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African American Lives

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Review

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Gates, Henry Louis Jr., Editor and Higginbotham, Evelyn Brooks, Editor.
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611 voices

Fleshing out historical figures

The scholarly literature on African American history has grown dramatically since the 1982 publication of Rayford Logan and Michl Winston's *Dictionary of American Negro Biography*. Since that time, scholars have drawn upon unexamined primary sources, applied new methodologies to old questions, and published a wealth of monographs and syntheses that both complicate and expand our understanding of the experiences, history, and influences of Africans and their American-born descendants. The editors of **African American Lives**, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, make the most of the scholarly developments of the last two decades. These two respected and distinguished scholars have combined their expertise with those of the fellows at Harvard University's W.E.B. DuBois Institute for African and African American Research, and the editors of Oxford University Press to create a thorough and engaging reference work.

African American Lives includes 611 alphabetically organized biographies ranging from the sixteenth century to the present day. They include the experiences of the most well known black Americans, the life histories of the once-famous and now-forgotten, and a number of ordinary people, whose lives of distinction shaped the contours and content of U.S. and world history. As a whole, Gates and Higginbotham hope that the biographies included in **African American Lives** will attest to the integral character of African Americans to the life of this nation û to their abiding influence on American culture and institutions. It should be noted that the entries contained in **African American Lives** comprise the core of a much larger ongoing project: the eight-volume *African American National Biography*, forthcoming from Oxford University

Press. When completed, the *AANB* will detail the lives of some 6,000 black Americans, and function much like the twenty-five volume *American National Biography*. Unlike these much larger reference collections for libraries, however, **African American Lives** is intended for personal as well as institutional use.

The 900 to 3000-word essays contained in **African American Lives** can be roughly placed into four basic categories. Two hundred and fifty seven of the entries are reprinted directly from the *ANB*. These detail the lives of the most prominent African American historical figures, from Frederick Douglass to Louis Armstrong to Mary Church Terrell. **African American Lives** connects the achievements of these famous African Americans with the life stories of their contemporaries — men and women like Henry Highland Garnet, Sidney Bechet and Hallie Quinn Brown — individuals who were renowned in their day, but now are familiar mainly to students of African American history. The third class of essays will introduce readers to historical figures known primarily to specialists in various fields. These, like the entries on the only known female Buffalo soldier, Cathay Williams (alias William Cathey), and Lee Shelton, the man behind the folk song and legend of Stagolee, make for fascinating reading. The fourth category of entries is devoted to notable figures of the present day, women and men such as Oprah Winfrey, Colin Powell and John Hope Franklin. **African American Lives** also contains a thorough index and two useful appendices. A subject appendix groups individuals by their occupation or their area of renown. A second appendix lists African American prizewinners, medalists, members of Congress and presidential appointments to the bench. With the exception of two missing dates in the list of Congressional Medal of Honor Recipients, the appendices are well-organized and well-presented.

Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham's **African American Lives** is an excellent collection of African American biographies. With its grand scope, its attention to famous and lesser-known figures, and its well-researched essays, the volume makes a first-rate reference tool. In addition to providing a history of the many contributions made by African Americans to the nation, the entries reveal a great deal about changing African American priorities, shifts in American race relations, and transformations in the relationship between African Americans and the state. The book is a welcome addition to African American biographical scholarship, and will prove useful to students and scholars alike.

Erica L. Ball is Assistant Professor of History at Union College. She is currently working on a manuscript examining gender and northern black activism in the decades surrounding the Civil War.