

Review

Reviewed Work(s): *Black Passports: Travel Memoirs as a Tool for Youth Empowerment*
by Stephanie Y. Evans

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Source: *CLA Journal*, Vol. 61, No. 1-2 (SEPTEMBER 2017 - DECEMBER 2017), pp. 124-127

Published by: College Language Association

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26559634>

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Stephanie Y. Evans. *Black Passports: Travel Memoirs as a Tool for Youth Empowerment.* Albany: SUNY Press, 2014. 310 pp. ISBN: 978-1-4384-5154-1. Paper (\$31.95).

Making meaningful contributions in the fields of autobiography, youth studies, education, and African American Studies, Stephanie Y. Evans's *Black Passports: Travel Memoirs as a Tool for Youth Empowerment* (2014) is an important book that grapples with ways to inspire today's young people. Evans identifies a serious issue that youth around the world face: a lack of role models to guide them in fulfilling their destiny. She desires to empower Black youth by providing them with tools—200 African American autobiographies with narrative explorations of international travel—that they can use as guides to help them in becoming wise citizens of the world. Overlooked no longer, young people can find an oasis within the pages of the travel memoirs or “narratives-within-texts” that Evans explores and adults can assist them along the journey. Unabashedly, she asserts in her prologue that she composed the book to help “those most ‘at risk’ of being affected by debilitating conditions at home or abroad” (xxiii). The narratives, ranging from lesser-known individuals to popular figures, such as Muhammad Ali, Diana Ross, Harry Belafonte, Angela Davis, Ray Charles, and Tina Turner, will encourage and stimulate young minds. Pairing mentoring skills with curriculum development, Evans's *Black Passports* ultimately furthers scholarship within higher education geared toward assisting youth with setting and achieving goals that will positively impact their lives as well as the local, national, and global communities to which they belong.

Evans arranges *Black Passports* in a traditional fashion, with a prologue, introduction, four body chapters, conclusion, and epilogue. The body chapters are dedicated to a specific subject concerning youth, including “Life,” “School,” “Work,” and “Exchange.” Some may see the one-word chapter titles as too vague and the numerous subheadings within the chapters as distracting, but the book is purposely composed like a handbook, rather than a traditional academic monograph, to facilitate its usability. For such a purpose, the book is well-organized. Evans designed her book for the young mentees as well as those who will aid them, whom she identifies as “high school teachers, university professors, agency directors, program staff and mentors who provide service to youth in their development” (xxiv). Additionally, the four appendices of the book will prove to be valuable resources for her multiple audiences.

In her introductory chapter, “Literary Mentoring,” Evans immediately establishes herself as a reliable voice on the topic of mentoring. She accomplishes this in several ways, including walking readers through her decade-long involvement with community service-learning classes, precollege youth summits, and

community partnerships. She also disperses her own autobiographical vignettes connected to life, school, work, and exchange throughout the text, providing a thoughtful personal touch. Concerning literary mentoring, Evans defines it as “readers gaining insight, perspective, inspiration, and guidance from a text in a similar way they would from a personal mentoring relationship” (21). Still, she cautions that no mentor is perfect, as everyone has flaws. Her methodology, to find the literary mentors, is concise and straightforward. Searching various databases and bibliographies, she was able to find her group of 200 Black travel memoirs, which she notes are mostly by entertainers and athletes. She stresses the need for others to tell their stories as well as for youth to become aware of knowledge systems of Africa. Perhaps one of the most interesting features of her introduction is her outline of eight narrative styles, or what she calls autobiographical archetypes: Activist, Survivor, Seeker, Relation, Rebel, Icon, Messenger, and Professional. Each of the autobiographies fits into one or more of these styles, which facilitates further comprehension of the narratives. Among the many acronyms she develops to help navigate her curriculum, SWAG is the one that may stand out the most because of the common use of the term *swag*, a short form of the word *swagger*, among contemporary young people. It stands for “start with a guide,” and she ultimately intends for young people to use the autobiographies as an introductory guide toward self-efficacy.

In the “Life” and “School” chapters, Evans delves more into what she calls the *Black Passports* curriculum. She notes that the information her book presents can be a part of fulfilling state and national academic performance standards on the primary and secondary educational levels, particularly in the areas of history, geography, and literature. Highlighting the requirements for Georgia high school students, for example, to identify dimensions of the Civil Rights Movement, she carefully delineates how the “autobiographies can supplement the Georgia performance standards for grades 9–12 in U.S. history” (80). In addition, she offers a wide variety of topics in which to help youth assess and compare the autobiographies, such as city histories, state histories, activist causes, military combat, music genres, and sports. To complement the various topics within the memoirs, she identifies online sources that youth can use for further research. Her inclusion of Wikipedia in this list may raise eyebrows and skepticism concerning reliability.

The appendices are informative resources that can certainly enhance learning. In particular, Appendix B provides a data set for the Viewshare Library of Congress online resource that she created in collaboration with the Emory University Digital Humanities Center/Research Commons. This database allows students to interact with maps that trace the geographical journeys of the authors. Contributing

to literary studies, Appendix C provides a 1,300-word vocabulary guide while Appendix D offers poetry on the history and culture associated with the memoirs, which Evans calls “nenoku” poetry.

To illustrate hands-on perspectives, she also includes two interviews as examples of positive mentoring experiences—one with Saroya Corbett and another with Frank Moten, mentees of the famed dancer and anthropologist Katherine Dunham and jazz legend Dizzy Gillespie, respectively. Evans details her service-learning work with the Reichert House for Boys and the PACE Program for Girls in Gainesville, Florida as well, and how the two programs assist youth by guiding them in areas such as health, conflict resolution, and financial management. She concludes by informing that the *Black Passports* curriculum can “also aid students of various racial and ethnic background[s] by introducing several new figures for study beyond those presented during traditional Black History Month programming” (92). The book, in short, can be influential to any young person.

In the chapter “Work,” Evans promotes another method of offering youth real-life exposure while enhancing their academic skills. She convincingly demonstrates how the narratives offer insight into career choices. To emphasize the significant role of work, she notes snippets of the work-life demonstrated in specific autobiographies around categories, such as politics, healthcare, and journalism, associated with different professions. Moreover, Evans features specific organizations that operate meaningful programs geared toward preparing youth for work by honing in on skills such as communication and leadership. The organizations, such as the National Association for Urban Debate Leagues, the Georgia Steppers League, and the Boys and Girls Club of America, strategically offer services that develop a variety of skill sets as well as partner their members with role models.

The “Exchange” chapter stresses the importance of an international context for youth and highlights memoirs that feature experiences abroad. In particular, she codifies into three categories (self-possession, self-determination, and self-definition) ten memoirs from female authors who narrate their experiences with college study abroad including Mary Church Terrell, Zora Neale Hurston, and Gayle Pemberton. Historically, various gender boundaries have stifled women in regard to extensive travel abroad. These facets of the memoirs also contribute to academic performance standards that mandate a comparative humanities approach. She includes reflections, in her concluding chapter, from some of her students who took her study abroad course in Paris to highlight further the value of exchange.

Without a doubt, the mission of *Black Passports* to help youth is admirable. It offers a captivating collection of autobiographies that will not only allow students to learn about and be inspired by notable people of African descent but also

inspire them to manifest their destinies. Indeed, the book shrewdly conveys how guiding youth in mastering self-control is a means to aid them in achieving self-liberation, which, in turn, allows them to assist others. While Evans has penned her own autobiography, *Chronicles of the Equator Woman: The Recipe for Justice Soup* (2013), she hesitates to call herself a role model. She candidly admits her weaknesses and bravely shares some of her life obstacles, including experiences of sexual violence and suicidal thoughts during her younger years. Despite it all, literary mentoring is the way she chooses to improve the world. She explains that “mentoring is about tapping into the force within yourself and then helping others find their own source of power and light” (165). Her epilogue, which includes a poem paying homage to family, reaffirms this belief. In the end, *Black Passports* carves out a space in university studies to address creative methods for helping today’s youth.

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