

**CONSTRUCTING THE SELF: ESSAYS ON
SOUTHERN LIFE-WRITING.**

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PLACER, EDITORS.

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This collection of essays offers a panoramic and encompassing view of a fascinating literary subgenre, self-writing, in a complex sociocultural reality, the Southern United States. For this task, editors Carmen Rueda-Ramos and Susana Jiménez Placer have assembled an impressive roster of both well-established and rising scholars in the field of Southern Studies, which results in a choral depiction of the broadly varied ways in which self-writing can be understood. The editors group these perspectives into five parts that, according to their criteria, try to depict the development of life-writing in the southern United States. In this way, the first part focuses on African American autobiographies as an element of subversion, while the second deals with issues of interracial relationships and the “reconciliation of the self”. The third part moves on to a more literary approach, and revolves around the interactions of autobiography and fiction when writers construct their fictionalized selves, and how this interaction might affect the truthfulness of the account. The fourth part examines the other side of the issue and takes a look at how southern writers distort or hide their selves to offer a transgressive kind of self-writing. For the last part, the essays deal with concepts of space, mainly in the process of pilgrimage, and the body as a medium to narrate stories of self-discovery.

This collection of essays is introduced by the editors, who open with a critique on Thomas Larson’s concept of autobiography as

a genre dominated by white men from the North. The editors proceed to challenge this view, pointing out the key role of African American and women's self-narratives, many of these from the southern United States. The editors illustrate how important autobiographies are in the context of the South, examining their burdens, their constructions and their paradoxes, all of which are driven by what Bill J. Berry aptly labeled "the autobiographical impulse of southerners", especially amongst those groups historically oppressed. To back their vindication, the editors embark on a thorough review of the history of self-writing volumes in the South, paying special attention to the production penned by African Americans and women alike. This kind of commentated bibliography extends into the first subsection of this introduction, which presents a most helpful reflection on how the self is written, using for this purpose an assortment of scholarly output, from James Olney's *Metaphors of the Self* (1972) to *New Essays on Life Writing and the Body* (2009), edited by Christopher Stuart and Stephanie Todd. After this comprehensive introduction to the scholarship of self-writing, the editors break down the structure of the book and meticulously summarize all the contributions, helping the reader visualize the connecting threads among the essays and the overarching coherence of the volume.

As previously mentioned, the first two parts of this book are tied together by the focus on racial themes, although they differ in their approaches and content. The first part is comprised of a piece by Trudier Harris, who offers a history of the African American autobiography and how it reflects the social conditions of the times in which the stories are written, from Frederick Douglass to her own autobiography. The other essay in this opening part, authored by Robert Brinkmeyer, concentrates on the figure of Booker T. Washington, vindicating his often slighted figure as a complex force of progress able to disrupt power. Both Harris's decision to include herself in her own scholarship and Brinkmeyer's call to reconsider the figure of Washington might come across as bold movements, but these professors manage to interweave her own experience into the trajectory of African American self-writing in one instance, and make a compelling case for the reconsideration of Washington as a subversive figure in the other.

The second part starts with Jennifer Ritterhouse's defense of autobiographies by African Americans as valid historiographical sources for chronicling the Jim Crow South. In contrast, Elizabeth

Hayes Turner delves into the life narrative of white southern historian Melton A. McLaurin, who realizes the evilness of segregation and redeems his past by dedicating his life to the fight for racial justice. To complete the picture, Pearl McHaney examines the life and work of twice US Poet Laureate Natasha Trethewey, bringing forth a reflection on biracial national identity. Lastly, Ineke Bockting moves to the idealistic plane and dissects the development of the American Dream, centering on the ideal of brotherhood and the symbol of the dinner table.

The following section deals with a more theoretical approach, built around Philippe Lejeune's idea of the "autobiographical pact" and how its commitment to narrating life and nothing but life, as well as to the vision of the American South of a foreigner, can be bent and broken. Thus, the first essay, by Peggy Whitman Prenshaw, examines Lejeune's paradigmatic triad –the author, the narrator and the protagonist– in a series of self-narratives by southern women, and, at the same time, provides a theoretical toolkit that goes with the following essays in this section. The next two articles use said toolkit to scrutinize the autobiographical impulses of two southern authors not commonly associated with self-writing, William Faulkner in the case of Thomas McHaney's piece, and Richard Ford for Gérald Préher. In the last piece of this section, Nahem Yousaf looks at French author Philippe Labro's *The Foreign Student*, which narrates his recollections as a student in Washington and Lee University, adding fictional elements to create a transplanted southern memoir. In this way, this last essay touches on themes of the Global South, the transnational and the temporal, all filtered through self-writing.

Part 4 is marked by a gender approach to southern self-writing, the first two essays being penned by the volume's editors. Rueda-Ramos writes about the 1990's boom of Appalachian women writers telling their lives while Jiménez Placer examines a more general sample to analyze the figures of "failed southern ladies." The editors author two compelling essays about the transgressive potential of what could be perceived as local color pieces or normative life narratives. This exploration of convention-breaking southern women continues in Beata Zawadka's analysis of Tallulah Bankhead's roles as a southern lady as an act of drag, contributing fascinating terms for southern femininity such as "transgressive hagsploitation". Lastly, Sandra Ballard goes back to the topic of Appalachian women writers to explore the cathartic qualities of humor in their life narratives.

The last part of the book is dedicated to two aspects that are connected by allegory: travel narratives and explorations of the self through the author's own body. These outward and inward looks start with Jesús Varela-Zapata's readings of Alice Walker's experiences in Africa and the Middle East, and how her accounts mirror what she lived through in the Jim Crow South. Waldemar Zacharasiewicz deals with another southern author's foreign endeavors and their impact on his conception of himself, in this case John Gould Fletcher and his ex-pat life in Europe. However, in the next essay, Candela Delgado Marín directs the reader's attention to a type of travel that is not so much in space but in time, focusing on the sensorial exploration of the self in Bobbie Ann Mason's memoir, which, as Delgado Marín aptly names, is dominated by "a psychogeography of the South". Lastly, the book closes with Marcel Arbeit's contribution, a refreshing piece that applies disabilities studies to southern life-writing, exploring several memoirs that are built around the concept of disability or illness, turning the autobiographical genre into a sort of therapy and coping mechanism.

This collection of essays proves to be a valuable reminder of the importance of the oppressed and the neglected in life narratives, showcasing a powerful vindication of the voices of African Americans and women as essential to the autobiographical subgenre. Rueda-Ramos and Jiménez Placer achieve a well-rounded, eclectic volume by gathering an impressive group of authors from the field of Southern studies, proving how it thrives in the context of European scholarship in general and in Spain in particular. It could be said that the introduction, while providing a comprehensive bibliography and an extremely informative breakdown of the contents of the book, can turn out to be overwhelming by the sheer density of sources and at times might feel like it is spoiling the book. But, as it can be observed, these possible shortcomings also speak of the care and knowledge behind this volume, as well as of its engaging mosaic of life narratives working at different levels without practically leaving the South. Indeed, the editors should be congratulated not only for uniting a remarkable roster of scholars with poignant contributions, but also for wrangling a beast as elusive and shapeshifting as self-writing under such a wide array of scopes, while keeping a clear conductive thread and a general harmony that make this book a necessary read for those working on autobiographies and the Southern United States alike.