

## CHAPTER I

*Crafting a Credible Black Self  
 in African American Life Writing*

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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*<sup>3</sup>

***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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> Within this context of generic preferences, then, even before *Becoming* could actually be accessed, Amazon reportedly sold 750,000 pre-

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].”<sup>5</sup> By March 2019, Obama’s book had helped Bertelsmann SE, the German company that owns Penguin-Random House, earn \$20 billion.<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> 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.”<sup>9</sup>

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

and many others have done “to bring stature to a field long considered ‘sub-literary,’ ‘marginal,’ and ‘untheorized.’”<sup>10</sup>

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.”<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup>

### **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*<sup>13</sup>

*Too good*, I am thinking. The stuff I make up is *too good*.

—Jacqueline Woodson, *Brown Girl Dreaming*<sup>14</sup>

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*

*Surprising 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.<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup> 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

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.”<sup>17</sup> 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.”<sup>18</sup> 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.”<sup>19</sup> 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.”<sup>20</sup> 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

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.<sup>21</sup> 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.<sup>22</sup> 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*.<sup>23</sup> 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.”<sup>24</sup> 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.”<sup>25</sup> 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.<sup>26</sup>

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.<sup>27</sup> 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.”<sup>28</sup> As if to prove the point, in 2008 and 2013, respectively,

Angelou published two more autobiographies: *Letter to My Daughter* and *Mom and Me and Mom*.<sup>29</sup> 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.”<sup>30</sup>

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.<sup>31</sup> 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.<sup>32</sup> 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).<sup>33</sup> 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.”<sup>34</sup> 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.<sup>35</sup>

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.<sup>36</sup> 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.<sup>37</sup> 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."<sup>38</sup>

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



of an oppressed social group, with ties to the other members.”<sup>39</sup> 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 multi-valent 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 gang-banger 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.”<sup>40</sup> 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”<sup>41</sup>

I’m a liar. —Shonda Rhimes, *Year of Yes*<sup>42</sup>

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

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."<sup>43</sup> 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."<sup>44</sup>

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."<sup>45</sup> 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."<sup>46</sup> 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."<sup>47</sup> 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