

## Creating a Community of Readers: Mary Mebane's Exploration of Difference in *Mary and Mary, Wayfarer*

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### **Article:**

The circumstances surrounding Mary Mebane's death in 1991—an anonymous death in a county welfare home, with a pauper's burial—are strongly reminiscent of the death of Zora Neale Hurston. Although Mebane never attained the stature that Hurston achieved in her lifetime, she too spoke penetratingly about the realities of growing up black and female in the twentieth-century South. Mebane was born in 1933, in Durham, North Carolina, a very different South from the Eatonville, Florida, of Hurston's childhood. Mebane also pursued an academic career, earning a BA from North Carolina College (where Hurston briefly taught); she eventually earned both a master's degree and a doctorate in English from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, which in 1982 awarded her a Distinguished Alumna Award. Mebane saw herself as a writer first and foremost, and she occasionally published articles about the South in the New York Times Op-Ed pages under the editorship of Harrison Salisbury, who provided her with much-needed encouragement throughout her career. She also published essays in the Milwaukee Journal and the Charlotte Observer, sometimes pseudonymously under the name "Elizabeth Wheatley." Unlike Hurston, Mebane was not an anthropologist per se, but her autobiographies perform anthropological work of a sort. *Mary* (1981) and *Mary, Wayfarer* (1983) contribute significantly to our understanding of how southern women, and African-American women in particular, must sometimes struggle to define themselves against the beliefs and values of their communities.<sup>1</sup> Mebane rejected the self-abnegating silence adhered to by most in the working-class community of her birth. Her autobiographies provide a poignant portrait of a woman whose outspokenness alienated her from this community, yet who desperately sought to understand this community and be a part of it. Mebane's alternative was to create for herself a new community of sympathetic readers for whom she recalls the frightening years of the segregated South, the excitement of the civil rights movement and the turbulent integration struggles of the 1960s and early 1970s.

Despite the upsurge in autobiographical theory and criticism during the last decade, Mebane's work has unfortunately received little attention, although it certainly merits further consideration as part of the tradition of southern and African-American autobiography. That there are, indeed, traditions of autobiography is now a critical commonplace. William L. Andrews, Joanne M. Braxton, James Olney and Sidonie Smith, among many others, all argue that there is a tradition of nineteenth and twentieth-century African-American autobiography.<sup>2</sup> And others, such as Lynn Z. Bloom, argue that there is a distinct tradition of southern autobiography, although some critics dispute that claim.<sup>3</sup> Certainly Mebane operates from within a tradition of direct literary influence from African-American writers such as Richard Wright, making frequent reference to him, James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison, all of whom she was privileged to meet and with whom she felt a sense of kinship. In *Mary, Wayfarer*, for instance, she tells of reading *Native Son* and of her empathy with Bigger's "feeling of danger" (16) whenever she herself moved into the seemingly "hostile, threatening environment" of white neighborhoods (15). Surprisingly, considering her preoccupation with the intersections between race, gender, class and region, Mebane makes no mention of female African-American writers, whether predecessors like Hurston, or contemporaries like Maya Angelou. This omission of literary foremothers is perhaps deliberate, given that Mebane sometimes adopts a more traditionally masculine style of autobiography, as I will argue later.

Since autobiography allows the writer to confront directly the issue of identity Mebane's preference for this mode of writing is not surprising. As she repeatedly asserts, gender roles for southern women are still largely defined by their class and race. To overcome the powerful influence of cultural proscriptions, Mebane develops specific rhetorical strategies which authorize her to write about her life and expose the illusions maintained by both black and white southerners. Only by confronting the issue of racial and gender construction, and, indeed writing about it, does Mebane gain the power to define herself. Self-definition is a crucial issue, for southern women who write autobiographies must not only struggle to define themselves as individuals within a dominant and often hostile male culture, but they must also struggle to define themselves against the powerful beliefs and values of their respective southern communities.<sup>4</sup> Mebane's work thus makes a substantial contribution to our understanding of how black women in the South have used autobiography as a way both to free themselves from culturally imposed identity and to document this struggle.

In many ways, the autobiographies of southern women serve a dual function as documents of failure and of liberation. The failure that they often denote is that of the community—its inability to recognize and respect the individual. The liberation they enact is the writer's, as she frees herself from the bonds imposed by her birth community. Communities serve an essentially conservative function, since their continued existence depends upon the preservation of cultural norms and values. Most commonly, in the autobiographies of southern women, communities punish, rather than celebrate, difference. Thus in many of these works, region and rootedness are not necessarily positive forces. For Mebane, "the South" represents not merely a geographical region, but rather a complex, interwoven set of beliefs and attitudes towards race, class and gender. Her autobiographies celebrate the development of the self, rather than the region, and they serve as a means of exploring difference and liberating that self from communal restraints. Although Mebane necessarily includes extensive discussions of the South and of black folklife in her works, it becomes clear that self-creation and self-definition are possible only through a close scrutiny of those systems and conventions that would constrain her autonomy.

Difference and its consequences are the subjects of Mebane's two autobiographies, *Mary and Mary, Wayfarer*. *Mary* traces the story of Mebane's life as she grew up in the black working-class community of Durham, North Carolina, from the 1930s through the 1950s; it ends with Mebane's graduation from North Carolina College (later renamed North Carolina Central University). *Mary, Wayfarer* documents Mebane's exploration of the world outside of Durham, her involvement with the civil rights movement, and her discovery of writing as a means to create a distinctive identity. Both of these works grapple with Mebane's sense of difference, as her goals and desires sometimes alienated her from both her family and her working-class community. Although Mebane later sought a new community in her professional academic life, she felt like an outsider there as well, because of her class and color.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, Mebane uses writing as a means of recovering and creating a community.

To ensure that readers understand the importance of community in the life of the individual, Mebane begins *Mary* by invoking this very issue. Although Mebane later became alienated and disenchanted with the working-class community into which she was born, she makes it clear that as a child she was happy in this environment. *Mary*, the first volume of her autobiography, opens with images of an Edenic green world. Mebane specifically uses the word "Eden" in describing her early years to demonstrate that she was not always alienated from her family and community (3). The green world of her childhood was a world of magic and endless imaginative possibility: half-buried rocks became the backs of elephants (5), while the water in the bottom of the well hid the route to China (6). She emphasizes that this "Eden" (the rural and largely black Wildwood area of Durham) was indeed a "community" in the most positive sense of the word. To evoke and explore this sense of community, Mebane recalls the rituals of her childhood, lending a timeless, almost mythic aura to communal events and childhood games. Mebane nostalgically recalls that "[b]erry-picking" was one such ritual, "a part of the rhythm of summer life," when adults and children united for a common, pleasurable goal (18). Her descriptions of such events attempt to recreate the childlike wonder she felt at community rituals and to recreate the feeling of belonging that such rituals evoke.

This childhood Eden comes to an end, however, as Mebane matures and her perceptiveness allows her to see the

inequities and injustices —both symbolic and literal—of the world around her. Mr. McDougald, the lower-class white man who neglects to take his hat off when inside her parents' home, symbolizes the lack of respect many white families had for the black families.<sup>6</sup> The poorly equipped classrooms and used textbooks that the poor black schools rent from the wealthy white schools demonstrate the unequal education the black children in Durham County received. Other children failed to perceive these inequalities or kept silent about them. But Mebane explains that when she was a child,

I was in the center of life and I didn't miss a thing; nothing slipped by unobserved or unnoted. My problems started when I began to comment on what I saw. I insisted on being accurate. But the world I was born into didn't want that. Indeed, its very survival depended on not knowing, not seeing—and, certainly, not saying anything at all about what it was really like. (5)

Her linguistic ability, then, becomes the signifier of her difference, as it empowers her to articulate her anger and dismay at basic social inequalities rather than ignoring them or suffering in silence.<sup>7</sup> The remainder of Mary sets out to deconstruct the Edenic image of her childhood as Mebane's difference increasingly sets her apart from her family and the rest of her community.

Awareness of the racial, social and sexual codes of the South underlies this exploration of Mebane's difference, for throughout her works, Mebane discusses the South's preoccupation with hierarchy. Class consciousness is a doubled-edged sword; while it prevents lower-class individuals from moving into a different social class, it simultaneously functions as inside-group coercion to keep individuals within the constraints of a particular class. Further, while the family and close kinship relations can be a source of strength for the southern woman, they also enforce cultural norms about "proper" behavior. The black working class Mebane portrays in Mary does not encourage her academic work. Instead, members of this group mock her aspirations, or tell her, as does her mother, that all the reading Mebane does will eventually drive her crazy. She also encounters resistance to her social mobility from the black professional class, which resents her working toward a college degree and, later, a doctorate in English. Mebane forcefully argues that this resentment stems not only from her working-class origins, but also from her dark coloration: she describes herself as an "earthy black African peasant" (224). Caught between these two alienated and alienating classes, Mebane continually searches for a way to synthesize her origins with her professional aspirations. But perhaps most disturbing is the overt hostility that Mebane sometimes encounters as a result of her educational aspirations. Ironically, but perhaps unsurprisingly, it is Mebane's mother who most clearly enforces for her daughter the cultural norms and values of the segregated South.

Mebane's mother, Nonnie Ailebane, assumes a prominent role in her autobiography, for Mebane makes her mother both victim and agent of the repressive forces within the community.<sup>8</sup> When Mebane's Aunt Jo encourages her to strive for academic and musical success, Nonnie repressively responds by saying, "Jo, you're always putting ideas into that girl's head. Nothing but foolishness" (32). Mebane's mother eventually stands in as a synecdoche for the rest of the community, and Mebane's conflicts with her mother embody her conflicts with her environment. Nonnie Mebane's life was typical of that of many black women of her time. An avid reader, she desperately wanted an education, but her parents could afford to send only one child to high school, and that child was her older sister, Cecily. Denied the opportunity to attend high school, much less college, Nonnie Mebane's choice of employment was limited to domestic labor for a white family or factory work. Of an independent nature, she chose factory work to support her family, laboring in the Liggett and Myers tobacco factory for thirty years doing difficult physical work for menial wages. Mary Mebane did work one summer as a nanny, and, another summer as a line employee at the American Tobacco factory, but her relationship with her mother was complicated by her rejection of her mother's occupation and her struggle to find other options for herself. Consequently, Mebane's mother, her brothers and many other members of the community bitterly resented the opportunities Mebane made for herself and viewed her choices as personal rejections of themselves, thereby creating a cycle of alienation. This rejection undoubtedly helped fuel her desire to write autobiography, for as Susan Stanford Friedman explains in "Women's Autobiographical Selves: Theory and Practice," it is "alienation from the historically imposed image of the self [that] motivates the writing, the

creation of an alternate self in the autobiographical act" (41).

As a result of the anger and alienation she felt, Mebane's autobiography employs conflicting narrative strategies whereby she alternately rejects her literal community in order to embrace the notion of a literary community—a community of readers. As a black woman choosing to write autobiography, a genre that many critics have labeled as inherently androcentric, Mebane struggles to break the silence traditionally imposed on her by both black and white culture. To do so, she adopts a narrative strategy that Sidonie Smith identifies in *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography* as typical of masculine individualism. Mebane casts her struggle in the "ideology of individualism" (52) and asserts her unique identity in the context of a heroic struggle of "man against society." My use of the phrase "man against society" is deliberate, for this is the classic pattern of male individualism when expressed in autobiography. Richard Wright's *Black Boy* exemplifies this pattern, and indeed Mebane's work may in some ways be modeled after his, given the way she describes her alienation from her family, her peers, and her community. This masculine narrative pose demands a concurrent rejection of the feminine and the maternal—a rejection that we see literally in *Mary* as Mebane consciously attempts to distinguish herself from her mother.

Language, as well as attitude, marks the difference between Mebane and her mother. When Mebane reconstructs dialogue from her childhood, she is careful to try and re-create the child's sense of wonder at her environment; thus through her tone she deliberately makes a distinction between her older self and the child that she was. In reconstructing her own dialogue, however, she uses only nonvernacular, grammatical English—probably not the language that a child from a working-class family would have used.<sup>9</sup> To her mother, however, she attributes such linguistic markers as dropped verbs and other kinds of vernacular usage. For example, Nonnie Mebane uses words such as "ain't" and the vernacular phrase "puting" to stand in for "disputing"—a phrase which Mebane carefully and, given the context, unnecessarily translates for her readers (49). Vernacular usages such as these mark the difference between Mebane and her mother in terms of opportunity and education and signal Mebane's identification with her (presumably) middle-class audience.<sup>10</sup>

In a later episode, Mebane dramatizes a mock dialogue with her mother that signals their inability to communicate with one another. Mebane seems to strive towards metaphoric truth, rather than realism, in this dramatization of their interactions, for this scene obviously represents the language and experience from countless repetitions of this same disagreement, stemming from Mebane's neglect of her household chores. Her mother angrily rebukes her for burning dinner, saying: "You somewhere with your head in a book and you let my okra burn. . . . you listening to those old stories or you listening to that music all the time. Burned up my food" (103-04). Mebane apologizes and tries to appease her by telling her, "But Mama, I got all A's on my report card this month. . . . [and] I'm going to play a piece at Mrs. Shearin's piano recital" (104-05). Disregarding these accomplishments, her mother instead points to her shortcomings, replying: "Marguerita makes all of her own clothes," and "Ida Mae does all of [the] washing and ironing" (104). In a narrative aside to the reader, Mebane explains, "I was guilty. Washing and ironing, the measure of achievement for community girls, interested me not at all. For unspoken was the knowledge that these black girls were really being trained to work as domestics, not to keep house for themselves" (104). This communally upheld falsehood seems remarkably like what Ellen Glasgow describes as the South's legacy of "evasive idealism" (104), demonstrating that white southerners were not the only ones who glossed over the ugly realities of life in the South. Mebane rejects this communally-shared falsehood and breaks the silence surrounding it. She can ex-pose this falsehood only by speaking directly to her readers through the medium of the autobiography, however, for in the reconstructed dialogue with her mother, Mebane insistently refuses to acknowledge what lies behind her mother's anger, and she responds only by noting her achievements. Clearly Mebane and her mother speak different languages, and they are not carrying on the same conversation at all. Their inability or unwillingness to communicate signals their mutual estrangement. And, since Mebane's mother becomes symbolic of the injustices against which her daughter struggles, her alienation from her mother signals her simultaneous alienation from the rest of the black working-class community in Durham.

To emphasize that her alienation extends beyond a difficult relationship with her mother, Mebane also portrays

other children as noticing her difference. Her cousin Gloria says to Mebane after she has commented on the diamond-like brilliance of a spider web, "You sure do talk funny . . . You don't talk like us" (93). Whether or not these are accurate transcriptions of Mebane's conversations with her mother and her cousin is in some ways irrelevant; what is significant about these exchanges is how Mebane uses language to mark her emotional and intellectual distance from her birth community and to appeal to a community of readers very different from that working-class folk community in which she was raised. To do so, she appropriates a higher level of discourse; by claiming a vantage point from which to mark difference, she hierarchically elevates herself to the normative level she assumes her middle-class readers will share.

To adopt a masculine ideology of the individual as does Mebane does not free the female writer, however. As Smith explains, this strategy "promotes identification with the very essentialist ideology that renders woman's story a story of silence, powerlessness, [and] self-effacement" (Poetics 53). In other words, if Mebane were simply to reject or silence her mother, then she herself would merely be replacing her as the agent or enforcer of the patriarchal codes of the South." To free herself from this patriarchal trap and to combat the alienation that her facility with language both engenders and expresses, Mebane employs another complex narrative strategy to signify her empathy with the members of her birth community. For despite her personal difficulties, both the structure and content of later chapters of Mebane's autobiography emphasize the individual's need for communal support.<sup>12</sup> Matter of factly woven into the story of Mebane's own life are the often tragic accounts of other black women—women who strove, but too often were defeated by the definitions and limitations assigned to them by their community. These women are not inherently tragic, like the tragic mulatto found in so much antebellum literature. Rather, the tragedy stems from the way their culture and community denied them opportunity. The narrative significance of these anecdotal vignettes is that they tell the story of what did not happen to Mebane; these vignettes tell the stories of women who, for various reasons, capitulate to and comply with the limitations that both the black and white social structures of the segregated South would impose upon African-American women.

In telling these other stories, Mebane creates an interlocking mosaic of narrative lives as she attempts to gain the reader's active participation, a necessary condition in order to make sense of how these stories relate to Mebane. These brief narratives are complete in themselves, and Mebane's manuscripts show that she conceived of each woman's story as a set piece—not merely as part of a continuous narrative.<sup>13</sup> Yet the cumulative effect of these short pieces is far greater than the sum of their parts, as their juxtaposition among themselves and against Mebane's narrative creates a dialogue between the individual and the community. Further, by deliberately presenting each vignette to the reader unmediated by title or other form of introduction, Mebane implicates the reader in interpretation of the text, as the reader must fill in what Wolfgang Iser calls "gaps" or "indeterminacies." The reader must actively engage the text in order to create meaning from these vignettes and to understand the relationship of these stories to Mebane's own life. Mebane's intention in including these stories soon becomes clear—readers must understand that all the black southern women she knew during the 1940s and 1950s had to struggle for self-definition, for they were "people ... without options" (168).

Chapter 20 of *Mary* particularly exhibits this structure of interwoven stories. As an epigraph to this chapter, Mebane describes the effect of the institutions and cultural pressures of the South. She writes:

The constrictions, the restraints, the hidden threats that we lived under, that were the conditions of our lives, inevitably produced mutations in the natural human flowering. To me we were like plants that were meant to grow upright but became bent and twisted, stunted, sometimes stretching out and running along the ground, because the conditions of our environment forbade our developing upward naturally. (168)<sup>14</sup>

Later in this chapter Mebane provides support for this assertion as she tells the stories of Irene and Inez. Irene worked eleven hours a day as a housekeeper for a white family and attended high school at night to earn her equivalency degree. After being fired from her job due to her white employer's jealousy of Irene's importance to the household, Irene simply "gave up on life for herself; overnight she changed into a black matriarch living for

others" (180). With "her dreams of self-fulfillment unfulfilled and now denied," she struggled instead to give Azell, her irresponsible and ungrateful sister, an education (180). Inez responds very differently and more self-destructively to the denial of her dreams. Inez is intelligent and musically talented, but her mother favors her older sister, Ann. Denied the opportunity to attend college, Inez finds work in a cafeteria, lives in a tobacco barn and raises ten children in abject poverty, while her philandering husband spends their much-needed money on white prostitutes. Mebane accounts for Inez's descent into poverty by explaining that "Her fanatically religious mother always put her religion before her children and tried to deny Inez everything. But Inez found sex and she found love" (185). Alarmed by Inez's inability to feed, clothe and educate her children, Mebane obtains a diaphragm for her. When Inez once again becomes pregnant after her husband makes her discard the diaphragm, Mebane loses patience with her. Mebane's anger at Irene stems from her pity for Irene's children, trapped in a cycle of deprivation, who do not understand why they can "never have seconds at the table," and who are all "slow learners," unable to read or even to write their own names (186). Although she does not excuse Inez, Mebane understands, explaining that "Inez early perceived the horrible limitations of her life, and instead of crying out in rage, she turned to embrace them" (187). Thus Inez becomes a drudge, unable to envision a different way of life. Inez and Irene are very different women, but they share a history of stunted expectations and unmet goals, a history which Mebane neither sentimentalizes nor trivializes. Instead, through her autobiography, Mebane is the one who "[cries] out in rage" at this waste of human potential.

The woman with whom Mebane seems to feel the most kinship is Daisy, married at sixteen, who bears child after child, and lives in "a little three-room hut" (190) her husband built at the time of their marriage, twenty years earlier. When Daisy suddenly begins to drink and moves to New York City, she shocks the Wildwood community. Daisy can only explain that "she 'wanted to live,' that she had been married too long" (189). Mebane strives to understand Daisy's motivations, but the people of Wildwood do not. They simply say "'Married all these years. A nice, quiet person and she wants to live? What in the world is going to happen next?'" (189). Mebane, however, thinks she understands: "Though Daisy had been married for twenty years she was still young, and she saw people all around her getting what she knew she would never have. . . . She decided to grab a whole handful of life while she could" (190). Mebane's sympathetic curiosity about the mystery of Daisy's behavior signifies her empathy for Daisy's desire to break out of the conventional behavior patterns for women in her community—regardless of the cost.

The stories of these other women, each of whom doubles as a potential "Everywoman" denied her dreams and aspirations, both complement and contrast with Mebane's own story. Despite the degradation of their lives, Mebane grants them dignity, giving voice to women who otherwise would have no voice. Coupled with Mebane's own stories, they vividly demonstrate the intersections between the culture of the South and gender construction. These stories should be read not as inherently tragic tales or as cautionary tales, but rather as tales of how two communities—both white and black—failed these women. To some extent, Mebane escaped the limitations of the white and black communities, yet she still felt a sense of alliance to those women who did not; in telling their stories, she attempts to create a textual community of black women. Although she was friends with many of these women during her childhood, Mebane treads a fine line between giving voice to their stories and appropriating them. For the most part, she avoids appropriating them because, except for Inez and her inability to care for the children she bears, Mebane does not pass judgment on their behavior. In fact, at times she is curiously dispassionate as she relates these vignettes in a journalistic fashion. But for the reader, these stories ultimately, and perhaps intentionally, serve to highlight Mebane's intellectual and narrative distance from that working-class community. Readers understand that Mebane escaped these potential traps. We can share her anger at social inequalities, but the later, educated Mebane, author of two autobiographies and numerous essays, perhaps feels more affinity with her readers than with the birth community she reconstructs for us.

Mebane's fascination with issues of community—especially southern community—continues from Mary into Mary, Wayfarer, but her attitude towards the working-class Community becomes even more deeply conflicted. Despite continued conflict with her mother and her younger brother, Ruf Junior, that renders her home a "battlefield" (55), Mebane repeatedly emphasizes the importance of community and describes her self as "desperate for a sense of community with my family, my group; failing in attempts, but never ceasing to try"

(146). Caught between cultures, working-class and professional, black and white, Mebane repeatedly claims that "home and family arid community and group . . . were my sources of strength" (146). Yet she continually defines herself against her community as an "outsider" (146) in order to establish her individual identity and to reaffirm her difference. At one point, she begins an imaginary dialogue with her community, first having an anonymous communal voice tell her to be happy with her lot as a high school teacher in Robersonville, North Carolina: "Why not you? . . . Others have come and have stayed, built homes and made stable lives for themselves. What makes you think that you're so much different from anybody else? Why are you so ambitious?" (16-17). Later in this imaginary dialogue, the church tells her that her ambitions spring from "vanity," while her peers label it "arrogance." Her family tells her "you're getting beyond your raising" (17), and her mother even repeatedly tells her, "You're going to end up in Goldsboro," which was then the location of the state mental institution (58). Mebane rationalizes her mother's anger and animosity as a means for her to "express some of the pain of her life—against a passive, unanswering target" (58), but she cannot forgive her for doing so. Despite Mebane's claim of drawing strength from her community, she gives us a portrait of a family, a community and even a race turned against themselves. Recognizing this course of self-destruction, Mebane defiantly asserts her difference, asking, "[W]ho is it that has ordained my place in life? Who has any right to tell me who I am, what I must do, what I must think, how I must view the world?" (17).

Mebane's defiance was not without its costs. Her difficulty in finding permanent employment at the college or university level, which she attributes to racism, class prejudice and sexism, led to a transient lifestyle, as she moved repeatedly between Durham, Chapel Hill and Orangeburg, South Carolina. Her physical and social dislocation and alienation brought about sleeplessness and clinical depression. Her religious faith weakened; torn between her folk origins and her professional aspirations, she consulted both faith healers and psychotherapists. Her rape by a friend of her cousins and their nonchalant response to it finally severed her hopes of fitting in with an increasingly urbanized and fragmented folk community.

The civil rights movement, however, marks a time and a place where Mebane perhaps truly found a much needed sense of community, despite her fear of reprisals during protests. The solidarity of the black population during the Montgomery bus boycotts of 1955 inspires her to say, "[F]or the first time I had hope, because it seemed to me that in the past people of my ethnic group had continually fought each other, put each other down, and refused to help each other. I had lived under segregation all my life, and I felt that it would last forever because we blacks were too divided among ourselves to stop it.... I had been wrong" (125). Even though she continued to feel somewhat of an outsider since she grew up and attended high school and college under segregation and was thus older than many of the college students with whom she joined in protests, participation in the movement clearly gave her a sense of purpose and unity: "I myself felt glad to think that I was part of a movement. I was older than the movement, outside of it, but I was black and a part of it!" (131). This sense of exhilaration alternates with fear, as she recalls her first night in the picket line at a segregated movie theater in Durham, fearing all the while that she might be shot or knifed, and the anticlimactic relief that results when a man instead shoots a camera in her face (134-37). The integration struggles of the South become signposts along her own life, and later visits to the South by Baldwin, Ellison and Malcolm X enhance that feeling of communal solidarity. Baldwin made a striking impression on her, and her reminiscence of his personal strength and freedom prompts her to conjecture, "Perhaps that was what I should do—use my outsider status to walk around, not looking in on the world closed to me, but discovering the one outside. Explore the limits of whatever situation you find yourself in" (146). If she could not truly belong to any one group, she could use her "outsider status" to discover how and why those groups function as they do—which is precisely the strategy she adopts in both *Mary and Mary*, Wayfarer.

It is not until near the end of *Mary, Wayfarer* that Mebane gains the self-knowledge and confidence necessary to define and to name herself. Ironically, it is segregation that provides her with a means to create both an identity for herself and a literary community. After the *New York Times* published her essay on the differences in "bus travel in the South before and after the Civil Rights Act" (208), Mebane explains, "I didn't know it then but I had found what I had been seeking: I was a writer" (209). Ironically, it is Mebane's understanding of the South that allows her to discover both her public and personal identity. In writing about the ugliness of

segregation and race riots, Mebane gains the power to define the South, rather than simply to be defined by it. Equally important for Mebane, the process of writing becomes what she describes as her "gulf stream" (230). Writing enables her to connect herself with the rest of the world—especially the world outside the South—and to create a sympathetic community of readers, a community that would celebrate, rather than punish, difference.

Community remained an issue that fascinated Mebane. In fact, she had tentatively entitled a third book, which she did not complete, "Lives: A Mosaic of Culture." Her notes indicate that this work was to be a study of community from the perspective of cultural anthropology.<sup>15</sup> We can only assume that she would have continued to explore the intersections between the black and white communities in the South and the influence of these communities on the individual. But the South was not only a source of repression for Mebane; paradoxically, it became the source of her greatest inspiration and the locus of her creativity. Despite her ambivalent feelings about this region, she returned to it again and again, both in her writing and in life. She returned to it, as Lucinda MacKethan has written of Ellen Glasgow, Zora Neale Hurston and Eudora Welty, not "to reconstruct the world [she] had left but to see it and create it anew from changed angles of vision" (39). Whether as subject or subtext, the South is continually present in Mebane's autobiographies; her critique of the South demonstrates the empowering nature of the autobiographical form, as it provided her with a way to authenticate herself as an individual. In transgressing the limits of the southern culture she inherited and in conjoining her personal history with that of the South itself, Mebane's work makes an important contribution to southern and African-American autobiography.

## Notes

1 Unfortunately, both of Mebane's autobiographies are out of print. Viking holds the copyright for these works, and although several other presses, including the University of North Carolina Press, have expressed interest in reprinting them, Viking refuses to release the copyright.

2 See Andrews, Braxton, Olney and Sidonie Smith.

3 In his essay "Autobiographical Traditions in Black and White," James Olney suggests that "there is not a tradition of autobiography among white writers in the South; but ... there is a tradition of autobiography among black writers coming from the South" (66-67). By "tradition," Olney refers to the "generic" patterns that he finds in black southern autobiography—patterns that he does not see in works by white southerners. Lynn Z. Bloom, however, argues that there is indeed a distinct tradition of autobiography among southerners, regardless of race. In her essay, "Coming of Age in the Segregated South: Autobiographies of Twentieth-Century Childhoods, Black and White," she claims that segregation "permeates twentieth-century southern childhood auto-biographies and distinguishes them, as a group, from other American childhood autobiographies . . . . This does not mean that segregation is exclusively southern, but that it is inclusive Y southern. No child, black or white, can escape it; no autobiography can ignore it" (113)• What Bloom leaves open to question, of course, is whether or not a distinctive tradition of southern autobiography can continue to exist among generations maturing after segregation.

4 While not all autobiography by southern women focuses on transgression from community standards, many twentieth-century works do precisely that. For example, Evelyn Scott's *Escapade* (1923), Katharine Du Pre Lumpkin's *The Making of a Southerner* (1946), Lillian Smith's *Kitten of the Dream* (1949) and Florence King's satiric contemporary work *Confessions of a Failed Southern Lady* (1985) explicitly discuss how each author violated her respective community's notions of southern womanhood. Still other autobiographies, such as Ellen Glasgow's *The Woman Within* (1954), demonstrate an uneasy negotiation between conformity and rebellion; Glasgow, for example, felt compelled to maintain an appearance of the southern lady, while still pursuing her writing career. On the other hand, in *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942), Zora Neale Hurston deliberately avoids casting herself as a victim of race and gender struggles, and she instead focuses on creating a transcendent autobiographical self, as Elizabeth Fox-Genovese (196-99) and Nellie McKay have noted (279). Hurston was able to do so, McKay argues, because she had already established her intellectual and literary reputation. Speaking of Hurston and Gwendolyn Brooks, McKay explains: "neither came to the literary mode as the result of struggle to define herself in relationship to a hostile world, and authenticating the self in autobiography was, for them, only another manifestation of the power of words that they had discovered much earlier" (268). Mebane, on the other hand, arrived at autobiography as a way to construct her identity.



5 In both *Mary and Mary, Wayfarer*, Mebane bitterly emphasizes that discrimination based on color and class continued to be a problem among black professionals, particularly at black schools and colleges, until the late 1960s. As a student, she felt continually under scrutiny, as if her professors questioned, "How could this black-skinned girl score higher on the verbal than some of the students who've had more advantages than she? It must be some sort of fluke" (Mary 209). Further, she explains that some black professionals had mixed views about integration, since it served to eliminate many of the advantages that the upper-class blacks enjoyed: "The blacks thought that with the coming of integration the whites would be discomfited, that the whites' world would crack. It never, ever occurred to the black professional class that the black world would undergo such changes that by the end of the decade it would no longer resemble what it had been since the beginning of the century" (Mary, *Wayfarer* 77-78). She explicitly labels this division among southern blacks a class struggle, explaining, "As soon as the college students finished fighting the racist whites and their system of segregation, they turned their attention to the black campus and the class and color racists on it. The ensuing struggle of the late 1960s was deep- and bitter, for it was a class struggle. The children of the black folk were tired of being spat on. And they rebelled" (Mary 226).

6 Mebane later avenges this insult when she gleefully relates an anecdote about how Mrs. Richards, an upper-class white woman, orders the family pool to be drained and scrubbed after the McDougald children swam in it, "remarking that the McDougalds might have 'crabs.'" Mebane explains that although Mrs. Richards's children intuitively understood that they should not invite the black children to swim, the youngest child, "not knowing about social classes," had unwittingly invited a lower-class white child to swim (Mary 197). Mebane thus implies that knowledge about race and class was acquired differently.

7 In *Mary, Wayfarer*, Mebane provides a telling example of the necessity for and the consequences of silence. While teaching high school in Roberson, North Carolina, she had to falsify attendance records in order to justify the number of teachers needed at the black high school. Actual attendance by black students during harvest time—when the black schools were already reduced to a half-day schedule—was less than fifty percent, but eighty percent was deemed the minimal acceptable figure. The end result of black participation in these communal falsehoods was, as Mebane explains, "The blacks were under and were going to stay under, and their main way out—education—was going to be abrogated or denied them altogether" (18).

8 Since Mebane's autobiographies are cast as documents of individual struggle against sexual and racial discrimination, they exhibit numerous tropes common to the tradition of African-American autobiography, including "the quest for self-sufficiency, self-reliance, personal dignity, and self-definition" (Braxton, *Black Women Writing* 184). Yet her works are notable for the absence of the courageous, self-sacrificing and nurturing "outraged mother figure" that Braxton finds in many African-American autobiographies ("Ancestral Presence" 300-01). Mebane's relationship with her mother was obviously a complex and often embattled one. Despite their frequent disagreements about Mebane's pursuit of her educational goals, which were undoubtedly sparked by envy, Nonnie Mebane did provide significant financial assistance to her daughter by allowing her to live in the family home while she attended college and graduate school. Overall, though, Mebane's relationship with her mother is probably more closely akin to the "matrophobic" mother-child relationship that Braxton identifies in Hurston's *Dust Tracks on a Road* (*Black Women Writing* 155-57).

Mebane's Aunt Jo, however, might qualify as a sort of surrogate mother, for she first encourages Mebane to go to college and wills her the money to do so. And, in fact, Josephine Mebane, "who first believed in me," was one of the three individuals to whom Mebane dedicated *Mary* (Harrison Salisbury and C. Hugh Holman were the other two).

9 As Smith notes in *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography*, "the shape . . . that the autobiographer's narrative and dramatic strategies take, reveals more about the autobiographer's present experience of 'self' than about her past, although, of course, it tells us something about that as well" (47).

10 There are numerous other indications that Mebane is writing for a middle-class and, most likely, a white audience, many of whom would not be southerners. Her discussions of black folk culture use an almost anthropological approach, as she carefully explains such features of southern life as soul food (186) and the evolution of the Afro (186-87).

11 I am indebted to Lucinda MacKethan for her thoughtful response to my essay, "A Community of Readers: Mary Mebane's Exploration of Difference," at the 1994 Virginia Humanities Conference.

12 As William L. Andrews points out, Frederick Douglass makes a similar narrative shift between *Narrative of*

the Life of Frederick Douglass and My Bondage and My Freedom, moving from a narrative of "ascendant" individualism to one that acknowledges the importance of communal ties (237- 39).

13 Mebane's papers, including personal material as well as drafts of her autobiographies, are located in the Manuscripts Department of the Southern Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

14 In using this organic metaphor to describe southern culture, Mebane is perhaps alluding to a passage near the end of *Black Boy* when Richard Wright discusses the influence of the South on the black individual: "So, in leaving, I was taking a part of the South to transplant in alien soil, to see if it could grow differently, if it could drink of new and cool rains, bend in strange winds, respond to the warmth of other suns, and, perhaps, to bloom" (284).

15 These notes are also in the Manuscripts Department of the Southern Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, as are approximately thirty manuscript pages for a potential third volume of her autobiography, entitled "Phoenix: The Ordeal and Rebirth of Mary Mebane. An Autobiography, Volume III."

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