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## **Autobiography and Black Identity Politics** **Racialization in Twentieth-Century America**

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.

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PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE  
 The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
 The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge, CB2 2RU, UK <http://www.cup.cam.ac.uk>  
 40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA <http://www.cup.org>  
 10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

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First published 1999

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeset in 9.5/12pt Palatino [VN]

*A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library*

*Library of Congress cataloguing in publication data*

Mostern, Kenneth.

*Autobiography and Black identity politics: racialization in  
 twentieth-century America* / Kenneth Mostern.

p. cm. (Cultural margins: v. 6)

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0 521 64114 4 (hardback). ISBN 0 521 64679 0 (paperback)

1. Afro-Americans – Race identity. 2. Afro-Americans – Politics and government. 3. Autobiography – Political aspects – United States.

4. United States – Race relations. 5. Autobiography – Afro-American authors. I. Title. II. Series.

E185.625.M685 1999

973'.0496073 – dc21 98-36538 CIP

ISBN 0 521 64114 4 hardback

ISBN 0 521 64679 0 paperback

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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?

LEROI JONES, IMMEDIATELY BEFORE BECOMING 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

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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.

In my professional life, two individuals followed this book from beginning to end, and have, in every sense, made my career possible: Barbara Christian and Abdul JanMohamed. Each, through their rigor and their personal commitment, centered me at times when my research was floundering. I do not think you can go very wrong, when reading this text, thinking carefully about the particular mix: a white anti-racist activist, in long-term conversation with Barbara’s commitments to the narrative text or “work,” to black women’s autonomy, and to the centrality of *movements*; and Abdul’s commitment to a revised psychoanalytical marxist theory. All of us have politics that could be described as third worldist, though only I use the term. I make no claims to follow either one in particular ways; they both disagree with numerous things that I say here. I claim that they have been incredible catalysts for me, and a wonderfully supportive faculty.

Percy Hintzen is the other faculty member who helped me find the argument of this book over many years. Other faculty and graduate students at Berkeley who read work of mine or from whom I have received help, support, and friendship, or merely conversed with me



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about theory, during the period of initial writing included Arturo Aldama, Victor Bascara, Rakesh Bhandari, Mitch Breitwieser, Oscar Compomanes, Donna Jones, Montye Fuse, Arlene Kaiser, Viet Thanh Nguyen, Catherine Ramirez, Leslie Salzinger, Amrijit Singh, Victoria Torres, France Winddance Twine, Jonathan Warren, Sau-Ling Wong. My dissertation writing group – Jyoti Hosagrahar, Mia Fuller, Arthur Riss, Jennifer Shaw, Jan McHargue, Rebecca Dobkins, and Tamra Suslow-Ortiz – supported and fed me, in addition to reading several chapters, during a key year. David Szanton, Dean of Interdisciplinary Studies, organized us and gave us funds for dinner.

I will always be grateful to my undergraduate advisor, Lucy Maddox, who first caused me to think about “American” “identity.”

After moving to Knoxville, Tennessee, I met both of the people who have given me most intellectually and personally, Heather Dobbins and Carter Mathes, as students in my black literature classes. (Carter has gone on to a Ph.D. program at Berkeley and Heather, an accomplished poet, swears the last thing in the world she will do is get a Ph.D.) Among my colleagues, my weekly lunches with Mark Hulsether, completing his first book at the same time as I have been, have provided particularly steady grounding, while George Hutchinson, Chris Holmlund, and Handel Wright have also been serious interlocutors. Krisztian Horvath and Susan Hilderbrand’s extensive help in preparing the final manuscript was truly service beyond the call. Other Tennesseans who have contributed substantially to my intellectual life are: Misty Anderson, Shannon Anderson, Joy Asekun, Janet Atwill, Charles Biggs, Erik Bledsoe, Allen Dunn, John Evelev, Jesse Graves, Chris Hodge, Ron Hopson, La Vinia Jennings, Leslie LaChance, Jeanne Leiby, Chuck Maland, Keith Norris, Betsy Sutherland, Randi Voss, and John Zomchick. Thank you also to my English 443 (African-American Autobiography) seminar in the spring of 1996 for being such excellent discussants for much of this material, as well as for humoring my desire to have the class on Nikki Giovanni at the entrance ramp to the James White Freeway, once 400 Mulvaney Street.

Thanks to my friends at Solutions to Issues of Concern of Knoxvilleans (SICK), Tennesseans for Fair Taxation, and Tennessee Industrial Renewal Network.

In recent years – and especially since moving to Knoxville – my intellectual community has been partially made on the net. Most critically important is Bruce Simon, who I began arguing with on a postcolonial studies reading list in 1993 and who did me the service of

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xreading this entire manuscript in draft. He also introduced me to Wahneema Lubiano, whose help in the completion of this project was enormous. Other friends or helpful interlocutors who are initially, or primarily, from the net include Michael Bibby, Anthony Rucker, and Kali Tal. Generally speaking, interaction with others on the Spoon Collective's postcolonialism and marxism lists, the American Studies Association's H-AMSTDY, the Marxist Literary Group list, and the UI-Chicago based AFAMLIT list, has been of great assistance in the initial articulation of many ideas.

Others to whom I am grateful for corresponding with me about specific sections of my book include Gina Dent, Colleen Lye, William Maxwell, and Alan Wald.

This book could of course not exist without my year off, provided by the Charlotte W. Newcombe Dissertation Fellowship, Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation, in 1994–5. The John O. Hodges Better English Fund at the University of Tennessee provided two courses release time and occasionally other expenses. Otherwise, thanks to those who have hired me to teach.

Thank you to the old and close friends whose names don't appear in any of the above categories, to my family, and to anyone who reads this.

And thank you to Ruth Mostern for, well, everything. Maybe we'll even get jobs in the same city sometime. (And, because it is theoretically relevant to chapter eight: Mostern is *not* my father's last name, but one we made up. And if we knew how defensive it'd make us, we'd never have done it. Now you know.)