

REVIEW ESSAYS

Writing Biographies of Women

Sara Alpern, Joyce Antler, Elisabeth Israels Perry, and Ingrid Winther Scobie, eds. *The Challenge of Feminist Biography: Writing the Lives of Modern American Women*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992. 210 pp. ISBN 0-25-201926 (cl).

Teresa Iles, ed. *All Sides of the Subject: Women and Biography*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1992. xi + 174 pp. ISBN 0-80-776255-5 (pb); 0-80-776256-3 (cl).

Sidonie Smith. *Subjectivity, Identity, and the Body: Women's Autobiographical Practices in the Twentieth Century*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993. xii + 226 pp. ISBN 0-25-335286-x (cl); 0-25-320789-4 (pb).

Nell Irvin Painter

Perhaps ironically, certainly usefully, the time I took completing a biography delayed this review. It is a good thing this essay comes after my book, for actually constructing a biography allowed me to compare these authors' experiences with my own. I base my conclusions on that comparison, which also suggests challenges to biographers of the future.

Over the course of the last seven years, I conceived, researched, and wrote a biography of one of the two currently best-known nineteenth-century African-American women, the ex-slave feminist and abolitionist, Sojourner Truth. (The other, Harriet Tubman, was also an unlettered former slave.) As a biographical subject Truth is singular, and her biographer must grapple with three contradictions. First there is the odd combination of Truth's familiar face and her obscure actions. Further, Truth's visual and verbal images are chaotic in that she is identified with a ladylike photographic image that clashes with the taunt of the question—ar'n't I a woman?—we associate with her. Moreover, that phrase itself represents more what someone else said she said than her own utterance.

In contrast with Truth, the subjects of these three books are known mainly to specialists. This does not mean that as biographers and critics these authors and I have nothing in common. On the contrary, the processes of crafting a biography of Sojourner Truth and of analyzing what passes for her autobiography—the *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*—belong to the same categories of theory and praxis as the work under review.

The Challenge of Feminist Biography collects essays by women histori-

ans who have written the biographies of better or lesser known twentieth-century women. A session at the first Southern Conference on Women's History held in Spartanburg, South Carolina, in 1988 entitled "Biographies of Women in Public Life: Challenges and Results," inspired the anthology. The session met so warm a reception that the presenters decided to expand and publish their papers in what they call a "workshop in print" on feminist biography. The essayists range in status from holders of named chairs, such as Kathryn Kish Sklar and Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, to independent scholars and associate professors, such as the editors of the volume. I note that all are white and middle-aged, but they present themselves as ethnically and racially transparent. None stresses her class origin or ethnicity, either to draw comparisons with her subject or to embed difference or sameness in her methodology.

For the most part, these biographers did their graduate work in the 1970s and published their biographies in the mid-1980s. Hence their self-consciously feminist scholarship reflects both the prejudices of 1970s feminism against white women of privilege and the nationalist, anti-feminist atmosphere of the Reagan-Bush administrations of the 1980s. The structural conditions of their labor also appear, as several biographers mention having been supported financially by the National Endowment for the Humanities and having presented their work in progress at meetings of the Berkshire Conferences on Women's History. If ever proof were needed that the NEH and the Berkshire Conferences materially advance scholarship, it lies in this book.

What self-consciously binds together the biographers and subjects in *The Challenge of Feminist Biography* is, first, shared gender. According to the introduction, when both the subject and the biographer are women "gender moves to the center of the analysis" (7). Other aspects of a woman's identity—which she may experience as equally or even more salient than her sex—are briefly acknowledged as being "[i]n addition" (7). Second, all these biographers are cognizant of sharing their subjects' life challenges, especially balancing the claims of family and career. They repeatedly confess to having initially approached their subjects as substitute mothers or role models. Not surprisingly, as mothers and role models, the subjects do not appear as employers or wherever else they exercised power over other women.

As these biographers are historians, their main preoccupation is the relationship between the lives of particular women and the history of women as a whole. While the essayists contrast biography with the social history of the 1970s, they also position their subjects as emblematic of women's fate generally. Whether a particular early twentieth-century woman succeeded as both parent and professional seems to the biogra-

phers to bear on whether success in both arenas will be possible for themselves and for women in the twenty-first century.

The various biographical subjects would not have lived in the same neighborhood, much less have been friends, but by and large they have much in common. All belong to the two generations born between the Civil War and the turn of the twentieth century, but only Emma Goldman had previously received noteworthy biographical treatment. Although largely forgotten in the decades between their deaths and the publication of their biographies, each of these women was recognized as a figure of note during her lifetime. Most came from families sufficiently rich to finance their higher education and much of their public life, yet none of the subjects became a stone reactionary or society butterfly.

Similarity also characterizes the concerns that these authors address, as though their essays were written to formula. They detail their searches for source material, often following their subjects to their summer homes, and, in the case of Kitty Sklar, felicitously discovering most of Florence Kelley's library there. One of the questions that reappears often is: "Do you like your subject?" Author after author gives the same answer: "No, but I respect her." Most of the essayists in *The Challenge of Feminist Biography* dwell on whether or not to judge their subjects—all women with careers outside the home—as mothers. Is it fair, they ask themselves, to judge a woman as a parent, when male subjects of biography must measure up to no such rule? If, as feminist dogma holds, the personal is the political, should the disgruntlement of children of an accomplished mother diminish the importance of the mother's achievements in her life as a whole?

All the essays in *The Challenge of Feminist Biography* discuss both the problems and gratifications to be found in the search for sources and the attachment, often extremely close, of the biographer to her subject. Dee Garrison's essay stands out for its perspicacity. Garrison perceives the tensions between art and science in biography with great sophistication, recognizing that successful biography demands literary as well as research skills. The other essayists (with Lois Rudnick a prominent exception) evidently assume that getting all the facts right and presenting the subject's real or true self equals a compelling narrative. Rudnick understands the biographer as an "active agent" and grasps the meaning of "biographical 'truth'" as opposed to a welter of detailed information. Though all the essayists in *The Challenge of Feminist Biography* treat autobiographical material critically, Rudnick rightly calls the subject's own memoir "a highly mediated source" that can even be "treacherous" (133). I will return to the question of how well a biographer can know her subject on the basis of written historical sources.

Like *The Challenge of Feminist Biography*, *All Sides of the Subject: Women and Biography* is a collection of essays by women writing about themselves as biographers of women. Unlike the former anthology, the latter is self-consciously international and interdisciplinary, and its essays are more uneven than in *The Challenge of Feminist Biography*. Few of the essayists in *All Sides of the Subject* are academics: They range from British critics of literature to a Japanese feminist, to English and Norwegian sociologists, to an English bookseller, and to an American short story writer. The oldest contributors seem to have been born in the early 1930s, the youngest are still in graduate school. By and large they seem somewhat older than the cohort in *The Challenge of Feminist Biography*, and their essays run the gamut from amateurish to highly sophisticated. A majority of their subjects are unknowns and include a late nineteenth-century sculptor identified only as Jessie; the Brazilian composer Chiquinha Gonzaga; Marguerite Carr-Harris, a Canadian nurse; Claire Myers Spotswood, an occasional writer and 1916 graduate of Texas Women's University. A minority is familiar: Rebecca West, Virginia Woolf, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton.

The main preoccupations of the essays in *All Sides of the Subject* are similar to those in *The Challenge of Feminist Biography*: the relationship between biographer and subject, the balance between fact and fiction, and the value of feminist methodology in the writing of biography. Once again the bogeywomen—rigid feminists of the 1970s—make several appearances, judging who rates as a true feminist heroine and whether individual bio-graphy is a feminist undertaking. And once again, our biographers rise above narrow-minded feminist orthodoxy to pursue their quest for truth.

A few contributors enthuse over following literally in one's subject's footsteps, eating what she ate, and sleeping where she slept. These essays repeat stale discoveries: that men's history obscures and distorts women's actions and that women's lives have different significance for readers who are women than for readers who are men. But other pieces reward the reader. Margaret Forster, a novelist and literary critic, beautifully illuminates the ways in which her biography of Elizabeth Barrett Browning differs from those by men by explaining through examples what actually makes a biography feminist.

In a more theoretical piece at variance with her usual verve, Liz Stanley (of the Manchester University, England, Sociology Department, the biographer of Hannah Cullwick and Olive Schreiner) lays out what she sees as the elements of the feminist biographical method, which other contributors would probably challenge. For Stanley, feminist biography is self-consciously ideological. It explains the "labor process" of the biography's epistemology, locates the biographer intellectually, and places the subject

within the feminist context that necessarily nurtures the active female subject. In Stanley's essay, no need arises to establish whether the subject was a feminist, whether her friends were women or feminists, or whether dwelling on process and biographer bores the reader.

Stanley's methodology is not *the* feminist methodology, and biographers who are not Marxist, or who do not invariably situate their subjects within a network of feminists, will reject her rules. I suspect that where many others would agree with her—on the need for the biographer to present her own intellectual autobiography—Stanley might well be appalled by the degree to which her sister essayists have taken other people's lives hostage to their own needs, under the pretext of explaining their relationship to their subjects. Reading this collection, I was struck by the ways certain biographers (Abi Pirani, Miriam Kalman Harris) have burrowed into their subjects so deeply that they obliterate their subjects' coherence.

All the contributors in this anthology appear content with gender—of itself—as a sufficient category of analysis: They are women; their subjects are women, and they assume that gendered identity alone nullifies all the evil summed up in masculine power, as manifested in the masculine gaze. Indeed, one might forget that women as well as men belong to networks of power. Except in sidewise glances, the more complex identities of generation, race, class, and regional identity disappear. White women have no race, and only one contributor is not white. This young Japanese feminist identifies with the American photographer Diane Arbus, and her piece avoids entirely the issues of disparate cultures, nationalities, and generations of biographer and subject. In short, identity is only gendered, and no author or subject raises questions of power relations between women or of women whose identities are complex. "Woman" to "woman" is enough.

The third book under review here, *Subjectivity, Identity, and the Body: Women's Autobiographical Practices in the Twentieth Century*, by Sidonie Smith, stakes its distance from the other two by dint of its discipline, its diction, and its concentration on autobiography instead of biography. Sidonie Smith is a professor of English and Comparative Literature, and her lexicon and indifference to history (as historians understand it, at least) can try the reader with historian's eyes. Nonetheless, Smith's understanding of autobiography meshes well with the previous authors' discussion of biography, for all write as feminists intent on producing something new: feminist biography or a feminist reading of women's autobiographies.

Smith makes three main points: that women autobiographers see themselves as enmeshed in the lives of others, rather than as the unencumbered, imperial, self-sufficient ego of masculinist autobiographies; that

women of color use their autobiographies to contest the negative stereotypes applied to them by whites, presumably men; and that women write from their experiences as female people embedded in a hostile (male?) culture. For Smith, identity is postmodern: constantly shifting, ambiguous, fragmented, and segmented. Her own words explain her conclusions like this:

The autobiographer's specific body is . . . the site of heterogeneous axes of signification that become constitutive of the subject of autobiography. Bearing multiple marks of location, bodies position the autobiographical subject at the nexus of culturally specific experiences, of gender, race, sexual orientation, and health among them, and at the nexus of 'micropolitical practices' that derive from the cultural meaning of those points of identification (130).

Smith also uses the key words in her title—"subjectivity," "identity," and the "body"—in very special, post-structural (especially Lacanian) ways. "Subjectivity" is not the opposite of scientific objectivity; rather, it refers to personhood, in the psychoanalytical style. "Identity" is not how each autobiographer conceives of herself as a person, but a collection of categories, beginning with "the woman" and extending to "the black woman" and "the Chicana." The "body" does not represent the particular material corpus of each autobiographer, but instead refers to the way others, most notably "the male gaze" see "woman" or "the black woman," or "the Chicana." Smith discovers this patriarchal male gaze practically everywhere, without noticing other women's controlling, matriarchal gaze.

As Smith is the only author under review here to deal with figures who are not white—the mid-nineteenth-century North Carolina fugitive, Harriet Jacobs, for instance—Smith's is the only work that attempts to take race seriously. But Smith's discussion of Jacobs, a very light-skinned woman who never refers to her evidently remote African ancestry, reveals Smith's disinterest in material bodies. Jacobs becomes "[t]he *black* slave" with an "*African* body," (40, my emphasis), a metonym for African-American slave women, stripped of her own personal identity. Similarly, for Smith, Elizabeth Cady Stanton's body becomes woman's body in the abstract. The motherly fat that encased Stanton in real life does not figure. Smith ignores any ideological or rhetorical role that overweight or near-whiteness might have played in Stanton's and Jacobs's autobiographies. As a result, Smith posits herself as only an observer of what she calls the "official narrative," which is white and male, and as the feminist, who, lacking a racial designation is, by default, assumed to be white. Despite whatever Harriet Jacobs and other black women autobiographers

have written, Smith translates their accounts into her concept of their bodies. Because such bodies do not conform to the white, male stereotype of woman, they become, for Smith, "carnavalesque." Once again, in Smith's book, masculinist norms supply the backdrop and provide the measure of what women write about themselves. In this theater, the two main players are woman and the patriarch who misconstrues her.

My own experience of writing biography evolved through several stages, only some of which appear in these three books. Like the biographers in *The Challenge of Feminist Biography* and *All Sides of the Subject*, I began with curiosity, although I never turned to Sojourner Truth for mothering or role modeling. At first glance, the problem of source material would seem to stymie the conventionally trained Sojourner Truth biographer, for while any biographer or critic must dig deep for sources regarding a woman of any class or race, a person of color, or a poor person, Truth poses another difficulty by dint of her illiteracy. Because Truth did not generate her own written material, I faced an extreme version of the usual lack of sources. Her narrative and only a few dictated letters are extant; moreover, she dictated the *Narrative of Sojourner Truth* (Boston, 1850) before the flowering of her career as a feminist abolitionist in the 1850s and 1860s. Understanding her activities and thoughts in the decades in which Truth flourished meant combing through anti-slavery newspapers and the personal papers of her colleagues and friends, notably those of the Isaac Post family, the letters of William Lloyd Garrison, and several obscure autobiographies.

I also encountered a cultural problem, for the most prominent theme running through most of Truth's adult life, Pentecostalism, is unfamiliar to much of American academia. I was fortunate that the field of nineteenth-century popular religion had flowered since the mid-1980s, although some of the necessary bibliography was still hard to find. Finally, my task inverted that of most biographers of women. Rather than making a little known life heroic, I had to subject an icon to close historical inspection, which some readers, particularly the young, see as diminishing a hero.

Nonetheless, I soon realized that my tasks were not quantitatively different from those of any biographer, especially biographers of women. Although Sojourner Truth produced almost nothing that replicates her own words exactly, other female biographical subjects, even those highly literate, also lack archives. For example, the personal papers of Lillian Smith, the mid-twentieth-century southern writer and civil rights activist, were destroyed in two fires in her home in Georgia. The novelist Willa Cather destroyed her own papers. Many an achieving woman has had her papers destroyed or lost, whether because she or her heirs wished to

hide uncomfortable personal truths or because no one thought her important enough to warrant an archive.

All biographers face the problem of entering the subject's mind, of discovering what she actually thought or felt. Lacking Truth's own writing, I can hardly begin to get inside her head, for nearly every extant word from her was meant for public consumption. Yet this opacity can prevail even when subjects write volumes, as I discovered with the 1380-page journal of Gertrude Thomas, a nineteenth-century plantation mistress who kept secrets from herself in her journal and practiced self-deception rather than admit distressing facts.¹

The very act of writing, no matter how private, entails the composition of a personage who writes, whether for the inspection of God, the mind's own eye, or one's correspondents or descendants. The writing personage does not automatically enter history, for once written, documents do not necessarily survive. Each text must be consciously preserved. Discovering what Sojourner Truth really thought or felt is not possible, but discovering what *anyone* really thought or felt is fraught with questions of self-presentation, emulation, social convention, and self-censorship. Given the cleavage between the inner self and the composed writing personage and the perishability of written documents, every inner self remains more or less inaccessible. Because representations of Truth are mediated by others, she represents an extremely murky, but not a unique biographical case.

Separating the biography of the symbolic Sojourner Truth—the strong black woman, "Ar'n't I a woman?" Truth—from the biography of the historical Sojourner Truth is similarly akin to the process of writing other lives, not only of famous figures, but also of people whose social station stamps them with stereotyped meaning, as is the case with all women and people of African descent. In a culture in which women represent nature and body and black people represent body and labor, it is no accident that word portraits of Sojourner Truth present her unclothed body and stress her untutored wit and physical strength. Feminists have a good deal of company when they succumb to the temptations of making any well-known woman stand for *woman*, as universal ancestor or role model, for few Americans can resist turning any black person into a unit of race brimming with the essence of blackness.

Once I had found my sources and forged my interpretation, the writing posed questions of narrative. I had to decide which evidence to stress, which to downplay or ignore. These issues appear only sporadically in *The Challenge of Feminist Biography* and *All Sides of the Subject*, where biographers write as though only two skills—turning individuals into

object lessons of gender and tracking down every extant piece of evidence—constitute biography. A successful biography, however, must mold a welter of facts into a narrative, for facts alone do not forge a credible character. The authors in *The Challenge of Feminist Biography* and *All Sides of the Subject* are alert to the distinction between biography and fiction, but few recognize the need to tell a compelling story and create an intriguing character. Biography is a form of life writing, with the stress falling as fully on “writing” as on “life.”

Smith exhibits the tendency of all three books to reduce the subject of a biography or the author of an autobiography to a bundle of more or less precise sociological categories ranging from gender alone to race, age, class, gender, health, and sexual orientation. But let me be clear. I do not at all object to the idea that one's social group identities influence one's life's course. Most certainly they do, and I don't mean to jettison this aspect of analysis. But by limiting their interests to what Smith calls “cultural positioning” or what I'm calling sociological categories, many of these authors stop up the very source of life writing: the singularity of a given life. For them, authors and subjects belong to an assortment of sociological categories. For me, however, these categories do not of themselves add up to one hundred percent of a life's story. Still lacking is the individual consciousness that makes each person unique, even if she is black, even if she is lesbian.

The unstated premise of biography and autobiography is the uniqueness of the life in question, the conviction that a certain quality in this individual makes this particular life worth reading. If biographers and autobiographers fail to show the singularity of a life, they fail as life writers, and their readers complain that their subjects do not come alive. Without the idiosyncratic stories and peculiar details that flesh out individual experience, life writing flattens into sociology. Sojourner Truth becomes interchangeable with Harriet Jacobs, and the reader might as well consult statistical tables in the United States census.

Making a subject recognizable as an individual who changes over time may entail the use of late twentieth-century social science or religion, which these authors do not confront. Yet psychology can connect and explain behavioral patterns that are otherwise inexplicable. In *Sojourner Truth, A Life, A Symbol*, for instance, I used the scholarship on child abuse, attachment, and loss to understand Truth's son's refusal to recognize her as his mother upon his return to her in New York after he had been sold into perpetual slavery in Alabama, and also to figure out Truth's motives for joining and remaining in the abusive Kingdom of Matthias in the early 1830s.

I also found it difficult to grasp Truth's psychology without

understanding her spirituality. Pentecostal religion played a crucial role in empowering Truth as someone who had been abused as a child, and also as an itinerant preacher and antislavery speaker. Because these biographers and critics disregard spirituality, their readers cannot know whether their subjects, like Truth, also drew upon God or Jesus or the Holy Spirit as a powerful ally.

Perhaps the hostility of orthodox religions to feminism explains this disinterest on the part of feminist biographers, but conventional religion is not the sum total of all American religions. Many female subjects, including Truth and her colleagues, practiced unconventional religions, such as Pentecostalism and spiritualism, that welcomed women's strengths. Spiritualism, especially, has attracted nineteenth- and twentieth-century feminists, under the names of spiritualism, Christian Science, or the various New Age faiths of our own time. Despite these authors' blindness, religion belongs in biography and in the analysis of autobiography, if only because it functions psychologically. Without a sense of the inner woman who often identified with a higher power who gave her the strength to do what made her noteworthy, we lose much of what makes a subject herself.

Readers do crave an understanding of the biographical subject as an individual, not merely as “the woman,” or “the black woman,” or even as “a woman, lesbian, light-skinned Chicana.” For this job, the biographer needs the poetic and narrative skills of a novelist. Sadly, much feminist biography, like much academic writing, sacrifices a general readership to habits of scholarship. In Smith's handling this can become almost ludicrous. Endless quotations of experts—three to every page—drive her poor reader into sullen resentment. Other authors also pay little heed to the quality of their prose, content with showers of facts or condemnations of masculinist discourse.

In sum, my assignment to biographers and critics is fourfold: (1) to see not only the pernicious power of men, but also to pay attention to power dynamics between and among women; (2) to write well-researched narratives that general readers find worth reading; (3) to use social science, notably psychology, to illuminate the personal meaning of their subjects' experiences; and (4) to recognize the power of religion in their subjects' lives. I will leave further tasks to other biographer-historians. But for me, these are the requirements that appear after a reading of these three thoughtful books from the early 1990s.

NOTES

¹See my introduction to Virginia Burr, ed., *The Secret Eye: The Journal of Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990).