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Autobiography & Memoir

Scenes of Instruction: A Memoir
Michael Awkward
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The academic is surely one of the least likely suspects to participate in the recent vogue of memoir writing. One would think that the long hours spent in libraries required to earn a Ph.D. and become a professor would not provide enough personal material to hold a reader's interest. Nevertheless, enough academics have produced memoirs that their work arguably constitutes a subgenre. Notably, the most famous examples of the work have been by women and African Americans, often detailing the obstacles they faced as they climbed into the so-called Ivory (i.e., white male) Tower.

In Scenes of Instruction, Awkward details his assent from the projects of Philadelphia in the 1970s, to his position at the University of Michigan where he was granted early tenure and his current position at the University of Pennsylvania, where what should have been a celebratory triumphant return of a native son was marred by controversy and the bittersweet memories of his deceased mother. Awkward has endured a fair amount of criticism because in his academic work he posits himself as a feminist scholar. Much of Scenes of Instruction is dedicated to demonstrating how a young black male can develop feminist concerns while living with an alcoholic mother who was severely abused by Awkward's father. He also details his internal conflicts with living up to the standards of inner-city black masculinity. The sections of the book that reveal Awkward's sometimes agonizing personal struggles with identity are by far the most interesting.

Much of the book, however, is devoted to personal feuds. He devotes several pages to criticizing an ex-girlfriend's poetry and musical performances. In a moment that will surely be controversial in some circles, Awkward attacks black intellectuals Michael Dyson, Gerald Early and bell hooks for producing works of limited scholarly utility, pandering to popular white audiences and lacking intellectual integrity. To establish his own credibility, he includes long sections of critical analysis of Richard Wright and other African American writers, complete

with the jargon-ridden prose that is too often typical of that discipline. Awkward's book is likely to appeal mostly to other academics.

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