
Postcolonial autobiography has already attracted a lot of critical attention in recent years, since it raises crucial questions around authorial identity, self-expression in the language of the colonizer, and relations between European and indigenous writing practices. Alfred Hornung and Ernspter Ruhe's Postcolonialism and Autobiography (Rodopi, 1998) and, more recently, Bart Moore Gilbert's Postcolonial Life-Writing: Culture, Politics, and Self-Representation (Routledge, 2009) explore these questions in Anglophone and some Francophone writing. And Debra Kelly's Autobiography and Independence (Liverpool, 2005) and Alison Rice’s Time Signatures: Contextualizing Contemporary Francophone Autobiography from the Maghreb (Lexington, 2006) are specific explorations of the use of the genre by Francophone Maghrebians.

Less attention has been paid to Francophone African and Caribbean autobiography, however, and Edgard Sankara’s study sets out to fill this gap with a comparative focus on three autobiographers from Africa alongside three from the Antilles. Juxtaposing discussion of Amadou Hampâté Bâ, V.Y. Mudimbe, and Kesso Barry with analysis of Patrick Chamoiseau, Raphaël Confiant, and Maryse Condé, Sankara uncovers the tensions inherent in the Francophone autobiographical project, including the authors’ often troubled relationship with their originary community, and the politics of their works’ reception. The book is framed by reflections on reception theory, and more particularly on Gerald Prince’s distinction between narratee and implied reader (see, for example, Prince 1980). Part of the originality of the individual close readings lies in their exploration of the ways in which the texts engage with particular audiences—in Africa, the Caribbean, and, most problematically, Europe. This framing gives the thrust of the analysis a critical slant, since Sankara is clearly concerned by the ways in which some of the works under consideration address above all the European readership and risk cutting themselves off from the country of origin.

The chapters themselves offer some close readings of these authors’ autobiographical works, then, but all include extensive discussion of their reception and its often uncomfortable politics. The exploration of Hampâté Bâ’s Amkoullel, l’enfant peul (1991) in the first chapter includes some
reflection on the work’s ironization of Eurocentric assumptions regarding African identity, and the young boy’s naive mythologization of the white man is read as itself a pointed reminder to the European that he too might be perceived as “other.” Much of this chapter is concerned, however, with the genesis of the work and its reception, leading Sankara to conclude that it is far too bound up with its European readership to offer any authentic representation of life in Mali. Mudimbe’s Les Corps glorieux des mots et des êtres, however, is read rather more favorably as a history of Africa itself, “at the crossroads between two systems of thought: that of the traditional Africa, and that of the modern West” (p. 73). Next, Kesso Barry’s contestatory depiction of her experience growing up as a girl in a Peul community is treated with more nuance, as Sankara uncovers her contradictory position in relation to patriarchal expectations and her unresolved engagement with feminist politics. The chapters on Caribbean writing then focus even more extensively on the critical reviews received in turn by Chamoiseau’s Antan d’enfance, Confiant’s Ravines du devant-jour, and Condé’s Le Coeur à rire et à pleurer. The reading of Chamoiseau nicely brings out the self-consciousness of his reflection on the concept of memory itself, and aptly illustrates his depiction of Creole plurality through an examination of his playful idiom. Similarly, in his reading of Confiant Sankara discusses the juxtaposition of different idioms and stylistic elements, though again, finishes by stressing how “the reception of Confiant’s Ravines du devant-jour reveals the failure of the Créolité movement to fulfill its claim to cater to a Martinican audience in its search for an authentic Martinican literature rooted in the language and realities of the island” (p. 143). Condé’s work seems to emerge as that most true to itself in Sankara’s eyes, as the reading shows how she overtly focuses on painful memories as well as happy ones, and she is also explicitly attempting “to make amends with her critics” (p. 167). Sankara’s reading of Condé makes the insightful suggestion that she deliberately and strategically stages herself in different ways in order to provoke her critics, rather than seeking to express an authentic self.

The study’s focus on reception is original and informative, but there is a risk in this book that critics’ reactions take precedence over careful close reading. The political slant to the work also means that it tends to be rather critical of the authors under discussion, which may be a valid approach, but raises the question of why other more successful autobiographies were not chosen for the analysis. The use of the first person is at times a little
awkward, and can give the text a slightly hesitant tone despite the strength of the arguments put forward. Nevertheless this book makes an important contribution to the field by revealing the highly fraught position of the authorial voice and its actual and implied interlocutors in the context of Francophone African and Caribbean autobiography.

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