Why has autobiography been central to African-American political speech throughout the twentieth century? What is it about the racialization process that persistently places African-Americans in the position of speaking from personal experience? In Autobiography and Black Identity Politics: Racialization in Twentieth-Century America Kenneth Mostern illustrates the relationship between narrative and racial categories such as “colored,” “Negro,” “black,” or “African American” in the work of writers such as W. E. B. Du Bois, Zora Neale Hurston, Malcolm X, Paul Robeson, Angela Davis, and bell hooks. Mostern shows how these autobiographical narratives attempt to construct and transform the political meanings of blackness. The relationship between a black masculine identity that emerged during the 1960s, and the counter-movement of black feminism since the 1970s, is also discussed. This wide-ranging study will interest all those working in African-American studies, cultural studies, and literary theory.

Kenneth Mostern is Assistant Professor in the Department of English at the University of Tennessee.
Cultural Margins

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The series Cultural Margins originated in response to the rapidly increasing interest in postcolonial and minority discourses among literary and humanist scholars in the US, Europe, and elsewhere. The aim of the series is to present books which investigate the complex cultural zone within and through which dominant and minority societies interact and negotiate their differences. Studies in the series range from examinations of the debilitating effects of cultural marginalization, to analyses of the forms of power found at the margins of culture, to books which map the varied and complex components involved in the relations of domination and subversion. This is an international series, addressing questions crucial to the deconstruction and reconstruction of cultural identity in the late twentieth-century world.

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Autobiography and Black Identity Politics

Racialization in Twentieth-Century America

Kenneth Mostern
What I thought was love
in me, I find a thousand instances
as fear. Of the tree’s shadow
winding around the chair, a distant music
of frozen birds rattling
in the cold.

Where ever I go to claim
my flesh, there are entrances
of spirit. And even its comforts
are hideous uses I strain
to understand.

Though I am a man
who is loud
on the birth
of his ways. Publicly redefining
each change in my soul, as if I had predicted
them,
and profited, biblically, even tho
their changing weight,
erased familiarity
from my face.

A question I think,
an answer, whatever sits
counting the minutes
till you die.

When they say, “It is Roi
who is dead?” I wonder
who will they mean?

LE ROI JONES, IMMEDIATELY BEFORE BEC OMING AMIRI BARAKA

Categorization is not the sin; the problem is the lack of desire to explain
the categorizations that are made.
Some of our greatest politicians have been forced to become ministers or
blues singers.

PATRICIA WILLIAMS
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Acknowledgments

When reading works produced within the contemporary academy, acknowledgments are a particularly significant autobiographical space. Especially in those texts in which the author’s self-position is not rigorously theorized (as either object or subject), acknowledgments may provide a window onto issues that are otherwise taken for granted. I do not claim to be stating anything especially clever in saying this: many of us realize that thanking universities and fellowship foundations for institutional support is a central ideological component of our lives, and that the least subtle of “vulgar” analyses of “manufacturing consent” are not misplaced, however ultimately inadequate they may be. Others of us are also in denial about this. I can say nothing about that here. Nor am I claiming that the publicly-private personality expressed by various scholars in their acknowledgments contains a relationship of immediate determination with the content of their books in every case. (One interpretation of this book would be that its topic is, precisely, “mediation.”) But, among other things, the argument that follows, including its quasi-autobiographical coda, is that it is never a good idea to avoid asking the question of the acknowledgments, in whatever form they appear, especially when reading the two literary genres addressed herein: autobiography and critical theory.

This, then, is the relatively unrigorous version of my autobiography:

Most of this book was drafted while I was in Oakland, California, having its origins in my second semester at Berkeley in 1990. There is a specific ambivalence in that sentence – retrospectively, I date my present life in terms of my entry to graduate school, yet at the time I
thought of myself as an off-campus activist at least as much as a professional intellectual. For this reason, the basic structuration of the book, its practical formation, was influenced in specific ways by the people I was doing anti-racist political work with outside the academy in a way that will undoubtedly never again be true of my intellectual work. In 1990 I was not some kind of model activist; in 1998 I maintain nonprofessional connections and commitments which continue to influence me: the two kinds of work are not in binary relation. Yet they have been materially distinct in my life, and this distinction cannot be disavowed by pretending to “go beyond” it. I make it here to prioritize the activists and the work that first motivated this book. In this regard I want to thank first the people least likely to read it, some of whom I remain in contact with, others who I have not spoken to for years: Jose Carasco, Mickey Ellinger, Harmony Goldberg, George Lipman, Kareima McKnight, Simone Rowe, Ikuko Sato, Rhodney Ward, generally John Brown Anti-Klan Committee, Immigrant Rights Action Pledge, Direct Action Against Racism, Roots Against War, and the Campus Coalition Against the Gulf War. Closest among my California activist friends for the last eight years is marxist autodidact and all around superior human being Rene Francisco Poitevin, who read much of this book in earlier forms. He enrolled in graduate school in sociology in the fall of 1997.

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