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presents

THE CHALLENGES OF WRITING BLACK BIOGRAPHY

Edited by

Leo Hamalian and James V. Hatch

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Nell Irvin Painter.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

A WORD ABOUT THE 1986 ISSUE	iii
Camille Billops	
James V. Hatch	
PREFACE	1
James V. Hatch	
INTRODUCTION	3
Paul Sherwin	
SEPARATING FACT FROM SELF-CREATED FICTION	5
Thadious Davis	
BIOGRAPHY, CAPTIVE OF THE WRITTEN RECORD.	10
Robert Hemenway	
OBTAINING DATA FROM GOVERNMENT FILES	19
LeRoy S. Hodges, Jr.	
SCIENTIFIC BIOGRAPHY: ERNEST EVERETT JUST	24
Kenneth Manning	
WRITING WORKING CLASS BIOGRAPHY.	30
Nell Irvin Painter	
PSYCHOANALYSIS AND BLACK BIOGRAPHY.	34
Arnold Rampersad	
BLACK BIOGRAPHY COMPARED TO WHITE.	43
John A. Williams	
PLUGGED IN, TURNED ON, AND POWERED UP: WRITING BLACK BIOGRAPHY IN THE 1980S	48
Joe Weixlmann	

A WORD ABOUT THE 1986 ISSUE

Artist and Influence is published annually by Hatch-Billops Collection, Inc. Transcriptions of tapes printed here reflect the opinions of the authors and not necessarily those of Hatch-Billops Collection.

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Camille Billops
James V. Hatch
Publishers

WRITING WORKING CLASS BIOGRAPHY

Nell Irvin Painter is Professor of History at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She has published three books, including The Narrative of Hosea Hudson: His Life as a Negro Communist in the South. Her new book, Standing at Armageddon: the United States, 1877-1919 is forthcoming this year from W. W. Horton.

I speak to you both as a biographer and as an historian, that is, as both a producer and consumer of the stories of individual lives. And because my interests as a consumer played a large part in my becoming a producer, I'd like to speak not only about writing working class biography, but also about the uses of biography in the writing of history.

Biography and the Writing of History

These days, historians can be divided--in a general way--between those who see themselves primarily as social scientists and those who think of themselves as part of the humanities. The social scientists, sometimes called cliometricians, count up votes, deaths, taxes, and people in various places. As in that class of cliometrics, Time on the Cross, this approach can show how many people were where, how often they got whipped, and how much money they made on the side as incentive payment. Although the sources that the authors of Time on the Cross quantified came from manuscript as well as census materials, cliometricians are generally more likely to use the census, vote counts, hospital records, tax returns, the sort of materials that exist for most people, whether they are/were rich or poor. Such materials can provide insights into the lives of people who left no narrative sources such as letters or diaries. In general, although not in the case of Time on the Cross, cliometricians have helped reduce the tyranny of the well educated--who are, for all intents and purposes the well off--in writing about the past. But statistics say little about motivation; they cannot answer the questions that begin with why or address the meaning of the figures they deduce.

Those of us who are interested in motivation and individual activity find the uses of cliometrics indispensable though limited. As an historian, I must begin by knowing how many people were doing what I'm investigating, whether it's migrating to Kansas or joining a CIO union. But knowing how representative a given person is or was does not explain the relationship between that person's experiences and culture or how rural people responded to urban conditions. Such answers come from manuscript sources, primarily letters and diaries, that present a personal narrative. Such sources provide the basis for biographies.

Biographies, the secondary building blocks of historical synthesis, are absolutely necessary for any generalizations about what people were thinking and doing at any given time. Although biographies are crucial to the work of historians, not everyone produces the manuscript sources that make biography possible. And that brings those of us who do Afro-American history face to face with the problems of class as well as race.

Class and Afro-American History

Afro-Americans who are poor are not unique in this country or any other in not having left historians very many narrative sources. Here, as in Ghana or France or India, poor people do not and did not write nearly as much as have the wealthy, and what the poor write is always much less likely to be conserved. Here, as elsewhere, manuscript collections are full of the records of the rich and powerful. While labor historians everywhere are digging hard and finding more manuscript source materials than had been thought possible twenty-five years ago, the fundamental problem of sources remains, particularly for those of us who believe that people from one class cannot automatically speak for those in another, even when both the rich and the poor face racism or sexism.

In Afro-American history, the problem becomes all the more vexatious because black people in this country were and remain a poor and working class people. The thought of a Frederick Douglass (as analyzed in a book like Waldo Martin's Mind of Frederick Douglass [1985]) clearly cannot be taken to stand for the thought of slaves who stayed in Maryland, particularly after Douglass became an abolitionist speaker and publicist. The biography of the sociologist Charles S. Johnson, were there one, would hardly illuminate the experiences of the rural people whom he studied in the 1930s. Thadious Davis's biography of Nella Larsen will show the class snobbery of the black bourgeoisie. But just as racial stereotypes indicate little about actual black people, class stereotypes also tell little about their objects as real people. Any synthesis of Afro-American history must depend on narrative sources from those who represent the vast majority of black people. As much as possible, working class blacks (like anyone) need to speak for themselves.

Working Class Biography/Autobiography

Ideally every person would sit down at some point in life, write an autobiography, and send it to an archive. But that assumes that everyone has the time to sit down and write. Most people who are not in easy financial circumstances spend most of their time working or

recuperating from working. They are unlikely to write, because leisure time in which to write is a privilege of relative wealth. And in the past, as John Steinbeck showed in Grapes of Wrath, poor people like the Joads did not necessarily carry around writing tools. Feeling at ease with what Pappa Joad called "word writing" has traditionally been a prerequisite of education, that is, of wealth. The editors of the Daily World discovered this in the early 1930s, when, touting proletarian literature, they sought to publish the creations of actual workers. Although workers and peasants might be extraordinarily eloquent in speech, their writing was often stiff and lifeless. It turned out that the best examples of proletarian literature came from gifted writers who either were people of some education or people, like Richard Wright, who spent a good deal of time (another way of speaking of money) polishing their craft.

I discovered the limitations of working class writing as literature when Hosea Hudson gave me the manuscript of his autobiography, Black Worker in the Deep South. Hudson, whose spoken word is perceptive, nuanced, and often humorous, wrote in a stilted prose style that masked the complexity and criticism of his spoken reflections on his experiences. Like many poor, uneducated people, Southerners particularly, Hudson's natural form of expression was the spoken, not the written word. He convinced me that in order to capture the wealth of intelligence of working people, speech, not writing, holds the key. Oral history, therefore, must remain at the center of working class biography. This means a collaboration between the subject and the historian. Two of the best examined examples of cooperative endeavor are, first, nineteenth-century slave narratives, often written down by white abolitionists, and second, the ex-slave narratives collected by the WPA interviewers, mostly white, in the 1930s.

Although these are the most ample and most accessible testimonies of people who had actually been slaves, their use by historians remains controversial because of the unfathomable role of the interviewer. Historians wonder whether abolitionists urged fugitives to exaggerate or dwell upon the cruelties of the peculiar institution, as they took down the narratives. In the case of the WPA narratives, one wonders about the possibility of self-censorship when ex-slaves spoke to interviewers who were sometimes the descendants of their masters. In either case, the role of the amanuensis becomes problematic.

Competing Agendas

When two people work on one project, the issue of competing agendas appears immediately, and oral historians

are divided on what constitutes the proper role of the historian/interviewer. One school of thought, embodied in the leadership of the Oral History Association some years ago, held that the interviewer merely facilitates the process of recording what the subject--here called "the historian"--wants to say. The speaker sets the agenda, expanding on what she or he wishes to dwell upon, deleting what she or he wishes to cover up. Deciding what is important is the prerogative of the speaker, who shapes the narrative alone.

This was not my approach in working with Hosea Hudson. As a social historian and consumer of biography, I sought to produce a testament that would illuminate not only Hosea Hudson's life as a Communist in Birmingham, Alabama, in the 1930s and 1940s, but also his life as a Southern industrial worker. But this is not to say that my concerns alone influenced the shape of the final product. Arnold Rampersad has written on the autobiography that lies at the heart of every biography, and his observations apply to The Narrative of Hosea Hudson. But I think that the book is richer for combining the interests of the biographer--an evocation of life and times--with those of the autobiographer, in this case, the vindication of CPUSA in the South.

This approach is not unambiguously positive, however, for combining the concerns of a working class person with those of an educated person risks contaminating working class autobiography with a middle class perspective. On balance, I would say that this is not simply a contamination of class but one inherent in the very act of writing biography. Virtually by definition, biographers are people of education and economic privilege, at least in comparison with working class subjects. What I have called contamination might also be termed critical distance, which is a fundamental strength of biography, as opposed to autobiography. But it is a special sort of distance that anyone writing about a subject who has suffered the injuries of class, race, sex, or sexual orientation needs to examine self-consciously.