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*Race and Form: Towards a Contextualized Narratology of
African American Autobiography (review)*

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Biography, Volume 30, Number 4, Fall 2007, pp. 651-654 (Review)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/bio.2008.0011>



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him into Christian worship, these ministers were following Wellington's own example. The Duke attended Sunday services, he wrote to a friend in 1849, primarily to model such behavior for his servants, and the church was eager to extend this example beyond the Duke's immediate household staff.

A second fresh approach Sinnema develops has to do with warring definitions of the English or Irish nature of qualities seen to be represented by the Duke. Born at Mornington House, Dublin, and raised among the Anglo-Irish aristocracy, Wellington did not return to Ireland after 1809, and in a codicil to his 1808 will disallowed any child of his ever even to visit "that country" (qtd. 103). After his death a controversy raged between elements of the English and the Irish press, in which Wellington "could be legitimately embraced or rejected by both sides" (104). Members of the Irish press claimed and disclaimed their native son, and Sinnema's probing discussion makes particularly fine use of the journalistic battles waged by and against the *Galway Vindicator* and the *Belfast Mercury*.

Soon after Wellington's death an author in the *Belfast Mercury* observed, "The English are gratified to discover in the Duke those characteristics which they believe distinguish themselves" (qtd. 95). This is the primary claim of *The Wake of Wellington* as well. That Sinnema's argument follows in the wake of a host of Victorian observers does not discredit it, but rather showcases not only one of the prominent meanings of a central Victorian cultural event, but what the lifted voices of the Victorians themselves tell us.

Cornelia Pearsall

Dejin Xu. *Race and Form: Towards a Contextualized Narratology of African American Autobiography*. Oxford: Peter Lang, 2007. 226 pp. ISBN 13 978-3-03911-003-2, \$47.95

In taking a formalist approach to a range of nineteenth and twentieth century African American autobiographies, *Race and Form* presents an observant and illuminating contribution to the fields of African American, autobiographical, and narrative studies. Its exploration of narrative strategy, construction, and effect works to counter the neglect of such aspects in existing critical readings of autobiography, and in particular, African American autobiography. The volume sets out a clear methodological line, drawing on narratological frameworks evolved in response to fiction, but revising and adapting them for non-fictional life writing, and performing practical analysis of a detailed and perceptive kind. Despite the author's somewhat clumsy use of the term ideology, once one has grasped and accepted his own working definition of an "ideological approach," there is much to be learned from this inquiry into

“the relation between narrative technique and . . . ideological significance” as filtered through the lens of race in the United States. The study consists of five main chapters, all but one of which examine pairs of African American texts spanning from 1845 to 1972. Although it is a shame that nothing more contemporary than Gwendolyn Brooks’s *Report from Part One* comes under scrutiny, the investigation of eight different narratives allows for breadth and stimulating comparison.

Chapter One seeks to establish a “narrative grammar” to be employed in subsequent practical analyses, and after outlining the neglect of autobiography in narratology and of formalist concerns in studies of autobiography, the chapter offers a route by which theories of narrative usually associated with fiction are adapted for the exploration of autobiography. This grammar encompasses such matters as narrative progression, perspective, voice, address, and unreliability, with particular attention to the increased prominence and awareness of extratextual referents in forms of non-fiction like autobiography. The engagement with the work of narratologists such as Genette, Chatman, Booth, Ricoeur, Rimmon-Kenan, Robinowitz, and Phelan is confident and well informed, although perhaps some consideration might also have been given to formalist branches of African American literary criticism and thus to potential intersections and specificities.

The substantial second chapter turns to a comparison of two autobiographical texts by the prominent ex-slave Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845) and *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855). Here close analysis permits the drawing out of several differences between two narratives that chart the same period of Douglass’s life, revealing contrasting depictions of his childhood and family, and disparate accounts of the scene in which he fights back against his master, Covey. For Xu such changes in terms of narrative order and duration, ellipsis, self presentation, address, and narratorial commentary reveal and reflect a positive evolution of Douglass’s confidence, standing, and skill between 1845 and 1855. In addition, the focus on intertextual discrepancy facilitates the codification of key features of Douglass’s voicings. Yet while much is attributed to the development of his personal career as an orator and celebrated abolitionist in explaining differences between the two autobiographies, far more attention could have been paid to the respective publishing contexts and expected readerships for 1845 and 1855 (for example, might Douglass have been compelled to be far more restrained in the treatment of his family background in the earlier publication, and might his repeated emphasis here on lack of connection be viewed positively as an effective strategy at the time rather than as something remiss to be later redressed?). Also missing is any sense of Douglass’s nineteenth century literary

peers or current trends and practices, the autobiographical models on which he might have shaped his narratives, and indeed, the changing place of the slave narrative genre itself in American letters.

Chapter Three moves on to discuss two texts from the first half of the twentieth century: Zora Neale Hurston's *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942) and Richard Wright's *Black Boy* (1945). A detailed examination of the use of the two perspectives of a contemporary narrating self and a past experiencing self on the part of both writers, of episodic and elliptical patterns in Wright, and of self-obscuring and humorous ones in Hurston, follows. Although, once more, analysis is sustained, here the focus on just one chapter from each narrative leaves the reader with scant insight into their wider concerns or the reasons for their pairing. The repeated reference to Hurston's representation as personal and therefore more typically autobiographical and apolitical, and to Wright's as more preoccupied with a racial community and overtly political, is heavy handed to the extent of taking away from some finely observed close readings. In addition, the decision to set aside issues of gender, stated from the outset of the volume, contributes to a neutralization of Hurston that is reversed only by a rather brief concluding treatment of the potential of her use of black vernacular diction and modes of signification.

Xu's fourth chapter brings together analysis of Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1970) and Gwendolyn Brooks's *Report from Part One* (1972). Here the distinctive use of the present tense in retrospective narratives, and the effects of this in terms of immediacy and narratorial direction, are brought to our attention. Such readings highlight fascinating aspects of both texts, as does discussion of the significance of unreliability and address. The exclusive focus on such local issues creates a somewhat myopic effect, however, with much about the action, thematic concerns, and overarching discourses of the two narratives that might have enriched the assessment being left out. For example, given the formalist framework, it is surprising that the use of fragmentation and collage in the composition of *Report* is barely mentioned.

Chapter Five, significantly shorter than the three preceding chapters of practical analysis, ends the broadly chronological path charted thus far by turning to Booker T. Washington's *Up From Slavery* (1901) and W. E. B. DuBois's *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept* (1940). The emphasis here is on "stylistic and rhetorical devices," with Xu examining and comparing the employment of particularization, citation, exposition, lists, comparison, juxtaposition, and dialogue. These readings feel less full and detailed, and less effectively positioned in relation to a theoretical or critical framework, than elsewhere. The two narratives are negotiated chiefly through a familiar but also, in this case, deterministic opposition between Washington

as a figure of accommodation and DuBois as standing for more militant resistance in questions of racial inequality. Picking up on the subtitle of DuBois's publication, there is some discussion of the notion of "an autobiography of a race concept," and this might have proved an interesting phrase with which to return to the texts explored earlier, each one of which navigates not just a personal life but African American identity in its own distinct way.

Race and Form provides a helpful starting point in thinking through a narratological approach to autobiography, and to African American publications too often read merely in terms of their social commentary. It also offers a series of observant practical analyses and stimulating comparisons. Despite the range of its selection of primary texts, the study is somewhat narrowed and impoverished, however, by a lack of engagement with how the autobiographies in question might be a part of or respond to an African American (or American) literary tradition. For example, it surely would have been productive to have examined how some of the twentieth century publications draw upon the tropes, devices, and modes of the earlier slave narrative genre. Indeed, the volume declines to "probe into the historical development of narrative strategies," although this is the very activity that would have strengthened the claim to a contextualized narratology. Unfortunately, the volume also suffers from a succession of errors of the kind that one might expect to have been picked up at the editorial stages: there are countless infelicities of expression, an article by Elizabeth Schultz published in 1975 is wrongly attributed a publication date of 1915 and then celebrated as "one of the earliest . . . critical essays on modern African American autobiography," material is repeated, the theorist Michel Foucault is referred to as Michael Foucault, and so on. This kind of inaccuracy does detract, but if set aside, *Race and Form* offers us promising ways of reconfiguring and combining critical frameworks, and elucidates neglected aspects of important African American prose texts.

Jennifer Terry

Gayle R. Nunley. *Scripted Geographies: Travel Writings by Nineteenth-Century Spanish Authors*. Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 2007. 272 pp. ISBN 0-8387-5633-1, \$49.50.

In *Scripted Geographies*, Gayle R. Nunley analyzes four travel chronicles by four Spanish authors. The journeys represent major destinations of Spanish and European travelers during the nineteenth-century. Although the authors might not easily be recognized as writers of travel narratives, their personal insights inspired by displacement to new lands and cultures reveal both the perceptions the travelers had of themselves, and more importantly, views