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Summer 2003

"100 Greatest African Americans: A Biographical Encyclopedia" Book Review

M. Elaine Hughes

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Recommended Citation
Hughes, M. Elaine, ""100 Greatest African Americans: A Biographical Encyclopedia" Book Review" (2003). *University Library Faculty Publications.* Paper 19.
http://digitalarchive.gsu.edu/univ_lib_facpub/19

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100 Greatest African Americans: A Biographical Encyclopedia. By Molefi K. Asante. Amherst, New York: Promethus Pr., 2002. 350p. alkaline $49 (ISBN 1-57392-963-8).

In the introduction to this one volume encyclopedia, Molefi Asante, a pioneer and leader in the field of African American Studies, states that what he hoped to accomplish with this compilation of 100 biographical sketches was to "make accessible the history of some of the most important American personalities" (13). He further states " this book is not about the African Americans who have the largest popular following or the ones who sell the most CD's or who establish the best records in athletics"(13). In other words, this is not a book of the most famous African Americans but the most significant ones.

100 Greatest African Americans consists of a compilation of brief (about 1 to 4 pages each) alphabetically arranged biographical sketches of what, in Mr. Asante's opinion, are the most important African Americans to distinguish themselves in the face of adversity and the "struggle for justice and equality" (18) since 1619. He admits this was a daunting task but this was a book that was needed because it provides "a more balanced array" (17) of persons. He uses five criteria listed in the introduction to explain why certain individuals were included: " 1) significance in the general movement of African American people toward full equality…; 2) self-sacrifice and the undertaking of risk for the collective good; 3) unusual will and determination in the face of the greatest danger…; 4) a consistent posture toward the social, cultural and economic uplifting of the African American people; and 5) personal achievement that calls attention to the capability and genius of the African American people."

All of the sketches are written by Mr. Asante and a bibliography of sources used is provided. The personalities range from James Forten (1766-1842), "one of the earliest campaigners for black education" (127) to Tiger Woods (1975-) a champion golfer. Most sketches are accompanied by black and white pencil drawing but some black and white photographs are furnished.

Of course, most of the life stories of these individuals can be found in the collections of any major academic or public or school library in a variety of sources such as: Jessie Carney Smith's *Notable Black American Women*(Gale,1992) or *Notable Black American Men* (Gale, 1999), Walter L. Hawkins' *African American Biographies* (2 vols., McFarland, 1992), Logan and Winston's *Dictionary of American Negro Biography*(Norton, 1982) and the mutivolume set, Michel L. LaBlanc's *Contemporary Black Biography* (Gale, 1992) as well as Columbus Salley's *The Black 100: A Ranking of the Most Influential African Americans Past and Present* (Citadel Press, 1999).

Of the above mentioned titles, Salley's *The Black 100* (Revised and Updated, Citadel Press, 1999) would invite the most comparison. Both books in listing the 100 greatest or most influential African Americans include a large per centage of the same personalities. However, both are highly subjective relying in the final analysis on the author's opinion of the persons who meet their criteria.

The difference in the two books is that Salley ranks the individuals in his book according his own criteria as to the person's influence on the black struggle, whereas Asante's book takes a strictly alphabetical approach to the persons who meet his own five criteria. And of course, Asante's book is the most recent allowing it to include more up-to-date biographies of contemporary personalities. It will be interesting to see if Salley comes out with another revised and updated edition in the near future. Salley's book includes a name and keyword index along with more photographs whereas Asante's book does not. Salley's book includes a shorter more selected bibliography.

I find the sketches in Asante's book very well researched and written. They are concise and informative and easy reading. And even though I thought I knew all there was to know about these individuals, I found there was still a lot to learn. So as far as Asante's stated objective "to provide the reader with access to information about the greatest men and women who have helped to make African American History" (11). He met his objective in providing the reader with access to information. It's the "greatest" part that is, in my opinion, still open to debate. Most readers knowledgeable in African American history will question some of Asante's choices, especially the most contemporary ones. But Asante acknowledges this in his introduction. I'm just not sure he stuck to his criteria.

Nevertheless, it's an excellent compilation. I would recommend it for public and school libraries.

M. Elaine Hughes
Liaison Librarian for African American Studies
Pullen Library
Georgia State University
Atlanta, Georgia