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Carmen Rueda-Ramos and Susana Jiménez Placer, eds. *Constructing the Self: Essays on Southern Life-Writing*. València: Publicacions de la Universitat de València, 2017. 370 pages.

Constructing the Self: Essays on Southern Life-Writing is a crowning achievement of the Research Group “Discourse and Identity” at the University of Santiago de Compostela. The book is the 147th volume in the “Biblioteca Javier Coy d’estudis nord-americans” series published by Publicacions de la Universitat de València. The nuanced readings of southern autobiographical writing not only suggest the continuing relevance of the works the edited volume explores, but also the importance of what these southern texts set out to show: that southern autobiographical writing not only (re)constructs and performs the self, but also presents a self-image of southern culture embracing the plurality of selves. *Constructing the Self* is a triumph of collaborative work by eighteen contributors from all around Europe and the USA working within southern studies. It is from this international collaboration that the book draws its strength. Carmen Rueda-Ramos and Susana Jiménez Placer managed to compile a truly impressive list of renowned scholars collaborating on this book project, yet the editors were able to unify these numerous voices into a cohesive text divided into five interrelated and cross-linked sections.

This division of essays “loosely reflects the development of southern life-writing, from its beginning to more recent approaches to autobiographical works that incorporate contemporary critical theories and perspectives” (31). The book progresses

from analyses of the subversive quality of the earliest autobiographical writings by African Americans, narratives reconciling the self across the color line, blurred generic boundaries between autobiography and fiction, and on to further transgressions of the memoir genre, to end with the final section, devoted to pilgrimages of self-discovery.

Carmen Rueda-Ramos and Susana Jiménez Placer did a commendable job in covering all the conceptual ground in an ambitious and well-researched introduction to the book entitled “The Enduring Impulse to Tell about the Self and the South.” A better introduction to the subject matter of *Constructing the Self* is hard to find. It is a highly informative guide to which readers may confidently turn for an enlightened condensation of southern autobiographical writing. The introduction is a treasure trove of names and titles, the sort of piece that would work well as an introductory essay for a course in southern life-writing. The editors researched the topic with full realization of the vast socio-cultural context needed to create this impressive road map to an expansive body of literature.

The book opens with the section “Subversive (re)creations of the Self – Past and Present” which has two essays in which renowned southern literary critics analyze how African American life-writing authors constructed themselves in a social environment which conspired against them. In the opening essay “‘My Story is Better than Yours’: The Changing Politics of and Motives for Composing Southern African American Life Narratives,” Trudier Harris analyzes the contrasting impulses that moved African American southern writers: the impulse to bear witness to a collective experience (communal concerns, Frederick Douglass or Booker T. Washington) or to engage in literary self-creation (individualistic concerns, e.g. Zora Neal Hurston), or to express social consciousness (embracing activism, e.g. Maya Angelou, Alice Walker or Anne Moody).

This social aspect of African American autobiographies is also the main focus of Robert Brinkmeyer’s essay “Working a Lever: Booker T. Washington’s Autobiographies as Tools for Social Change.” Brinkmeyer examines the subversive potential of Washington’s autobiographical writings—a potential embedded in Washington’s theories on practical education and the dignity of meaningful manual labor performed by African Americans. In his nuanced reading of Washington’s life-writings through the prism of “economic-social gospel” Brinkmeyer challenges a common belief in Washington’s accommodationist and reactionary ideas (as evidenced in the writer’s ideas about economic advancement rather than political agitation).

The next section, “The Legacy of Race: Reconciling Selves,” brings other readings of southern life-writings across the racial spectrum. The four essays contained in this section focus on the continuing racial divide and on attempts to form meaningful relationships across the color line. The first essay, “‘I Knew Then Who I Was’: Memory, Narrative, and Sense of Self in Autobiographies of the Jim Crow South,” offers the interesting perspective of a historian reading literary texts. Jennifer Ritterhouse does not reduce autobiographical narratives to “factual” records of historical events. Nor does she simply read them as scripts or patterns. She suggests, rather, an analysis of subjective lived experiences. She brilliantly problematizes “the truth-value” of retrospective stories of childhood racial learning from the Jim Crow South.

In the next contribution, “Daily Encounters: The Coming of Age of Melton A. McLaurin,” Elizabeth Hayes Turner analyzes McLaurin’s *Separate Pasts: Growing Up*

White in the Segregated South as a “conversion narrative.” A historian by profession, McLaurin wrote of his own lived experience, a decision that served as a therapeutic act which allowed him to deal with the past. In her article Hayes Turner provides an engaging and informative account of McLaurin’s self-transformation through a series of stages which led to his rejection of family paternalism and of the role of the privileged white man.

The legacy of race is also the subject of the essay written by Pearl McHaney. In her “Life Writing in Poetry and Prose: Natasha Trethewey’s Personal and National Revelations” she discusses how US Poet Laureate Natasha Trethewey’s interweaves her own personal story with the history of her region and nation in her poetry and prose. McHaney skillfully identifies and locates Trethewey’s life story on the larger canvas of national histories—stories of racism, poverty, cotton, the Jim Crow Laws, and the unrecognized work of the Louisiana Native Guards. Telling her own story—McHaney proves—gave Trethewey a chance to uncover and/or recover untold or erased stories which constitute shared knowledge: “Trethewey’s life writing in prose and poetry emanates from the personal, but her imperative is to reveal us to ourselves, as insisting that our history is a shared history.”

The issues of race and racial reconciliation also segue into the final essay of this section. In “Southern Autobiography Around the Table of Brotherhood: A Dream Deferred, a Dream Deceased, and Dream Destroyed, a Dream Dismissed?” Ineke Bockting explores racial relations through the prism of commensality, first denied across the color line and then subversively performed during the Civil Rights Movement. Using Martin Luther King’s “table of brotherhood” metaphor Bockting probes the themes of abundance, success and innocence in various southern life writings.

The third section, “Authors, Narrators, and Fictionalized Selves,” turns the discussion of life-writings away from the perspective of how and why racial identities are performed and constructed and towards stylistic analysis of the genre and discussion of the fictionalization of life-writings. In her discussion of “Memoirs’ Characters: Writer, Narrator, Protagonist” Peggy Whitman Prenshaw interrogates the three components of the memoir—the voices of the writer, storytelling narrator, and protagonist—using autobiographies written by southern women as examples. Prenshaw probes how Ellen Douglas’s, Mary Karr’s, and Maya Angelou’s stories relate to the credibility of life writings, to truth telling, and to sensory details engaging the readers.

While the following contributions in this section generally refer to the fictionalization of memoirs (analysis of a given author’s factual self and fictionalized self), Thomas L. McHaney’s essay “Faulkner and Autobiography in Fiction” offers an intriguing analysis of Faulkner’s “embellished autobiography” in his fiction. Faulkner’s other biographers “have given attention to the writer’s propensity for biographical application and exaggeration in his poetry and fiction” or, in other words, to Faulkner’s inclination towards “impersonations, imitations, fabrications, fictional personas, role-playing, and legends about himself.” Unlike such biographers, Thomas McHaney, manifesting copious and fascinating knowledge about his subject, carefully reads one of Faulkner’s letters and points out how information included in it might enrich our understanding of *The Sound and the Fury*.

Gerald Préher’s article “‘A Someone Somewhere’: Locating Richard Ford’s

Southern Self in his Fiction and Non-Fiction” traces Ford’s ambivalent stance towards his southern origin and his being labeled a southern author. Préher traces Ford’s inner struggle and love-hate relationship with the South in *The Sportswriter*. In the closing essay in this section, “Self-Fashioning and Philippe Labro’s ‘Southern Memoir’ *The Foreign Student*,” Nahem Yousaf offers an analysis of the “memoir with the texture of fiction.” Yousaf provides depth to his analysis of how Labro’s southern exposure in his youth influenced his self-fashioning as author through historically rich contextualization of changes southern culture has undergone and his elegant articulation of the metamorphoses of life writing as genre. Actually, Yousaf claims that one informs the other: the hybridity of the genre (Labro’s text as either “an autobiographical novel”, “true tale” or “a memoirlike novel”) might reflect the transcultural perspective on a book written by a French journalist who was an international student in Virginia in the 1950s.

Part four, “Transgressors and Performers of Self,” brings exhaustive discussions about the strategies southern women use to construct and deconstruct their selves. Carmen Rueda-Ramos’s “Appalachian Women’s Autobiographies from the Margins: Crossing the Boundaries of the Genre” brilliantly analyzes the transgressive quality of life narratives written by marginalized women. The life writings chosen for the analysis “do not conform to the conventional specifications of the genre.” Rueda-Ramos’s reading of Appalachian women’s autobiographical narratives as “outlaw genres” is particularly enlightening—the author points to the ability of generic hybridization to blur the boundaries between the individual and collective.

A different form of transgression is analyzed by Susana Jiménez Placer in her article “‘Pariahs for Flattering Reasons’: Confessions of Failed Southern Ladies on the Black Help.” In contradistinction to Rueda-Ramos’s article about Appalachian women’s “relational auto/biographies,” Jiménez Placer’s captivating work sheds light on societal transgressions of southern ladies in a series of southern autobiographies. Her analysis of Virginia Foster Durr’s, Florence Kings’, and Shirley Abbott’s memoirs concentrates on depictions of rebellious acts against traditional expectations towards ladies and mummies.

The next two essays in this section address the issue of performativity. Beata Zawadka’s contribution “‘A Tarnished Lady?’: Tallulah Bankhead’s Southern Performance in Hollywood” offers an insight into the southern actress’s self-reflective characterization in her acting style (reenactment of the status of the white elite southern female). In her analysis of Bankhead’s self-fashioning Zawadka pushes the traditional boundaries of the autobiographical genre. While performance of white elite ladyhood in Zawadka’s article is identified as “drag,” performance in the last essay in this section, Sandra Ballard’s “Grief and Humor: Appalachian Writers Using Autobiography to Find a Way Home,” relies on the use of humor. Ballard pinpoints possible uses of humor as a counterbalance to grief, which could be applicable not only in the case of Appalachian autobiographies, but also African American slave narratives, mountain memoirs, and black autobiographies.

The final section of the book, “Sites for Self-Explorations: Travel and Illness Narratives,” offers a glimpse into life-writing as a site of self-discovery. A quest for identity can take a very physical, geographical shape. That is the case in the first two essays of this section. Jesús Varela-Zapata, in “The Self Elsewhere: Alice Walker’s

Identity in the Wider World,” persuasively claims that travelling to other places allows writers to extend their activism. Varela-Zapata sees *Overcoming Speechlessness* as Walker’s travelogue engaged in international activism. He perceptively discusses the parallels between Walker’s own experiences during the Jim Crow South and then the Civil Rights era, with stories of brutality and genocide.

In “Reflecting on the Region, Revisioning the Self: John Gould Fletcher’s Song of His Life and Its Transatlantic Context” Waldemar Zacharasiewicz interprets Fletcher’s self portrait in his autobiography *Life Is My Song* as the poet’s constant attempt to find his “stable identity.” Zacharasiewicz demonstrates that suffering from bouts of manic depression and never feeling at home wherever he was (due to his feelings of cosmopolitanism), Fletcher attempted to create a sense of self affected by his travels and illness.

In her article, “The Physicality of Reminiscence: The Stimuli of the South in Bobbie Ann Mason’s *Clear Springs: A Memoir*,” Candela Delgado Marin explores Mason’s memoir from an intriguing conceptual-analytical perspective: southern autobiography as a record of bodily impressions and physical sensations. Delgado Marin chooses to treat sensory memoirs as a critical lens to analyze Bobbie Ann Mason’s exploration of her self and her native region. In the final contribution to the volume, titled “Coming to the End: The Perception of Mortality in the Autobiographical Writings of Reynolds Price and Tim McLaurin,” Marcel Arbeit turns his critical eye to an analysis of illness and disability narratives, a relatively new sub-genre of life-writing. Arbeit analyzes how authors use illness narratives to tell the story of personal struggle to reconstruct their bodies and sense of self.

The dramatic increase in authorship, publication, and readership of life writing, which has by now become mainstream in American autobiographical writing, necessitates a study of self-narratives through the prism of contemporary theories about culture, narrative, and techniques of self-representation. Demonstrating how various southerners across time and space channeled the autobiographical impulse, *Constructing the Self: Essays on Southern Life-Writing* answers that demand. It is an invaluable handbook for those who wish to have authoritative information on southern lived experience and its textual representation. Contributors to this volume not only discuss canonical autobiographies by both black and white authors, but also poetry, fictionalized autobiographies and various types of memoirs. Even though the individual essays easily stand on their own, readers will also benefit from reading the collection in its entirety due to its overarching themes. Due to the broad variety of theoretical approaches, the volume succeeds in offering breadth and depth of expertise on southern life-writing.

Contributors to this volume consulted an important array of sources, and this highly readable and extremely insightful book therefore provides rich, well-documented insights into the subject matter. *Constructing the Self* will become an invaluable research tool for any scholar wishing to study life-writing in general and southern autobiographical writing in particular. A thoughtful and engaging read, this book will be useful also for students in a variety of fields ranging from literary, cultural, African American studies to sociology and history.

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