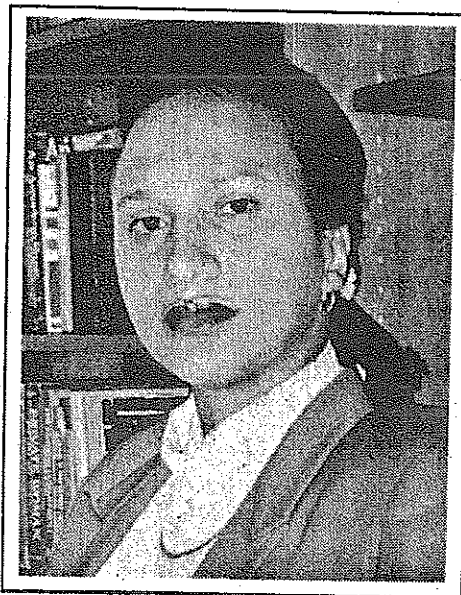


## Newsmakers

### Black Women Writing Autobiography

# Joanne Braxton's new book seeks redefinition of genre

Joanne M. Braxton, Francis L. and Edwin L. Cummings Professor of American Studies and associate professor of English, is author of *Black Women Writing Autobiography: A Tradition Within a Tradition*.



Joanne Braxton

tion, published by Temple University Press. She is also co-editor with Andree Nicola McLaughlin of *Wild Women in the Whirlwind: Afro-American Culture and the Contemporary Literary Renaissance*, published by Rutgers University Press.

The idea for *Black Women Writing Autobiography*, says Braxton, originated with her Yale University American Studies doctoral dissertation. She received support for this project from the American Council

of Learned Societies, the College, the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. During the spring of 1984, Braxton was a Mellon National Scholar in a semester-long Mellon-funded faculty development seminar at the Wellesley College Center for Research on Women. The following summer Braxton participated in a National Endowment for the Humanities summer seminar at Rutgers University on "Women's Writing and Women's Culture," directed by Elaine Showalter.

The College supported her work during 1986 with a semester faculty research assignment. A second semester of full-time work was made possible by a grant from the American Council of Learned Societies. The National Endowment for the Humanities supported *Black Women Writing Autobiography* with a Travel to Collections grant, which enabled Braxton to spend additional time at the Moorland-Spangor Research Center at Howard University.

In the acknowledgments to the book Braxton thanks several members of the English department, including Tom Heacox, Elsa Nettels and Ann Reed for their assistance.

In *Black Women Writing Autobiography*, Braxton argues for a redefinition of the genre of black American autobiography to include the images of women as well as their memoirs, reminiscences, diaries and journals—as a corrective to both black and feminist literary criticism.

Beginning with slave narratives and

concluding with modern autobiography, she deals with individual works as representing stages in a continuum and situates these works in the context of other writings by both black and white writers.

William L. Andrews, professor of English, University of Wisconsin-Madison, praises the book highly as "the most inclusive and thoughtful literary history of black American women's autobiography in existence. It reads very smoothly and is cogently argued. Its conclusion is one of the best brief descriptive statements about the tradition of Afro-American women's autobiography as a whole that I have read."

Elizabeth Fox-Genovese also compliments the new book. "Joanne Braxton's essays on black women's autobiographies delineate and illuminate the personal and historical dimension of an important literary tradition. Emphasizing the distinct character of Afro-American women's experience and relations with each other, she grounds their writing of their lives in the struggles and triumphs of the lives they actually led."

Braxton will speak on "What I Learned from the Story of Autobiography by Black American Women," at Yale this spring as part of the 1989-90 Women's Studies Lecture Series featuring feminist scholars with degrees from Yale.

*Wild Women in the Whirlwind: Afro-American Culture and the Contemporary Literary Renaissance* is the first comprehensive collection of critical and theoretical essays to explore the literary and many cultural traditions of black American

women in a multitude of forms including fiction, poetry, autobiography, drama, political essay and oral history, over a broad span of time.

Contributors include Angela Y. Davis, June Jordan, Gloria I. Joseph, David A. Curtis, Henry Louis Gates Jr., Robert J. Fehrenbach, (professor of English at William and Mary), Daphne Duval Harrison, Billie Jean Young, Regine Altagrace Latortue, Calvin Hernton, Barbara Smith, Joanne V. Gabbin, Nellie McKay, Barbara Omolade, Vashti Crutcher Lewis, Barbara Christian, Zala Chandler, Rudolph Byrd, Chinosole, and Gale P. Jackson.

The two editors have written introductions providing both historical and comparative discussions of the contemporary literary renaissance. The book also includes a valuable bibliography of selected English-language works by black women in the Americas from 1970 to the present.

Braxton is also the author of *Sometimes I Think of Maryland*, a collection of poetry, and in 1988 received the Society of the Alumni Fellowship for Excellence in Teaching. She is currently working on chapters on Maya Angelou and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper for *Modern American Women Authors*, forthcoming from Scribners.

Andree Nicola McLaughlin is professor of Humanities at Medgar Evers College, CUNY and, presently, the Jane Watson Irwin Professor in Women's Studies at Hamilton College. She chairs the editorial board of NETWORK, a Pan-African Women's Forum, and is a published poet.