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Uta Reuster-Jahn   
Universität Hamburg  
uta.reuster-jahn@uni-hamburg.de

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## Book review

*Gehrmann, Susanne. 2021. Autobiographik in Afrika. Literaturgeschichte und Genrevielfalt. (Literaturen und Kunst Afrikas, Band 14). Trier: WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier.*

Uta Reuster-Jahn, Universität Hamburg

This book by Susanne Gehrmann, Professor of African Literatures at the Humboldt University of Berlin, Germany, provides an overview of autobiographical writing in Africa. The presentation of the genre's diverse forms in their historical contexts reflects the author's extensive scholarly engagement with self-referential writing on the continent. The intended target audience includes both scholars and interested general readers, which is why the book offers not only scholarly discourse, but also an exciting and stimulating read. Gehrmann's detailed discussion of the works of individual authors, as well as the manifold cross references she points out particularly contribute to this.

In the introduction (p. 1–11) Gehrmann outlines the development of scholarly discourse regarding autobiographical writing in Africa. While Eurocentric positions marginalized or even negated the genre until the second half of the 20th century; poststructuralist, feminist, and postcolonial literary theories have led to the recognition of its diversity on the continent and in the diaspora. Gehrmann's survey impressively demonstrates the rich forms of autobiographical writing in Africa. She also shows how strongly many authors' fictional work is intertwined with the autobiographical, and she also includes autofiction in her consideration.

Recent scholarly debate regarding autobiography in Africa has focused on the question of individual versus collective identities of the authors, as well as on the further validity of a teleologically oriented autobiographical paradigm that is increasingly being dismantled by authors. Anglophone literary scholars use alternative genre terms such as "life writing" for this reason. Gehrmann instead argues for an opening of the concept of autobiography and speaks of "autobiographical forms". With her book, she aims to provide an overview of the diversity of autobiographical writing in Africa, but at the same time she points out an unavoidable gap: neither does her text map the entire diversity of forms nor the diversity of languages. She

focuses on Anglophone and Francophone texts by writers originating in sub-Saharan Africa.

The first two chapters provide a concise overview of autobiographical forms in pre-colonial and colonial Africa. In Chapter 1 (p. 12–30), the author emphasizes that self-referential oral forms in the realm of praise poetry, epics, and narratives belong to the continuum of autobiographical forms. She further points to pre-colonial autobiographical texts written in African languages in Arabic script (*ajami*) and often in lyrical form. Finally, she addresses the genre of slave narratives written outside of Africa and related auto-ethnographic accounts by African-born authors. These date back to the 18th century and established an early counter-discourse to European discourses of race and domination.

In Chapter 2 (p. 31–54), Gehrman shows how autobiographical forms diversified during the colonial period and how written prose autobiography, despite its beginnings as a colonial educational project, increasingly developed into a prominent medium of expression through which authors could “inscribe themselves in history as colonized subject[s] in defiance of existing power relations” (p. 53)<sup>1</sup> and revalorize African cultures. During this period, authors such as Camara Laye, Robert W. Cole, and Bernard B. Dadié also wrote about their experiences in Europe.

The third chapter addresses central themes of postcolonial African autobiography through a close reading of the works of prominent authors (p. 55–131). In the first part, Gehrman looks at texts by Cheikh Hamidou Kane (Senegal), Amadou Hampâté Bâ (Mali), and Wole Soyinka (Nigeria), whose childhoods date back to the colonial era. In her discussion, she shows how these authors inscribe themselves as subjects in history and construct their identities within the framework of cultural hybridity. The second part, “Postcolonial autobiographies of African women”, highlights the close connection between fictional works and self-referentiality of female authors, such as in the work of Nigerian author Buchi Emecheta. Gehrman is particularly concerned with the fragmentarily narrated autobiographical novels of the Senegalese writer Ken Bugul, which she has studied since the publication of Bugul’s *Le baobab fou* (1982). She argues that Bugul’s works are more aptly termed autofiction as “the fictional portions become increasingly dominant as the autobiographical series progresses, without ever entirely losing touch with dealing

with self-referential experience and trauma” (p. 80, footnote 112)<sup>2</sup>. The self-therapeutic moment of the writing, typical of autofiction, also speaks in favour of this classification. Gehrman concludes that the migrant experience in the European metropolises stimulated and often even made writing possible for many women, especially in the second half of the 20th century.

In the third part of Chapter 3, Gehrman focuses on autobiographical essays. This genre, in which autobiographical writing and scholarly or socio-political reflection merge, has gained prominence in the African diaspora since the 1990s. These texts often explicitly address the issue of the relationship between the individual and the collective, which is present throughout the autobiographical continuum in Africa – a term introduced by Gehrman. She shows that in contrast to Wole Soyinka’s childhood autobiography *Aké* in his later essay *You must set forth at dawn. A memoir*, the author combines an analysis of political crises in Nigeria with a narrative of his years in exile in the United States. Gehrman goes into detail about the essay *Les corps glorieux des mots et des êtres* by V.Y. Mudimbe, which she highlights as a masterpiece because of its virtuoso play with metatextuality and hybridity. The section on essays is rounded out with Manthia Diawara’s scholarly, analytical travel essays. In summary, Gehrman notes that autobiographical writing in Africa often involves the abandonment of linear narratives of identity in favour of a subjective historicity, a fictionalization of the self, and a focus on its collective dimension.

In the fourth part, Gehrman discusses political memoirs, prison accounts, and testimonies. These include the memoirs of Kwame Nkrumah and Kenneth Kaunda from the generation of the first post-colonial presidents, those of the first female president of an African country, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, and others of human rights and environmental activists. Prison accounts have their beginnings in the colonial era, but the genre flourished under repression in postcolonial conditions, Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s and Wole Soyinka’s accounts gaining the greatest prominence. Gehrman points out that autobiographical poetry is also a widespread branch of African prison literature, as evidenced by Jack Mapanje’s anthology (2002).

Chapter 3 concludes with an interesting excursus into the multifaceted South African autobiography published during and after apartheid, in which autobiographical practices were part of a cul-

ture of resistance and reappraisal in which men and women alike participated. This section discusses testimonial and prison accounts of South African political activists. The abolition of apartheid and transition to democracy led to a new flourishing of autobiographical literature, in which testimonial texts dating back to the apartheid regime have played a major role. The number of autobiographical texts by white South African women has increased significantly since the 1990s, and these texts deal with their identity constructions and learning processes during and after apartheid.

In Chapter 4, devoted to medial extensions of the autobiographical (p. 140–75), Gehrman once again turns to V.Y. Mudimbe and Ken Bugul, whose work she has dealt with most thoroughly in her research to date. With regard to V.Y. Mudimbe's essayistic text *Les corps glorieux des mots et des êtres*, which is supplemented by a photographic appendix, she elaborates on intermedial references that function as textual strategies. In some cases, the photographs reinforce memory or iconize specific people and symbolically significant moments in the autobiographical narrator's life. In other cases, they fill voids in the text. In the second part of the chapter, Gehrman discusses film adaptations of autobiographical texts and then specifically addresses Silvia Voser's film *Ken Bugul - Personne n'en veut* (2013), which she interprets as a medial extension of Ken Bugul's autofiction and whose interconnections with Ken Bugul's texts she elaborates in detail.

The fifth and final chapter of the book (p. 176–194) focuses on East Africa, first providing an overview of published autobiographies written in English and in Swahili. Gehrman then contrasts Ngugi wa Thiong'o's autobiographical trilogy with Binyavanga Wainaina's autobiography. Through his writing, Ngugi wa Thiong'o inscribes himself in history as an African subject and bears witness to the collective resistance to colonialism in Kenya. At the same time, in this classic postcolonial ensemble of texts, the autobiographical narrator constructs himself as a hybrid subject who, informed by local culture, appropriates the tools of colonial rule in order to criticise it and reconcile the two systems. In contrast, Wainaina's text addresses the individual identity formation of a subject who perceives himself as an outsider, focused on global culture rather than local politics, and is more subject-centered and individualistic in nature. His text there-

fore points beyond the conventions of “classic” postcolonial autobiography.

Gehrmann’s monograph is an important overview and reference work, as well as a highly stimulating read that highlights the importance of self-referential writing in African literary production. The extensive bibliographical index of African autobiographical sources (p. 195–204) allows readers to engage further with such texts. Secondary literature is listed in 20 pages and is followed by a filmography. The book concludes with a useful index of names. Despite the absence of Lusophone and Afrophone autobiographical writing in the book it is an important contribution to the field and should be available in English translation to reach a wider readership.