. *The Rising Son* also relies on a wide variety of sources, ranging from travelers' accounts to diaries and slave narratives."[34] In 1908, *The Work of the Afro-American Woman*, by Mrs. N[athan] F[rancis] [née Gertrude Bustill] Mossell, names each of hundreds of public figures–mostly African American women – who engaged in critical civic services, including the transatlantic Anti-Lynching Committee. Mossell's book was followed, in 1926, by Hallie Q. Brown's *Homespun Heroines and Other Women of Distinction*, an illustrated volume heralding sixty African American women leading distinctive lives from within legal enslavement in the middle of the eighteenth century through the 1905 emancipatory founding of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in Canada.[35]

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Fortunately, critics and scholars have documented some of the extensive academic activity concurrent with African American life writing. A landmark twentieth-century text of Black life writing studies, Russell C. Brignano's *Black Americans in Autobiography: An Annotated Bibliography of Autobiographies and Autobiographical Books Written Since the Civil War*, published first in 1974 and then expanded in 1984, collates a superb list of African American life writing texts published after 1865.[36] In 2004, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., took on a similar project in *African American Lives* – not the first book of its kind but one of the most popular due to the lead editor's renown. Then Gates and Evelyn Higginbotham twice updated *African American Lives* as the *African American National Biography*, each time with extensive bibliographies and chronologies in supplemental volumes.[37] Between these multivolume works and dozens of other collections of African American life writing stands William L. Andrews's consummate *Documenting the American South*, which includes the *North American Slave Narratives*. The latter collection provides access to the life stories of enslaved individuals, from late eighteenth-century dying confessions of alleged rapists such as Joseph Mountain's confession published in New Haven in 1790 to Emma J. Ray and Lloyd P. Ray's *Twice Sold, Twice Ransomed: Autobiography of Mr. and Mrs. L. P. Ray* (1926). Written by or about persons of African descent, and set in the North American colonies and later the United States, such life narratives range from the pamphlet detailing the enigmatic criminal and Christian *Confessions of Nat Turner*, by Thomas Gray (1831), to the harrowing *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Narrative, Written by Herself* (1861), published by Harriet Jacobs under the pseudonym Linda Brent. Richard K. Barksdale rightly observed of African American autobiography: "It represents the collective self-appraisal of a rich variety of Afro-Americans – a challenging mélange that cuts across all groups, sects, and classes of black America."[38]

As Black studies transitioned from community centers to university classrooms after the Civil Rights Movement, African American life writing has expanded, too, as entertainment, as commodity, and as belles-lettres. Joining Gates, Higginbotham, Andrews, Barksdale, Brignano, and numerous others in articulating the aesthetic and ideological integration of multiple identity categories in African American life writing, Stephen Butterfield affirmed autobiography as a form central to the construction of African American identity and Black selfhood: "The 'self' of black autobiography . . . is not an individual with a private career, but a soldier in a long, historic march toward Canaan. The self is conceived as a member

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of an oppressed social group, with ties to the other members."[39] Consider the deceptively straightforward ex-slave narratives collected during the Federal Writers Project and the ostensibly simple Great Migration narratives collected for the Works Progress Administration. Consider the multivalent travel memoirs by Harlem Renaissance literati like Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston; the bleak mid-twentieth-century life accounts like those by Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Pauli Murray, Malcolm X, and Maya Angelou; the breakout memoirs of the children of the Children of the Civil Rights Movement, including Bliss Broyard, Rebecca Walker, Danza Senna, and Martin Luther King III; the gangbanger exposés written in prison, such as *Monster: The Autobiography of an L. A. Gang Member* (1993), with its author Sanyika Shakur's boast on the paperback edition back cover: "I propose to open my mind as wide as possible to allow my readers the first ever glimpse at South Central from my side of the gun, street, fence, and wall."[40] Perhaps the twenty-first-century antithesis of *Monster* is *Unashamed* (2016), hip-hop and rap artist Lecrae's multigeneric narrating his conversion to Christianity after a life of violence and misdemeanors. Consider such acclaimed recollections of the present day as Ta-Nehisi Coates's *The Beautiful Struggle* and *Between the World and Me* (2008 and 2015, respectively), Jessmyn Ward's *Men We Reaped* (2013), Margo Jefferson's *Negroland* (2015), John Lewis, et al.'s serial and graphic text *March* (2015–2018), or Kiese Laymon's *Heavy* (2018) – ironically, each, like Obama's *Becoming*, born onto the *New York Times* bestseller list and first editions immediately available at Costco.

Terms, Contexts, and Subtexts

> My folk, in other words, have always been a race for theory – though more in the form of the hieroglyph, a written figure which is both sensual and abstract, both beautiful and communicative. —Barbara Christian, "The Race for Theory"[41]

> I'm a liar. —Shonda Rhimes, *Year of Yes*[42]

Ask any reader about the fundamental elements of a traditional autobiography, and they will offer familiar conventions: an autobiography is a first-person narrative of the life of the author, the individual person whose name and image appear on the text's print cover. Chronologically structured, coherent and linear, factual and authentic, an autobiography gives a truthful account of the author's struggles, accomplishments, the major life events that affirm this person as someone credible, authoritative, and

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interesting. Moreover, the general reader of auto/biography anticipates a retrospective story narrated by a younger avatar of the author's self. And indeed, life narratives continue to conform loosely to what Philip Lejeune in the 1970s described as "the autobiographical pact."[43] Lejeune posited a contract between authors and readers, that author-autobiographer was both a discrete narrator and a protagonist to whom events of the narrative arc happen. Readers may rightly expect an autobiography to answer questions they have about the back story of a protagonist's life, leading to its worthy production of an autobiography. But where auto/biographers must temper any prideful claims of exceptionalism with modesty, African American life writing narrators generally proclaim individual I-witness and eyewitness to collective African diasporic common cultural experiences. After Lejeune, William L. Andrews would argue about African American autobiography in particular: "to write autobiography one must take one's own life (or some major portion of it) seriously enough to find in it a significance that makes reconstructing that life valuable to another."[44]

Finding ample importance in their own experience, Black life writers in turn call readers of African American life writing to re-present the stories they consume, if not also become inspired to share their own lived experience. For, by and large, a distinctive feature among African American life writing continues to be its forceful insistence on witnessing. Trudier Harris affirms as much, saying: "Arguably, witnessing is the guiding motivation and creative force behind African American autobiographical writings."[45] And readers like those who pre-purchased Michelle Obama's *Becoming*, myself among them, we comply, believing wholeheartedly in auto/biography's power. Jesmyn Ward offers a poignant example in her introduction to *The Fire This Time*: "In desperation [when Trayvon Martin was murdered], I sought James Baldwin. I read Baldwin's essay 'Notes of a Native Son' . . . Around a year after Trayvon Martin's death, a year in which black person after black person died and no one was held accountable, I picked up *The Fire Next Time*, and I read."[46] Ward ends her introduction in direct address to "each one of you, dear readers," and with the hope to inspire them to "feel as if we are sitting together, you and me and Baldwin and . . . all the clear-sighted writers here [in *The Fire This Time*] – and that we are composing our story together."[47] Indeed, this vision of a collective (African American) readership undergirds, or more, permeates, most Black life writing – a canon of veritable counter-stories.

Richard Delgado and other founders of Critical Race Theory draw connections between the efficacy of conventional legal written argumentation, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, African American

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counternarratives – inventive, self-actualizing stories that subvert "the linguistic code required by the court [that] sterilize[s]" the facts of inequitable and bigoted race relations.[48] In the *Michigan Law Review* article "Legal Storytelling: Storytelling for Oppositionists and Others: A Plea for Narrative" (1987), Delgado situates the phenomenon of Black counter-storytelling within its cultural roots of (among other phenomena) African diasporic enslavement, emphasizing the centrality of personal experience to the expressive form: "Subordinated groups have always told stories. Black slaves told, in song, letters, and verse, about their own pain and oppression" and mocked their oppressors' turns of depravity and myopia.[49] Long after the cessation of infamous traffic in the slave trade's Middle Passages, lived experience remains central to African American storytelling, and life narrative central to Black literature. As the chapters in *A History of African American Autobiography* illuminate, the genres of Black life writing run a brilliant gamut: freedom petitions, manumission papers, memoir, affidavits, civil rights photographs, LGBT coming-out narratives, travel stories, missionary chronicles, disability narratives, genealogies, testimonies, and personal essays – records of memory for progeny and for "proof." Black life writing also emerges in myriad decontextualized and unexpurgated objects: diaries, letters, scrapbooks, high school yearbooks, birth certificates, census records, marriage licenses, newspaper clippings, and publicity announcements of all kinds. Furthermore, Black life writing manifests in social media, blog posts, and of course, email; less discursively, it takes such diverse digital forms as the Christian conversion albums of the rapper Lecrae. A recent automediality special journal issue asserts: "If 'autobiography' has denoted a way to write the self from the location of the self, automediality points to the range of media forms and technologies through which people engage in digital, visual, filmic, performance, textual, and transmediated forms of documenting, constructing and presenting the self."[50]

Because violence is quotidian in African American experience, and the Black body ever under siege, African American auto/biography and its technologies frequently document psychological, physical, and emotional trauma – and just as often inscribe healing. bell hooks theorizes Black affect and emotion through personal and first-person narratives, and describes the phenomenon of family secrets as "something blocking my ability to tell my story."[51] Her theorizations reveal the emotional landscape of her interiority as part of her process to clear her narrative flow. But across centuries, African diasporic life writing has virtually always recorded injustice and oppression, exposed subjugation. As

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Delgado observes, "far from deepening the despair of the oppressed, [personal stories] lead to healing, liberation, mental health."[52] Ideologies of Black selfhood and intersectional survival are inscribed on the pages of works for children from the perspective of children even, as in Jacqueline Woodson's *Brown Girl Dreaming* (2017). Which is to say that a politics of racialization and the documentation of resilience are integral to the final outcomes of African American life writing, that is, the texts themselves. In Nellie Y. McKay's words: "the personal narrative became a historical site on which aesthetics, self-confirmation of humanity, citizenship, and the significance of racial politics shaped African-American literary expression."[53] Writing with an ironically measured pen, W. E. B. Du Bois foregoes intimate details of his life in his 364-page *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept* – never once naming his wife or young son, as K. A. Appiah observes – in favor of meditating on the status of the Black folk, circa 1940.[54] Indeed, he specifically admonishes readers not to mistake "my discussions of the concept of race, and of the white and colored worlds . . . as digressions from the history of life; rather my autobiography is a digressive illustration and exemplification of what race has meant in the world in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries."[55]

For all the torment recounted across the genre over the centuries, African American life writing upends the supremacy of whiteness and domination "against all odds," as Joanne M. Braxton contends, such that "the Black autobiographical narrator comes to self-awareness and finds herself at the center of her own experience."[56] Invoking Du Bois's famous trope of the veil, Braxton continues: "Veiled though she might be (even twice veiled, thrice if she should be a member of a sexual minority), the black woman autobiographer possesses her own self-conscious vision of herself and her community."[57] Playfully implying she must disclaim herself any kind of African griot, Shonda Rhimes succinctly touts her poor memory in *Year of Yes*, which in part reflects on life as a misfit: "My memory sucks."[58] Rhimes's autobiography contains photographs of her birth family and of her adopted daughters; other photographs feature the actors of various ethnic and race identifications who have acted in television roles Rhimes has created. *Year of Yes* demonstrates strong familial bonds connecting the eccentric narrator to her parents and siblings. Yet Rhimes undergoes a "year of yes," she insists, to restore her lost access to "the memory that writers derive from their connection to a collective historical imaginary."[59] She suggests from the outset that her lifelong obsession with fiction-making unsuits her for the particular kind of

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storytelling that yields traditional African American autobiography: "Names are forgotten, details of one event are switched with another, a crazy story I am sure was told by one friend was actually told by someone else. The insides of my brain are a fading photograph, stories and images drifting away to places unknown. Leaving patches of nothingness where a name or event or a location should be."[60] Truth-telling, embellishing, subterfuge, flattery, prevarication: the underpinnings of African American literature, survival, and self-determination. When slave traders and other white supremacists argued that, as barbarians, people of African descent lacked moral integrity and any interest in honesty and credibility, the sideways truth became a Black folk necessity in these United States, from the antebellum era and before, from the Western expansion, even on the US prairies, Rhimes's Hollywood included, and beyond. African American life writing proves and breathes the prophecy forecast by Ricia Anne Chansky and Emily Hipchen that the future of autobiography is vast beyond measure: "multitudinous, multifaceted, and boundless."[61]

African American life writing consists of keywords such as *counternarrative*, *counter-storytelling*, *body*, *humanity*, *authenticity*, *intersectionality*, *resistance*, *domination*, *diaspora*, *violence*, *consciousness*, *loss*, *interiority*, *truth*, and *heart*. Conversely, critical autobiography scholarship comprises such keywords as *memory*, *aesthetics*, *subjectivity*, *confession*, *transformation*, *retrospective*, *reflection*, and recently *blog posts* and other online life forms. During the last decades of the twentieth century, the greatest emphasis in the formal iteration of scholarly African American literary criticism underscored slave narratives. Paving the way were Frances Smith Foster's *Witnessing Slavery: The Development of Ante-Bellum Slave Narratives* and Robert B. Stepto's *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative*, both published in 1979.[62] In the next decade, Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the "Racial" Self* (1987); William L. Andrews's *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760–1865* (1989); and Joanne M. Braxton's *Black Women Writing Autobiography: A Tradition within a Tradition* (1989) built on a growing list of published research titles amplifying the field. In 1993, Andrews edited *African American Autobiography: A Collection of Critical Essays*. More than twenty years after the publication of Robert Sayre's *American Lives* (1994), Eric D. Lamore edited *Reading African American Autobiography: Twenty-First-Century Contexts and Criticisms*, an anthology of essays reading individual and collective first-person accounts of Black lived experiences under the broader, more inclusive nomenclature life writing.[63]

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A Future Like the Past: Body, Story, Fugitivity, Power

> Du Bois is always using what Spivak and Chandler would describe as the autobiographical example, which is not a personal story that folds onto itself; it's not about navel gazing, it's really about trying to look at historical and social process and one's own formation as a window onto social and historical processes, as an example of them. In *Lose your Mother*, I wanted to tell a story capable of engaging and countering the violence of abstraction. For me, that had to be embodied in physical story, and I was the one who had to hazard the journey.
>
> —Saidiya Hartman, Interview with Patricia J. Saunders[64]

> The extremism, the tenacity in me. I will hold on. I *will* to hold on. Until all the cards have been played.
>
> —Kathleen Collins, *Notes from a Black Woman's Diary*[65]

The twenty-two eminent scholars whose chapters follow this introduction illuminate the lives of distinguished African American leaders and ordinary Black folk, champions, gamblers, churchgoers, homemakers, ancestors. In addition, the contributors offer enlightening discussions of an exceptionally wide variety of life writing forms engaged in by people of African descent in formal and informal self-representations. The collection is divided into two parts. The first, "Origins and Histories," is chronologically arranged from the mid-eighteenth century through the current moment and traces African American autobiographical traditions in diverse print culture and multimodal forms over the centuries – petitions, newspapers, antebellum slave narratives, Civil Rights Movement memoirs, and so on. The latter part of the collection, "Individuals and Communities," attends to distinctive groups of Black people, some – like glitzy celebrities and brawny athletes – whose lives are the common stuff of life writing documentation, and others the subjects of life writing only recently getting the critical attention they merit – life narratives by or about sexual minorities, mixed-race individuals, children, visual artists. A compelling characteristic of each chapter is the contributor's observation of life writers' use of auto/biography and counter-storytelling to reconstitute for readers the humanity, emotions, and intelligence of Black Americans and all people of African descent, wherever they are in the African diaspora.

Tellingly, an emphasis on race, racial identity, and transnationalism undergirds each chapter in a particular way – whatever the century or subgenre under discussion. This seems especially the case for life writing

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after 1900, after the Niagara Movement and the founding of the NAACP. Autobiographers writing after 1900 had advantages over their predecessors in the form of the microchip, email, and social media. And partly because of those twentieth-century inventions, contemporary African American personal narratives project as their backdrop a kind of "borderless black Atlantic" and regard Black identity as a complex and mutable, fluid and fugitive social construct.[66] On the whole, they cast doubt on an implied halcyon future for *life* as well as for both the life stories they could tell and any future life writing scholarship generated about those stories. That is, if Chansky and Hipchen, editors of the academic journal *a/b: Auto/Biography*, optimistically project: "Our future is a discursive space in which we will interweave multiple visions, versions, disciplines, languages, rhetorics, genres, and theoretical lenses to study narrated lives,"[67] then this vision does not hold for Black life writing writ large. Rather, influential theorists such as Fred Moten, Saidiya Hartman, and Christina Elizabeth Sharpe increasingly draw on personal life stories to expose violence and injustice in the Americas; their nimble notions of geography reconfigure a vast diaspora within and beyond the Atlantic Basin to include autobiographers from the eighteenth century (Belinda Royall Sutton, Olaudah Equiano) to the nineteenth century (Zilpha Elaw, Ellen and William Craft, William Wells Brown) to the twentieth (Barack Obama, Angela Davis, Assata Shakur).

Sharpe's multivalent use of "wake" as ship hold, funeral service, and state of social consciousness is just one example of Black scholars' increased use of personal narrative and personal lived experience in the production of knowledge about collective people of African descent. Their first-person singular scholarship demonstrates how life writing studies has *continued* since the columns of *Freedom's Journal* to blend the analytical and scholarly with the aesthetic and autobiographical, the theoretical with the embodied. Sharpe asserts: "I include the personal here to connect the social forces on a specific, particular family's being in the wake to those of all Black people in the wake; to mourn and to illustrate the ways our individual lives are always swept up in the wake produced and determined, though not absolutely, by the afterlives of slavery."[68] Thus, she joins the elegiac tradition of, for example, Gwendolyn Brooks's *Gay Chaps at the Bar* (1944), Elizabeth Alexander's *The Light of the World* (2015), and Lindon Barrett's *Conditions of the Present: Selected Essays*, posthumously published by other scholars (2018). Moten, Hartman, and Sharpe, and the scholars they have influenced, poignantly remind me of a Black feminist scholar gone far too soon: their work reminds

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us of what Barbara Christian heralded in her 1987 essay "The Race for Theory." Extoling the capacity of people of African descent to imagine stories and create dynamic narrative for survival, Christian celebrated a veritable "need" among folk like herself to theorize, and so they do, she marveled: "in riddles and proverbs, in the play with language," despite being "constantly limited by societal structures." The future of the field of African American life writing, like its past and as examined by perspicacious, expert scholars, is ever inclined this way.

Notes

1. Ida B. Wells, "Preface," in *Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells* (Negro American Biographies and Autobiographies), ed. Alfreda M. Duster (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 5.
2. This volume interchangeably identifies people of African descent as African Americans, Black people, and Africans in the diaspora. As Andrea Stone observes in *Black Well-Being*, "even though race is not rooted in biology, the social construction of race locates racial difference in the body." Andrea Stone, *Black Well-Being: Health and Selfhood in Antebellum Black Literature* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2016). Likewise, Black is capitalized in accordance with common journalistic practice, as implemented by the Associated Press. Reflecting on the usage of capitalized Black in the *New York Times,* for example, Lori L. Tharps wrote: "When speaking of a culture, ethnicity or group of people, the name should be capitalized. Black with a capital B refers to people of the African diaspora. Lowercase black is simply a color" (November 18, 2014, https://nyti.ms/11hVgKH). See also sociolinguists' discussion of African American racial identity signifiers in *The Oxford Handbook of African American Language*, ed. Sonja L. Lanehart (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), www.sonjallanehart.com.
3. Sam Gillette, "Michelle Obama's Book Sales Hit 3 Million as She Adds New Cities to 2019 Tour: 'I'm So Humbled,'" *People Magazine Online*, December 11, 2018, https://people.com/politics/michelle-obama-announces-becoming-book-tour-dates-2019/.
4. Amy Watson, "U.S. Book Industry: Statistics & Facts," *Statista*, January 16, 2019, www.statista.com/topics/1177/book-market/.
5. Michael Schaub, "Michelle Obama's Book Has Sold Almost 10 Million Copies, on Track Toward a Historic High for Memoirs," *LA Times* (March 26, 2019).
6. *Ibid*. See also statistics of the sale of Barack Obama's *A Promised Land* (2020), by Howard Rambsy II. http://www.culturalfront.org/2020/12/barack-obamas-memoir-by-numbers-so-far.html
7. Jay Conner, "Michelle Obama's *Becoming* Is Becoming a Class Curriculum," *The Root*, December 29, 2018, https://theglowup.theroot.com/michelle-obamas-becoming-is-becoming-a-class-curriculum-1831378329?utm_me

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dium=sharefromsite&utm_source=theroot_copy&utm_campaign=top. See also Kinitra Dechaun Brooks and Kameelah L. Martin, eds., *The Lemonade Reader: Beyoncé, Black Feminism and Spirituality* (London and New York: Routledge, 2019).

8. Jim Milliot, "Nonfiction Categories Continued to Grow in 2017," *Publishers Weekly*, January 19, 2018.
9. *Ibid.*
10. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, "A Personal Introduction to *Life Writing in the Long Run*," in *Life Writing in the Long Run: A Smith & Watson Autobiography Studies Reader* (Ann Arbor: Michigan Publishing, 2016), xx.
11. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Bearing Witness: Selections from African-American Autobiography in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1991). Quotes appear on pp. 4, 5.
12. Susan Chira, "Michelle Obama and Stacey Abrams, Models of Power for Black Women," *New York Times*, December 29, 2018, https://nyti.ms/2GLL33k.
13. Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015).
14. Jacqueline Woodson, *Brown Girl Dreaming* (New York: Nancy Paulsen Books, an imprint of Penguin Group [USA], 2014), 269.
15. *Slave Voyages*, https://slavevoyages.org/voyage/about. *The Early Caribbean Digital Archive*, https://ecda.northeastern.edu. "The Family Tree of Michelle Obama, the First Lady," October 7, 2009, *New York Times*, https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/interactive/2009/10/08/us/politics/20091008-obama-family-tree.html.
16. William L. Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760–1865* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986). Frances Smith Foster, *Witnessing Slavery: The Development of Ante-Bellum Slave Narratives* (Wisconsin Studies in American Autobiography), 2nd ed. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994).
17. Frances Smith Foster, "A Narrative of the Interesting Origins and (Somewhat) Surprising Developments of African-American Print Culture," *American Literary History* 17, 4 (2005): 716.
18. *Ibid.*
19. P. Gabrielle Foreman, John Ernest, their former graduate students, and other scholars are to be commended for their extensive, award-winning work on the *Colored Convention Project*, a digital humanities project begun in 2012 at the University of Delaware. The Project moved to the Penn State University in 2019. "About the Colored Conventions," *Colored Conventions: Bringing Nineteenth-Century Black Organizing to Digital Life*, http://coloredconventions.org.
20. Samuel Cornish and John Russwurm, *Freedom's Journal* 1, 1 (1827).
21. I use the terms life writing, autobiography, and auto/biography interchangeably within this introduction. On the distinctions, see Smith and Watson, *Life Writing in the Long Run*, xxiii.

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22. In addition, more information about Caribbean life writing is currently available in *Caribbean Literature in Transition* ed. Evelyn O'Callaghan and Tim Watson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).
23. Audre Lorde, *Zami, a New Spelling of My Name* (Watertown, MA: Persephone Press, 1982).
24. On autofiction, see Michael Lackey, ed., *Truthful Fictions: Conversations with American Biographical Novelists* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), and *Biographical Fiction: A Reader* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2017). See also Kevin Young's *Bunk: The Rise of Hoaxes, Humbug, Plagiarists, Phonies, Post-Facts, and Fake News* (Minneapolis, MN: Graywolf Press, 2017).
25. Foster, "A Narrative of the Interesting Origins," 716.
26. Cheryl A. Wall, *On Freedom and the Will to Adorn : The Art of the African American Essay*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018. Print. on the African American essay. This reference is from the typed ms., 55.
27. Natasha Trethewey, *Beyond Katrina: A Meditation on the Mississippi Gulf Coast* (University of Georgia Press, 2010).
28. These texts are *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1970), *Gather Together in My Name* (1974), *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas* (1976), *The Heart of a Woman* (1981), and *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* (1986). Mary Jane Lupton, "Singing the Black Mother: Maya Angelou and Autobiographical Continuity," in *Maya Angelou's I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings: A Casebook*, ed. Joanne M. Braxton (Oxford University Press, 1999), 130. Reprinted from *Black American Literature Forum* 24, 2 (Summer 1990): 257–276. See also Jacqueline S. Thursby, *Critical Companion to Maya Angelou: A Literary Reference to Her Life and Work* (New York: Facts on File, 2011).
29. Maya Angelou, *Letter to My Daughter* (New York: Random House, 2008). Maya Angelou, *Mom & Me & Mom* (New York: Random House, 2013).
30. Richard K. Barksdale, "Black Autobiography and the Comic Vision," *Black American Literature Forum* 15, 1 (Spring 1981): 22–23.
31. See Geneva Cobb-Moore, "Diaries and Journals," in *Oxford Companion to African American Literature*, ed. William L. Andrews, Frances Smith Foster, and Trudier Harris (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 216–218.
32. For more on these organizations and their record keeping, see John Ernest, *A Nation Within a Nation: Organizing African-American Communities before the Civil War* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2011).
33. William Wells Brown, *The Rising Son; or, the Antecedents and Advancement of the Colored Race* (Boston: A. G. Brown & Co., 1874). Hallie Q. Brown, *Homespun Heroines and Other Women of Distinction* (Xenia, OH: Aldine Publishing Company, 1926).
34. Stephen G. Hall, *A Faithful Account of the Race: African American Historical Writing in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 2.
35. Mrs. N. F. Mossell, *The Work of the Afro-American Woman*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: G. S. Ferguson, 1908). Brown, *Homespun Heroines*.

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36. Russell C. Brignano, *Black Americans in Autobiography: An Annotated Bibliography of Autobiographies and Autobiographical Books Written Since the Civil War*. Rev. and exp. ed. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1984).
37. Henry Louis Gates, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, and W. E. B. Du Bois Institute for African American Research, *African American Lives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). Henry Louis Gates and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, eds., *African American National Biography*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).
38. Richard K. Barksdale, "Black Autobiography and the Comic Vision," *African American Review* 50, 4 (2017): 613–618.
39. Butterfield quoted in Friedman, in Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, eds., *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), 78. Susan Stanford Friedman, "Women's Autobiographical Selves: Theory and Practice," excerpted in Smith and Watson, eds., *Women, Autobiography, Theory*, 72–82.
40. Sanyika Shakur, *Monster: The Autobiography of an L.A. Gang Member* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1993).
41. Barbara Christian, *From the Inside Out: Afro-American Women's Literary Tradition and the State* (Minneapolis: Center for Humanistic Studies, University of Minnesota, 1987).
42. Shonda Rhimes, *Year of Yes* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015), xx.
43. Philip Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, ed. Paul John Eakin, trans. Katherine Leary (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 3–30. The phrase "The Autobiographical Pact" is the title of Chapter 1. NB: In *Life Writing in the Long Run*, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson take issue with the primacy of "reference predominantly [to] the work of de Man, Barthes, and Lejeune, as if that triumvirate of theorists in the nineteen-seventies summed up the parameters of theorizing the autobiographical" ("A Personal Introduction," xx).
44. Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story*, 16.
45. Trudier Harris, "African American Autobiography," in *The Cambridge Companion to Autobiography*, ed. Maria DiBattista and Emily Ondine Wittman (Cambridge University Press, 2014), 180–194.
46. Jesmyn Ward, *The Fire This Time: A New Generation Speaks About Race* (New York: Scribner, 2016), 7.
47. *Ibid*., 11.
48. Richard Delgado, "Legal Storytelling: Storytelling for Oppositionists and Others: A Plea for Narrative," *Michigan Law Review* (1987): 2428.
49. *Ibid*., 2435.
50. Umit Kennedy and Emma Maguire, "The Texts and Subjects of Automediality," *M/C Journal* 21, 2 (2018), paragraph 5. Kennedy and Maguire write: "What we are exploring as scholars of automediality is a process of living. How people live, create, and present themselves, participate, narrativise, and simply 'be' in different spaces, using different mediums and technologies" (paragraph 1, in section "A Conversation between Editors").

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51. bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2015), 156.
52. Delgado, “Legal Storytelling,” 2437.
53. Nellie Y. McKay, “The Narrative Self,” in Smith and Watson, *Life Writing in the Long Run*, 96.
54. Kwame Anthony Appiah, “Introduction,” in W. E. B. Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept* (Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1940), i–xxxii. Appiah notes Du Bois’s omission of his spouse’s name on p. xxx.
55. *Ibid.*, xxxi.
56. Braxton, “Symbolic Geography,” in *Maya Angelou’s I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings,* p. 4. Braxton writes specifically of Maya Angelou here.
57. *Ibid.*, 4.
58. Rhimes, *Year of Yes*, xxi.
59. Gregory D. Smithers, “Challenging a Pan-African Identity: The Autobiographical Writings of Maya Angelou, Barack Obama, and Caryl Phillips,” *Journal of American Studies* 45, 3 (2011): 491.
60. Rhimes, *Year of Yes*, xxi.
61. Ricia Anne Chansky and Emily Hipchen, “Looking Forward: The Futures of Auto/Biography Studies,” *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* 32, 2: 154.
62. The widespread forms of African American life writing studies is apparent in the breadth of the Library of Congress call numbers assigned to these texts. Consider this range, for example: John Sekora and Darwin T. Turner’s *The Art of the Slave Narrative* is listed as PS366.A35 A 78 1982; William L. Andrews’s *To Tell a Free Story* appears at E185.96.A57 1986; and Sue Houchins’s edited collection of Black women’s *Spiritual Narratives* at BR1713 .S65 1988. Henry Louis Gates, *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the “Racial” Self* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).
63. Eric D. Lamore, “Introduction: African American Autobiography in the ‘Age of Obama,’” in *Reading African American Autobiography: Twenty-First Century Contexts and Criticism*, ed. Eric D. Lamore (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2017), 3–18. Robert F. Sayre, *American Lives: An Anthology of Autobiographical Writing*, Wisconsin Studies in American Autobiography (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994).
64. Patricia J. Saunders, “Fugitive Dreams of Diaspora: Conversations with Saidiya Hartman,” *Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal* 6, 1 (2008): 5, https://scholarlyrepository.miami.edu/anthurium/vol6/iss1/7.
65. Kathleen Collins, “Notes from a Black Woman’s Diary,” in *Notes from a Black Woman’s Diary: Selected Works of Kathleen Collins*, ed. Nina Lorez Collins (New York: HarperCollins, 2019), 46. Italics in original.
66. See Smithers, “Challenging a Pan-African Identity.”
67. Chansky and Hipchen, “Looking Forward,” 154.
68. Christina Elizabeth Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

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