



# **"Closer to the Truth Than Any Fact": Memoir, Memory, and Jim Crow**

*Jennifer Jensen Wallach*

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Although historians frequently use memoirs as source material, too often they confine such usage to the anecdotal, and there is little methodological literature regarding the genre's possibilities and limitations. This study articulates an approach to using memoirs as instruments of historical understanding. Jennifer Jensen Wallach applies these principles to a body of memoirs about life in the American South during Jim Crow segregation, including works by Zora Neale Hurston, Willie Morris, Lillian Smith, Henry Louis Gates Jr., William Alexander Percy, and Richard Wright.

Wallach argues that the field of autobiography studies, which is currently dominated by literary critics, needs a new theoretical framework that allows historians, too, to benefit from the interpretation of life writing. Her most provocative claim is that, due to the aesthetic power of literary language, skilled creative writers are uniquely positioned to capture the complexities of another time and another place. Through techniques such as metaphor and irony, memoirists collectively give their readers an empathetic understanding of life during the era of segregation. Although these reminiscences bear certain similarities, it becomes clear that the South as it was remembered by each is hardly the same place.

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