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CHAPTER 16

African American Celebrity Auto/Biographies

Anthony S. Foy

Black stars now abound, embodying the rhetoric of racial progress for some observers and mystifying the effects of unyielding racism for others. However, scholars continue to spurn the autobiographies of Black celebrities as little more than the jejune byproducts of popular culture, unworthy of rigorous literary, historical, and theoretical consideration. The routine neglect of such autobiographies should surprise no one since the status of the Black celebrity's life as a commodity presents us with a series of critical issues, including formal mediocrity and thematic banality, political irrelevancy, and narrative inauthenticity. Indebted to strategies of public relations and motivated by commercial interests, celebrity narratives seem to lack the depth, sophistication, and durability that induce serious study, even when stories of particular stars fascinate us. Moreover, the popular narratives of Black stars, particularly athletes, often salute exemplary individuals whose achievements merit recognition, obscuring the intersectional effects of structural power on Black lives. Most damning is the dubious credibility of autobiographies employing coauthors, ghostwriters, or editors. The paradox of collaboration – wherein a vague multiplicity of hands shapes a singular, autonomous Black subject in narrative – often troubles the legitimacy of texts that are neither solely nor wholly self-authored, especially when such impure texts exploit the industrial processes of image-making, mediation, and marketing that produce stars. Not all celebrity narratives exhibit each of these problems. Still, within a critical tradition that has often concerned itself with the willful agency of the Black voice, the Black star's narrative challenges us as readers, students, and scholars: how do we approach the overdetermined narrative of the Black celebrity as a modern variant of African American autobiography, rather than simply dismissing it for its lack of artistry, activism, or authenticity?

Fame alone does not define a Black figure's celebrity, largely because celebrity is a historically contingent phenomenon resulting from the acceleration of consumer societies and the growth of such modern culture

industries as advertising, mass media, and mass entertainment. Rather than reflect the exceptional gifts – talent, charisma, beauty, and other allures – intrinsic to certain public individuals, celebrity encompasses a phenomenon of social, cultural, and economic forces that work *through* public figures. If celebrity thus constitutes a "genre of representation and a discursive effect," then an autobiography *by* a Black star is not necessarily a *celebrity* autobiography, especially when such a narrative withholds any account of the public exploits that both engendered the subject's visibility and justified the publication of a book.[1] The mid-century autobiographies of writer Richard Wright, musician Louis Armstrong, and performer Katherine Dunham, all famous when their narratives appeared, exemplify this distinction.[2] While all of these books contribute to the production of their authors' images, none of them directly narrates the image-making processes of stardom or the meaning of the racial celebrity's visibility in the public eye. Beyond the fame of its subject, then, the Black star's autobiography *as such* accounts for that subject's *achievement* of celebrity status. More than a trite story of success resulting from some combination of talent, hard work, moxie, luck, or fate, the Black celebrity's autobiography requires us to examine the racial subject's incorporation into the commodifying relations of consumer culture and the complex of discourses that permeate the star's public visibility.

Any star's image consists of the manifold representations available to a mass audience – performances, interviews, biographical sketches, advertisements, and even rumors – but in its material incarnation as a book the autobiography distills the star's meaning into a coherent form that binds prose and pictures.[3] The Black star's narrative consists of a number of key features that should ground any critical interrogation: (1) it recounts the emergence, construction, maintenance, circulation, reception, or transformation of the star's image, while also registering the synecdochic function of the star's racialized body; (2) it features the sites, activities, practices, and products of consumer culture in order to ratify the star's status as exemplary consumer and alluring commodity; (3) it commodifies authenticity by promising to reveal the "real" self beneath the racial persona. If a star is born once the media (and consumers) become more intrigued by a famed person's private life than by her public accomplishments, then the star's narrative also exploits this interplay of privacy and publicity with its visual paratexts.[4] Because visibility is essential to the constitution of Black stars, the autobiography's pictures draw attention to the racialized body through generic images of celebrity: studio portraits that signify glamour; pictures of the star in action or before captivated audiences, spectators, and fans; pictures of the star socializing with

celebrities, politicians, and other leaders; personal pictures of private moments or domestic scenes that signify the "real" star. Notably, these paratexts usually originate in the prior construction of the celebrity's image while reconstituting that image in the present. Springing from the work of news agencies, talent agencies, or professional photographers, they verify the established visibility of the Black star, which warrants the autobiography itself. Any analysis of a Black celebrity's autobiography should thus attend to the elaborate interaction among its narrative and visual modes of self-presentation.

Historically, the Black star materialized as an autobiographical figure only after World War II with the publication of Joe Louis's *My Life Story* in 1947.[5] Although the first traces of celebrity culture had appeared in earlier interwar African American narratives by boxer Jack Johnson, bicyclist Major Taylor, and Louis Armstrong, these transitional autobiographies were not fully realized celebrity narratives.[6] Following Louis's autobiography, a dozen books by popular Black athletes, entertainers, and performers established a subgenre of Black celebrity autobiography by the end of the 1950s. Except for two older singers, Ethel Waters and Marian Anderson, these postwar autobiographers belonged to a younger generation who were themselves products of the major transformations in American society involving migration, urbanization, and mass consumption.[7] Black celebrities like boxing champion Louis, baseball pioneer Jackie Robinson, Hollywood star Lena Horne, cosmopolitan entertainer Eartha Kitt, and tennis champion Althea Gibson, among others, drew upon their visibility to evoke "a democratic myth of humble beginnings followed by hard work, discovery, and stardom."[8] As a result, they effected new possibilities for racial recognition based on the image-making mechanisms of consumer society and its culture of celebrity. Even as the narratives of respectable educators, ministers, and professionals continued to dominate Black autobiographical production for most of the twentieth century, these postwar athletes and entertainers launched a new trajectory within African American autobiography as both symbols and symptoms.

Like most of the Black autobiographers preceding them, these celebrities published narratives evincing the residual assumptions of "racial uplift" ideologies, which promoted the respectable self-presentation of exemplary individuals to reconstruct the race's public image.[9] As symbols of racial progress, they instantiated new biopolitical forms of visibility, publicity, and recognition, based on the exploits of the Black body in realms of sports, entertainment, and leisure.[10] In turn, books by popular Black athletes and performers in the late 1940s and 1950s announced the shifting

significance of their bodies to the autobiographical construction of the race's image. As symptoms, these early Black stars heralded the incursion of consumer culture into African American autobiography, adapting racial self-presentation to both narrative and visual modes of star-making. Because "the primacy of the visible" is one of its essential features, "celebrity demands a gaze."[11] By definition, then, the Black celebrity must circulate widely as racial sign through mass media and its visual technologies, inviting varied affective responses – identification, admiration, absorption, desire, fantasy – from an attentive, unseen public. Rooted in older assumptions about racial representation, indebted to newer mechanisms of publicity, and emerging from within consumer culture, Black celebrity autobiography is a pivotal development, requiring an account of the historical specificity, cultural conditions, and political meanings of its origins.

Famous figures like Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington certainly punctuated a centuries-long tradition of Black autobiographical production, but the advent of Black *stars* as autobiographers depended largely on a conjuncture that made their stardom possible. In stark contrast to the essential visibility of the modern Black star, the visibility of the racialized body had often troubled earlier African American autobiographers, both in slavery and in freedom. Consequently, any account of racial celebrity in the twentieth century must first reckon with the dilemma of racial visibility in the nineteenth, given the fundamental significance of visuality to the constitution, organization, and perpetuation of chattel slavery, as well as its associated forms of racial control.[12]

Consider, then, how visibility imperils the slave's freedom in the canonical *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (1845). For Douglass, the nadir of his existence comes while he works for the vicious slave-breaker Edward Covey, whose crude, serpentine methods of surveillance – not just his brutal violence – distinguish him from all other enslavers and overseers in the *Narrative*. Eventually, Covey's disciplinary techniques characterize slavery itself for the young Douglass, who imagines a dangerous network of gazes that transform the institution into "a stern reality, glaring frightfully upon us."[13] The enslaved Douglass's fraught visibility thus rivals his enforced illiteracy as the paradigmatic effect of his unfreedom.

To resolve this dilemma, Douglass crafts a panoptic threat of his own, inverting the racial visibility that menaces him. Refusing to describe his own escape to the North, Douglass hopes to thwart "greater vigilance on the part of slaveholders than has existed heretofore among them," a strategy

that demonstrates the fugitive's full authorial control of his text.[14] In addition, Douglass aims to subject slaveholders and their agents to that anxious sense of being surveilled that is fundamental to the power of slavery:

> I would keep the merciless slaveholder profoundly ignorant of the means of flight adopted by the slave. I would leave him to imagine himself surrounded by myriads of invisible tormenters, ever ready to snatch from his infernal grasp his trembling prey. Let him be left to feel his way in the dark . . . and let him feel that at every step he takes, in pursuit of the flying bondman, he is running the frightful risk of having his hot brains dashed out by an invisible agency.[15]

By representing his freedom in sharply visual terms, Douglass articulates the self-consciousness of a racially surveilled body; by invoking the unseen eye to conjure "an invisible agency," he upends the looking relations of racial power; by making the enslaver rather than the enslaved the object of the gaze, he uses his narrative to counter the dilemma of Black visibility.

As an autobiographer, Douglass imaginatively resists racial surveillance by rendering the fugitive's body inaccessible at the moment of escape. Beyond his writings, however, he also enacted his freedom within a hostile environment by posing for his own portraits. Indeed, photographic technologies captivated Douglass throughout his life: he sat for two daguerreotypes even before he published his *Narrative*, and he would become "the most photographed American of the nineteenth century" by the time he died in 1896.[16] He thus represented freedom alternately as invisibility and visibility in different modes of self-presentation. Douglass's example is instructive, then, because it distills some of the contrary impulses – evading the gaze and constructing the pose – that governed African American autobiography after emancipation.

As the Jim Crow regime congealed late in the nineteenth century, Black autobiography grew into a narrative form of racial publicity dominated by upright teachers, preachers, reformers, and professionals who presupposed that the race's image directly affected its social, political, and material progress. As devotees of racial uplift, these elite and aspirational figures insisted that "rights and freedom would accrue to those who had achieved the status of respectability," and they honed a cultural politics of racial synecdoche, managing the public image of the race through the self-presentation of emblematic individuals.[17] In effect, this specific formation of African Americans deployed autobiography to narrate themselves as the proof and promise of an advancing race. Faced with demeaning caricatures

of Black bodies on the minstrel's stage and the dehumanizing killings of Black people on the lyncher's stake, these autobiographers depicted their resolute striving in both prose and pictures to challenge the racist discourses that sustained such symbolic and spectacular violence.[18] Espousing bourgeois standards of industry, propriety, and probity, they fashioned themselves as models for rural farmers and urban migrants (whom they also sought to uplift through educational and ecclesiastical institutions), and they forged networks of affective identification among other Race Men and Women who imagined themselves as a distinct class of Black leaders. Mobilizing autobiography in the service of interracial recognition, intraracial supervision, and middle-class formation, these figures predicated their synecdochic authority and public visibility upon a Victorian ethos of respectability.

Nonetheless, the eminent Black men and women who sought to personify the race as its best public representatives were cautious about depicting their own bodies. Booker T. Washington, the famous principal of Tuskegee Institute and popular autobiographer, mandated manual labor for his students, but he rarely allowed the laboring Black body within the scope of *self*-presentation. Instead, he and his followers used autobiography to stress their own elevation from laborers to managers of racial progress. Their uplift narratives often demonstrated their ability to coax others to adapt to institutions like schools and churches, which instilled cultural values of discipline (thrift, chastity, modesty, temperance, etc.) and emphasized self-restraint over sensuality, character over personality, and productivity over pleasure or play. Moreover, once halftone technology allowed them to reproduce photographs in their books, Black autobiographers would customarily include two types of illustrations that demonstrated this ethos while deflecting their readers' eyes from their own bodies: first, portraits of themselves and others, which resisted "the display of the black body as the embodiment of backward savagery" by featuring physiognomy rather than physique; second, pictures of schools, homes, and other buildings, which displaced the authors' own racialized bodies by substituting concrete manifestations of race-building.[19] In effect, the autobiographers who bridged the antebellum slave narrative and the modern celebrity narrative sought to remove their own Black bodies from view, employing both narrative and visual strategies of evasion, diversion, and displacement.

If Washington's authority to narrate a Black life depends on the transcendence of his body, Louis's authority to narrate a Black life depends instead on the conspicuous appeal of *his* body. As autobiographers, Black

athletes and entertainers departed from the guarded visibility of their predecessors. Defined by the performances, achievements, and profuse images of their bodies, Black stars effected historically discrete forms of racial publicity that accompanied momentous shifts in American society. Predicated on a vision of the American worker as a consumer, the Fordist reorganization of the US economy began to tether mass production to mass consumption. The emergence of modern celebrity followed two key developments in the rise of consumer culture circa World War I: the technological improvement of print and visual media, which allowed for the mass reproduction, distribution, and circulation of both moving and still images; and the growth of a mass audience of consumers who, prompted by an expanding public relations industry, demanded to know more about the real personalities of the stars appearing before them, thereby binding the celebrity's public image to the revelation of a private self.[20] These new public personalities became emblems of the consumerist ethos of a changing society, eclipsing earlier idols who had represented the producerist values of a "culture of character."[21] The new celebrities thus manufactured through the culture industries quickly became "a connecting fiber between the materiality of production and culturally contextualized meaning of consumption and its relation to collective identity."[22]

Amid these developments early in the twentieth century, a conjuncture of mass consumption, mass media, mass migration, and urbanization sparked the first coherent formation of Black celebrity autobiographers. The Great Migration reshaped the Black public sphere as African Americans built new urban centers of cultural production. Cities like New York, Chicago, and Detroit promised access to commercialized sounds, images, amusements, and leisure, including a Black film culture and Black professional sports; at the same time, a vibrant African American press cultivated interest in the accomplishments of the race's own public personalities.[23] Additionally, the Black star arose at a moment when "the formation of the racial system and resistance to it moved out of workshops and into spaces of consumption – into houses, stores, movies, and sport."[24] America's fight against fascism abroad exacerbated the hypocrisy of racism at home, and African Americans sought equality as citizens in a nation of consumers after World War II. Black stars came to embody these larger expectations; they became multivalent emblems whose symbolic power depended on the extent of their visibility, signifying the complicated relationship between the public individual and the racial collective, the pressures faced by Black individuals in a racially stratified society, and the possibilities available to Black individuals in a consumer society wherein

access to stardom served as a proxy for access to the polity. By the time the earliest cluster of African American celebrities published their autobiographies in the late 1940s and 1950s, their narratives took shape against the dilemma of racial visibility that had determined a longer history of Black autobiographical production.

Published a decade into his reign as heavyweight champion, Joe Louis's *My Life Story* (1947) depicts the boxer's ascent as an iconic symbol of Black citizenship within a society transformed by the Fordist interrelation of mass production and mass consumption.[25] Haunted by the specter of the disreputable Jack Johnson, Louis's managers had assumed that his success would depend on his public image, presenting him as "a perfect *black* example of the Protestant ethic," a clean-living athlete known for his physical prowess and sportsmanship in the ring, as well as his simplicity, humility, and decency outside of it.[26] As "the subject of sympathetic human-interest profiles," the Southern-born and Detroit-bred fighter benefited from newly established forms of celebrity journalism, including extensive photographic coverage in the mass media, after 1935.[27] Consequently, Louis had become the most visible Black figure of his day by the time he published his autobiography, which consolidated a public image that had been crafted collectively by the media, his managers, and himself. Written with two *Pittsburgh Courier* sportswriters, *My Life Story* describes Louis's rise from autoworker to heavyweight champion to American soldier, embracing a project of racial publicity by affirming the heroic masculine ideal that he embodied. As a result, Louis's autobiography presents his life as an allegory of political recognition, merging older conceptions of synecdochic representation with newer forms of visibility that attended the growth of consumer culture.

While *My Life Story* carefully presents Louis's boxing as the productive work of a disciplined body rather than the leisurely play of a ludic body, it also foregrounds his incorporation into America's consumer culture.[28] First, the boxer measures his success in the ring by his ability to consume (purchasing a new home for his mother and a new Buick for himself, for example). Louis also emphasizes his desirability as a spectacle to be consumed by identifying celebrities who attend his fights, like Hollywood stars Douglas Fairbanks and Cary Grant, and by detailing attendance figures and gate receipts.[29] Finally, Louis values the commodified forms of his life and body – biographical sketches and cartoon strips in the press, picture postcards, collectible objects – that constitute him as a star.[30] The freedom to consume within a segregated economy; the recognition of other celebrities; the appeal of the Black body for a mass public, documented with facts

and figures; the various forms of both publicity and commodity that stoke interest in the Black star – these do not merely signify the perquisites earned by a singular athlete or entertainer. Rather, all of these consumerist forms of recognition link Louis's success to the visibility of his body before an extensive public, allowing him to "do a lot of good for my country and my people" by eliciting recognition as a Black celebrity.[31]

Louis's narrative of racial stardom unambiguously promotes him as "the wedding of consumer culture with democratic aspirations," since the boxer's visibility as popular spectacle actually occasions his entry into the US military as a symbolic citizen during World War II.[32] While *My Life Story* calls attention to the boxer's transformation from public individual to private citizen with his induction into the Army, he does not join the military as an ordinary Joe. Recognizing Louis's greater value as icon than as combatant, the War Department orders him "not to do any actual combat fighting," staging him instead in morale-boosting activities like boxing exhibitions and propaganda films (including Irving Berlin's *This Is the Army*).[33] Characterizing the wartime Army as a "brotherhood," Louis concludes *My Life Story* as both the icon of loyal Black citizenship and the emblem of a desegregated military, but both of these meanings originate in his visibility as a celebrity, not simply in his merit as a fighter. Finally, attesting to the significance of the visual field in constructing the boxer's public image, the "Album of Photographs" at the end of Louis's book comprises seventy-five illustrations credited to news agencies, publicists, and the Army; more than one-third of these images depict Louis as a soldier posing in uniform and boxing in exhibitions, while the remaining images are publicity shots, action sequences, and portraits of Louis with other celebrities. Overall, these pictures represent a selective expression of the visual archive of the public Louis, substantiating his value as a Black star to be photographed, reproduced, distributed, circulated, sold, and idolized. Without any clear narrative, chronological, or thematic logic, Louis's visual paratexts depend simply on his body – at play, at work, at "war" – for their coherence.

After Louis and Robinson, famous athletes dominated the autobiographical production of Black male celebrities until the mid-1960s, including baseball players Willie Mays, Roy Campanella, and Satchel Paige, boxers Henry Armstrong, Archie Moore, and Floyd Patterson, and football player Jim Brown.[34] During the same period, nearly all of the Black female celebrities to publish autobiographies – Lena Horne, Ethel Waters, Marian Anderson, Eartha Kitt, and Billie Holiday – were primarily singers, though Waters and Horne had also established themselves on film by the time their

books appeared.[35] Reflecting, if imprecisely, the spheres of consumer culture within which African American stars could appear, this dichotomy between the sportsman and the songstress also raises questions about the gendered division of symbolic labor marking Black celebrity autobiography at its origins. These sportsmen became autobiographers after earning their celebrity in boxing rings and on playing fields, where regulated exercises of symbolic power affirmed them as idols of masculinity. In contrast, these songstresses faced a distinct contradiction as autobiographers: the celebrity they earned on stages and screens could not guarantee their standing as idols of femininity. As new vehicles for embodying racial progress, these performers could not enter the synecdochic project of Black autobiography without negotiating a gendered politics of respectability, given enduring adverse stereotypes about Black women's sexuality. The vexed meanings of Black women's performing bodies thus agitates Horne's *In Person* (1950), the first autobiography by a Black female celebrity.

By the time she published her first collaborative narrative, Horne rivaled Louis as one of the country's most visible African Americans. Appearing shortly after Horne canceled her long-term contract with Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, *In Person* details the fair-skinned performer's ascent from a teenaged chorine at Harlem's Cotton Club to her career as a singer on stage, radio, and record to her stardom in Hollywood's segregated film industry of the 1940s. Following a teleological arc – the young Black fan dreams of stardom before becoming a star herself – *In Person* typifies other key features of celebrity autobiography: intimating some of the desire, despair, insecurity, and rage she experienced as a Black female performer, it uncovers a private Horne beneath the inaccessible "impersona" of her restrained performance style; it explores Horne's struggle with her synecdochic potential, involving a "kind of social stage presence" that promised to "advance our entire race"; it frames the political contest over African American rights and recognition in consumerist terms as Horne addresses the demands and desires of Black moviegoers; it presents Horne as the subject of fan mail, press releases, reviews, interviews, and gossip columns (often quoted directly) to certify her ascent; and it captures Horne at the height of her career with nearly two dozen illustrations (indeed, the autographed portrait on the book's cover highlights the materiality of the photograph itself, a memento that circulates among fans as a talisman of "beauty, femininity, success, wealth, happiness, and fantasy").[36]

In order to recover her body from its sexual inscription, an inexorable condition of her public visibility, Horne's narrative must resist "the way most white people treat Negro women – as though we are all born harlots,"

a projection she faces repeatedly from contemptuous white women, sexually aggressive white men, and bigoted theater managers.[37] A resonant conflict in the autobiography encapsulates both the defensive respectability associated with the residual ethos of racial uplift and the redemptive promise of celebrity in a burgeoning consumer society. Within her black middle-class milieu of Brooklyn in the early 1930s, the teenaged Horne and her girlfriends develop consumerist forms of sociality, relating to each other through the movies they watch regularly, the "imitations of our favorite movie stars" they share socially, and the autographs they collect "from stage personalities."[38] Despite their generational immersion in celebrity culture, Lena's peers still dismiss acting as "an unspeakable profession" for Black women, one that threatens the dictates of bourgeois respectability.[39] When Lena confesses her dreams of becoming a performer, they voice a collective verdict, insisting that "[n]o decent man would want his wife to be on the stage, dancing without any clothes on in front of all those people."[40] Alienated from her Brooklyn crowd, Lena assures herself that "when I was a great star and had made a real contribution, they'd all be proud of me," though their opprobrium continues to sting.[41] Eventually, Horne's solo engagement at Café Society earns her acclaim and publicity as "[s]mart magazines . . . ran my picture with praise-filled reviews," attracting her decorous Brooklyn friends to her performances.[42] Once they realize, she writes, "that I wasn't shaming them all by doing something degraded and indecent," they embrace the newly glamorous Horne.[43] This minor drama of recognition distills one of this rich autobiography's major themes: for the public body of the Black woman, laden with synecdochic meaning, the aura of stardom itself resolves this gendered dilemma of racial visibility.

Following Louis and Horne, tennis champion Althea Gibson published *I Always Wanted to Be Somebody* (1958) as a singular figure – a Black athlete who was not a man, a Black female star who was not famous for singing. The earliest known autobiography by a Black female athlete, *I Always Wanted to Be Somebody* appeared after Gibson had defended her singles titles at the Wimbledon Championships and the US Open, and it relates her girlhood in 1930s Harlem, her discovery by two Black doctors who trained and educated the teenager in the South, her career as a fast-rising amateur, and her major victories as a world-class competitor in the late 1950s. Like the narratives of her contemporaries, *I Always Wanted to Be Somebody* situates Gibson within the consumer culture that formed her, presenting her as an avid fan of the movies, which provide her with an escape from school and work, a refuge when she runs away from home, a lens through which she sees her life, and her favorite form of leisure. At

the same time, sites of consumption like the movie theater, bowling alley, and lunch counter organize Gibson's experiences of Jim Crow racism in the South.[44] Describing the attention of journalists and photographers, as well as her television appearances and brief recording career as a celebrity, she recognizes her status as a racial symbol throughout the autobiography. Ambivalent about the synecdochic power of her public image, however, Gibson also resists the uplift assumptions that had stabilized Louis's fame just a decade earlier.

Gibson's autobiography seems to conform to a meritocratic logic whereby hard work, determination, and discipline enable her rise to visibility as a world-class athlete, but, like Horne's *In Person*, it also contends with the gendered discourses of social mobility, respectability, and representation that shape her public image. After attracting attention in Harlem for her athletic ability, the teenager becomes aware of the class-based premises that motivated her supporters among the African American elite.[45] Admitting that "I was still living pretty wild," Gibson explains that members of Harlem society "felt they had to be doubly careful in order to overcome the prejudiced attitude that all Negroes lived eight to a room in dirty houses and drank gin all day and settled all their arguments with knives."[46] In order to "break into the major league of tennis and play in the white tournaments," she receives instruction in decorum – not simply athletic training – from her Black sponsors.[47] Moreover, the tennis star's celebrity depends on the distance she travels from the working-class tomboy who "hated to wear anything except slacks" to "a fine lady" who admires the "beautiful evening gown" she wears to the Wimbledon ball, a sartorial transformation depicted in the eleven illustrations at the center of *I Always Wanted to Be Somebody*.[48] According to this chronological series of images, Gibson's achievement of celebrity demands the avowal of femininity and the social refinement of a brash, athletic Black woman. Nonetheless, her narrative never fully embraces the conflation of racial progress with gender conformity.

Unsettling the emblematic power of the Black star, Gibson resists the cultural politics of racial synecdoche both directly and discursively. First, she discloses her personal discomfort as a Black pioneer, remarking on the "strain [of] always trying to say and do the right thing, so that I wouldn't give people the wrong idea of what Negroes are like."[49] Contrasting herself with the outspoken Jackie Robinson, Gibson dismisses her obligation as a racial emblem, refusing "to flaunt [her] success as a Negro success" or "to turn [her] tennis achievements into a rousing crusade for racial equality."[50] Rather than accept what – and whom – she represents, Gibson troubles her

meaning as a racial symbol. More importantly, *I Always Wanted to Be Somebody* widens the boundaries of racial self-presentation beyond the dictates of respectability by adopting the streetwise pose of the juvenile delinquent. Gibson's gendered narrative of Black social mobility augments her dramatic rise with boasts of her delinquency, though she disavows "all the drinking and narcotics and sex" in Harlem's street gangs, as well as "the stickups that they turned to sooner or later."[51] When she returns to her Harlem block as a Wimbledon champion, "[i]t was hard not to think about other days on the same street, days when I felt as though I were carrying home a precious trophy if I had under my jacket a mushmelon [*sic*] that I'd snitched at the Terminal Market."[52] Gibson's tales of street fighting, shoplifting, petty theft, and truancy thus echo "a vast network of discourses that converged in the 1950s and early 1960s on the problem of juvenile delinquency in the inner city," situating the young Althea *within* such contemporary discourses even as her celebrity narrative seems to quell them.[53]

Ultimately, Gibson's narrative delineates the competing demands of respectability and authenticity, a tension that would become even more evident among other Black celebrities in subsequent years. For example, Archie Moore's *The Archie Moore Story* (1960) would briefly describe how delinquency lands him in a reformatory, where he decides that boxing would be the most gainful "short cut if I was to accomplish anything."[54] Likewise, Floyd Patterson's *Victory Over Myself* (1962) would recount his troubled childhood as a thief and occasional runaway who also takes up boxing during his two years in a reformatory.[55] Demonstrating the power of organized sports to forge the wild Black child into a decent public figure, such narratives echo Gibson's arc from delinquency to discipline. While the subgenre of Black celebrity autobiography had emerged in the service of racial publicity, *I Always Wanted to Be Somebody* clears narrative space for the Black delinquent as the subject of self-presentation, not simply as the object of social critique. Moreover, the champion presents her roots with pride, writing, "it meant a lot to me to have all those people come out of their tired old apartment houses . . . to tell me how glad they were that one of the neighbors' children had gone out into the world and done something big."[56] With this turn from the Harlem elites toward the Harlem streets, Gibson's narrative distresses the Black celebrity's authentic connection to African Americans: What is her relationship and responsibility to Black people, and whom among her people does her visibility actually serve? To be sure, authenticity, especially for Black stars, is an effect of the shifting discourses that ground the production of the public

Black self, not simply a measure of increasing freedom to be "real." Still, as racial concerns, such questions of authenticity and constituency would become increasingly salient for Black stars once the Civil Rights Movement marched into the 1960s.

Even as Black celebrity autobiography has evolved, its full significance remains veiled. With this condensed account of its origins, I call for a fresh examination of the Black star's autobiographical production that thoroughly attends to its historical contingency, political complexity, and theoretical possibility. We need more precise criteria, parameters, and typologies for delineating varieties of self-presentation by Black celebrities; we need more extensive surveys of important figures, incipient formations, pivotal texts, and key moments; we need more studies of seriality among Black celebrity autobiographers who present themselves across multiple texts over time; we need more analyses – synchronic, diachronic, and intersectional – that account for the discursive limits, pressures, and prospects affecting the cultural work of Black stars; we need theoretical analyses of autobiographical production as a collective or corporate project among stars and their collaborators. Finally, looking beyond the autobiographical *figures* of celebrity, we also need analyses of the *phenomenon* of celebrity as a cultural, social, political, and economic force altering the broader currents of modern Black autobiography.

Notes

1. Graeme Turner, *Understanding Celebrity*, 2nd ed. (Los Angeles: Sage, 2014), 10.
2. Richard Wright, *Black Boy: A Record of Childhood and Youth* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1945); Louis Armstrong, *Satchmo: My Life in New Orleans* (1954; New York: Da Capo, 1986); Katherine Dunham, *A Touch of Innocence* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1959). Note, too, that these books contain virtually no visual paratexts, which are also defining features of Black celebrity autobiography.
3. Richard Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), 2–3.
4. Turner, *Understanding Celebrity*, 8.
5. Joe Louis, *My Life Story* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1947).
6. Johnson details his private life beyond the ring in *In the Ring – and Out* (1927), occasionally describing the heavyweight's theatrical and musical performances; more often, the notorious Johnson seeks to redeem himself by emphasizing activities like lecturing, advertising, selling stocks, and making investments that associate him with the productive realms of professional and commercial enterprises. The bulk of Taylor's *The Fastest Bicycle Rider in the World* (1928) details the cyclist's on-track exploits, but it also briefly describes the use of his

image to sell bicycles. In *Swing that Music* (1936), Armstrong presents his own life as the story of the new swing music, distinguishing this authentic, improvisational form of music from the "stale brand of jazz" resulting from its commercialization; meanwhile, he also describes the growth of his popularity as an artist through radio broadcasts, recordings, and fan clubs. See Jack Johnson, *Jack Johnson – In the Ring – and Out* (1927; New York: Citadel Press, 1992); Marshall W. "Major" Taylor, *The Fastest Bicycle Rider in the World* (Worcester, MA: Wormley Publishing, 1928); and Louis Armstrong, *Swing That Music* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1936), 123.

7. Ethel Waters, with Charles B. Samuel, *His Eye Is on the Sparrow: An Autobiography* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1951); Marian Anderson, *My Lord, What a Morning: An Autobiography* (New York: Viking, 1956).
8. Jackie Robinson, as told to Wendell Smith, *My Own Story* (New York: Greenberg, 1948); Lena Horne, as told to Helen Arstein and Carlton Moss, *In Person* (New York: Greenberg, 1950); Eartha Kitt, *Thursday's Child* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1956); Althea Gibson, *I Always Wanted to Be Somebody*, ed. Ed Fitzgerald (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1958). The quote appears in Marshall, *Fastest Bicycle Rider*, 6.
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11. Joseph A. Boone and Nancy J. Vickers, "Introduction – Celebrity Rites," *PMLA* 126,. 4 (2011): 907.
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14. *Ibid.*, 350; Robert B. Stepto, *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative*, 2nd ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 25.
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19. Ross, "The New Negro Displayed," 270; Anthony S. Foy, "The Visual Properties of Black Autobiography: The Case of William J. Edwards," in *Reading African American Autobiography: Twenty-First Century Contexts and Criticism*, ed. Eric D. Lamore (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2017), 89–116.
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