

3-2010

Review of: *Owning Up: Privacy, Property, and Belonging in U.S. Women's Life Writing*. By Katherine Adams.

Laura Laffrado

Western Washington University, laura.laffrado@wwu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://cedar.wwu.edu/english_facpubs



Part of the [American Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Owning Up: Privacy, Property, and Belonging in U.S. Women's Life Writing. By Katherine Adams. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. Pp. viii, 264. \$65.00.) Laura Laffrado, *The New England Quarterly* 2010 83:1, 155-158

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the English at Western CEDAR. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Faculty and Staff Publications by an authorized administrator of Western CEDAR. For more information, please contact westerncedar@wwu.edu.

Importantly, Dolan demonstrates how Emerson's liberalism transcends narrowly political boundaries, encompassing social, economic, cultural, epistemological, and theological dimensions. Dolan is most effective, and on steadiest ground, when examining Emerson's explicit commitments to negative liberty, social justice, and progressive change—three pillars of liberal ideology—and when exploring Emerson's antiutopianism, arguments on behalf of limited government, and condemnation of slavery.

Dolan's preference for close readings of Emerson's texts, and his examination of Emerson's use of key words such as "work," "reason," and "property," are also satisfying. This analysis reveals Emerson's liberalism, in the larger historical sense of the word, to be unavoidable, even in texts such as "Experience," which is not usually read for its contributions to liberal political thought. In his treatment of Emerson's later works, including *Representative Men* (1850), the obscure *English Traits* (1856), and *The Conduct of Life* (1860), as well as some of his later speeches and addresses, Dolan shows how Emerson provides "a taut moral-metaphysical ligature for the distinctively rich rhetorical-symbolic imagining of liberal culture" (p. 195).

Nevertheless, even after showing that Emerson was grounded in the liberal-Enlightenment tradition and was committed to liberal-Enlightenment values, Dolan may not argue convincingly enough that Emerson's liberalism is the main reason that Emerson should continue to be read today. We may find ourselves agreeing with Dolan that Emerson thinks liberal thoughts without necessarily being convinced that he is merely, most importantly, or most interestingly a liberal thinker.

Jason A. Scorza is Professor of Philosophy and Political Science at Fairleigh Dickinson University, in New Jersey, and author of *STRONG LIBERALISM: HABITS OF MIND FOR DEMOCRATIC CITIZENSHIP* (2008), which considers Emerson's contributions to liberal political thought.

Owning Up: Privacy, Property, and Belonging in U.S. Women's Life Writing. By Katherine Adams. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. Pp. viii, 264. \$65.00.)

In *Owning Up: Privacy, Property, and Belonging in U.S. Women's Life Writing*, Katherine Adams sets out to explore "the consequences of imagining human existence in terms of two antagonistic

and simultaneous conditions—we are owned, we are not owned—and of incessantly rehearsing the drama of passage between them” (p. 203). Adams is particularly concerned with “how such representations, and the fantasy they project of self-(non)-possession—that is, of self-possession without self-alienation—intersect with questions about democratic freedom and nationhood” (p. 203). Locating her discussion in the culturally unstable period of 1840–90, Adams moves from the antebellum context of romantic nationalism to the late nineteenth century’s vexed lament for a perceived loss of privacy.

In the book’s five chapters, Adams offers detailed critiques of autobiographical texts by and biographical texts about nineteenth-century U.S. public women Margaret Fuller, Sojourner Truth, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Elizabeth Keckley, and Louisa May Alcott. Adams’s choice of primary texts is one of the book’s clear strengths. The works she selects to discuss are interesting individually and in combination, which allows for cross-textual play and richly developed context. For example, the examinations of Fuller’s *Summer on the Lakes*, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, and her unfinished autobiography result in a compelling, comprehensive analysis of Fuller, romantic nationalism, and endangered privacy. Likewise, Adams’s use of various representations of Sojourner Truth by Olive Gilbert, Frances Gage, and sculptor William Storey provides a fascinating portrait of the multiple ways in which Truth both represented herself and allowed others to represent her. Adams’s treatment of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s less-considered novel *Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp* focuses closely on Stowe’s moral economy and reveals her more restrictive views of national privacy after the success of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Elizabeth Keckley’s *Behind the Scenes* is a perfect textual choice for Adams’s critical project. In Keckley’s roles as dressmaker to Mary Lincoln, witness of family life in the Lincoln White House, and, later, author of what was condemned as a cruel exposé of the widowed Mary Lincoln, Keckley stood at the intersection of autonomy and democracy—precisely the position Adams seeks to understand. Also, Adams’s welcome selections of less-studied literary texts, such as Alcott’s critically neglected *Little Men* and *Jo’s Boys*, add to the generic contours of the women’s life writing she considers in her book.

In addition to printed autobiographies and biographies, Adams references non-print texts, such as William Wetmore Storey’s sculptures *The Libyan Sibyl* and *Cleopatra* and nineteenth-century U.S. political cartoons. Illustrations of these works are included in the book. Finally, the book’s epilogue moves, somewhat jarringly, not only to the

twenty-first century but to Michael Bay's *The Island* (2005), an action film about clones, which Adams reads in terms of current concerns about identity, biotechnology, and privacy.

Adams defends her critical concentration on nineteenth-century U.S. women's life writing as enabling her

to examine privacy discourse at its most self-conscious. For these are texts that both enact and confront the public circulation of private matters. As a genre devoted specifically to the marketing of privacy, life writing might be seen as an agent of invasion and exposure. Yet it also routinely thematizes its own transgressive function, ruminating upon the uncouth and uncanny nature of what Sojourner Truth refers to as "selling the shadow." The result is a metadiscourse that both generates and investigates public privacy. [Pp. 6-7]

Adams maintains that focus admirably throughout her project. Clearly familiar with the scholarship about privacy discourse and democratic authority, she consistently specifies how her readings differ from the criticism she cites.

Given Adams's interest in nineteenth-century women's autobiographical and biographical texts, it is surprising that she neglects the rich critical literature about women's life writing. Briefly addressing the omission, she explains that her book "does not investigate life writing as a genre. Nor is it concerned with problems of form and classification that frequently preoccupy scholars of biographical and autobiographical literature" (p. 20). This implicit, narrow definition of autobiographical and biographical studies leaves out a great deal, much of it relevant to the exploration Adams conducts. In any case, readers led by the book's title and texts to expect an engagement with criticism about U.S. women's life writing will not find it here.

Adams is a smart and fluent writer. She handles her fairly thick academic discourse well but at the same time is unafraid of the occasional sly nod to the reader. For instance, when recounting the heady mix of privacy, self, and denial of desire that led the ever-self-absorbed Bronson Alcott to take to his bed and refuse to eat or speak, Adams wryly notes that "Alcott eventually consented to take nourishment, and so lived on to burden his family for years to come" (p. 169). A section title within the same chapter, "Mother Bhaer, or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Market Economy," weds Dr. Strangelove to Jo March (p. 174).

In sum, *Owning Up* is a learned and engaging book that makes a strong contribution to compelling questions of privacy and democracy in the nineteenth-century United States.

Laura Laffrado, *Professor of English at Western Washington University, is most recently the author of UNCOMMON WOMEN: GENDER AND REPRESENTATION IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY U.S. WOMEN'S WRITING* (2009).

Citizen Bachelors: Manhood and the Creation of the United States.

By John Gilbert McCurdy. (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2009. Pp. xiv, 268. \$35.00.)

In American culture, the eligible bachelor is a familiar figure. Yet what do we really know about the bachelor and his history? John McCurdy's interesting book traces the history of this figure in American life. While much recent historiography on single men has associated the development of the American bachelor identity with industrialization and the concomitant emergence of an urban middle class, McCurdy finds this identity emerging in the years surrounding the American Revolution. Despite the wealth of historical studies on colonial American history, he writes, there has been a failure to appreciate that not all colonists married, and that even those who did spent much of their lives in the single state. Both the young unattached man and the confirmed bachelor had a significant impact on our country's history.

In early modern England, McCurdy explains, men's rank in society was determined by their material possessions or mastery over a household rather than by their marital status; this continued under what was called the "Little Commonwealth" of family government in British North America. McCurdy illustrates his point by opening with the story of young Stephen Hoppin, who in 1672 was brought to court before Judge William Stoughton in Dorchester, Massachusetts, for being unemployed and for not living in a family household. Stoughton himself was single, but the difference in age and social standing between the two men made it impossible to see the two as belonging to the same group. According to McCurdy, historians have failed to understand that early New England's laws against single men living alone were an attempt to protect society from the dangers represented by young property-less men, not an indictment of unmarried men as a whole. Furthermore, laws forbidding colonists to live outside