



Reflections of the 1965 Freedom March from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama by Susan Jans-Thomas (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2012. 163 pp., ISBN 978-0-7734-2653-5) reviewed by Christopher A. Varlack (cavarlack@gmail.com), Lecturer, Department of English and Language Arts, Morgan State University.

Centered on the struggle for racial equality throughout the American South, *Reflections of the 1965 Freedom March from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama* by Dr. Susan Jans-Thomas retraces the author's journey to discover this rich and troubled history of a not so distant past. The memoir maneuvers swiftly across historical spaces from President Andrew Jackson's family plantation in Nashville to the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham—site of the infamous 1963 bombing—to the Bridge Crossing in Montgomery, symbolic of the transformation from a time

of racial oppression to one of acceptance and increased understanding. The words that fill these pages, though ill-conceived at times, therefore reflect Jans-Thomas' interests in Southern race relations and civil rights history as Associate Professor of Research and Advanced Studies at the University of West Florida and her firm belief that history is more than just the stories of an era's most noted figures. Here, instead, what Dr. Jans-Thomas emphasizes is the necessary and continual engagement with history, "shar[ing] stories so others would make future journeys" and actively discover that history (both political and social) for themselves (p. 20). Each chapter then offers a momentary glimpse into the people and places of the past too often lost amidst the larger struggle for civil rights or buried within the pages of old textbooks where individuals are largely forgotten, their personal struggles rarely told.

In this sense, *Reflections* is an inquiry into the individual responsibilities we each have in discovering and preserving the social histories of the past, most evident perhaps through the interconnections that Jans-Thomas frequently draws between her personal experience and the struggle for civil rights in the South. For example, in chapter two, she writes, "During the Civil Rights Era, it was people's unwillingness to discuss racial injustice that maintained oppressive race relations for years, and I could not repeat the history of silence" (p. 11). Though not all of her reflections are so seamless, these words reflect the underlying drive behind the memoir: to break the tradition of silence where men and women died with their voices stifled within them, refusing to be proponents of change. As a result, the essential theme this seems to reflect is simply one of remembrance. Jans-Thomas expresses that she "had to share what [she] knew about Southern hospitality, history, and race relations" as part of an ongoing conversation about race and American society—a conversation vital yet incomplete, hence her journey to Alabama to begin filling in the empty spaces of her knowledge of history (p. 10).

Of these short chapters, each centered on place, chapter nine, “Montgomery, Alabama,” is arguably one of the most significant in Jans-Thomas’ efforts to trace the history of the civil rights struggle and the role individuals played in this enduring fight. Much of the chapter focuses on the important role Rosa Parks played in the Montgomery Bus Boycott that challenged the tradition of segregation in the city. Here Jans-Thomas writes, “It is fascinating how the actions of women heightened the awareness of social injustices throughout all history . . . I was pleased that Rosa Parks, being physically tried, was also philosophically tired of succumbing to segregation” (p. 59). What Dr. Jans-Thomas accomplishes in such passages is heightened recognition of the impact women, often overlooked in the larger record of history, had in inciting both social and political change. In doing so, she not only traces the lineage of women whose voices shattered inequality and oppression—figures like Harriet Beecher Stowe, Rosa Parks, and the four girls killed in the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing, but she also strives to reconsider our concept of history itself. Offering a more expanded perspective, whenever possible, she reimagines it as *herstory*—the lingering impact of strong women who demand increased attention for their roles in realizing the American Dream.

Chapter ten, “The People’s March,” is also particularly important to the narrative that Jans-Thomas weaves, the climax of a journey to rediscover the past and to forge an immediate connection with a history in part her own. “Thoughts of Bloody Sunday having occurred during my lifetime haunt my Civil Rights Era studies,” she writes, explaining in part the overwhelming desire that drove her to Alabama to participate in the 40th Anniversary Bridge Crossing Jubilee (p. 60). In these moments, Dr. Jans-Thomas recognizes the impact of the civil rights journey on her own, acknowledging that figures such as Rosa Parks paved the way for the Civil Rights and Women’s Rights movements alike and, as a result, those “paths blazed by people in the past allowed my journey to be a bit less rocky” (61). More importantly, however, this chapter is about self-discovery. Standing amidst the traffic of the Edmund Pettus Bridge where protestors were beaten and bloodied just forty years before, she recognizes the progress that has occurred as well as the lengths the United States still has to go to achieve the sense of equality upon which it was originally built. Thus, Jans-Thomas “had worn denim blue jeans to show there was work to be done. It would be the work of learning about history, meeting people, making memories to last a lifetime, and embracing those who had walked this path 40 years ago” (p. 62).

The remaining eight chapters of the memoir sequence through Dr. Jans-Thomas’ final reflections as she concludes her tour of the South and returns home. In chapter eleven, “A Walk in the Park,” she focuses on her experiences as a white woman participating in these historic events—events, for some, so troubling and shameful, a part of America’s darkest moments they would rather forget. But in these chapters, Jans-Thomas chooses not to forget as so many have before, instead “thriv[ing] on the personal testimony to the injustice found under the reign of Jim Crow,” hoping to harvest these stories never captured in the pages of her textbooks or in the images of old photographs or in the tattered clippings of newspapers cataloguing the era’s events (p. 83).

For Jans-Thomas, these moments are richer than the sculptures she studied along her tour of the city's numerous sites and museums, for these are the living legacies and legacies preserved that she can no longer ignore. She continues to capture these stories with each remaining chapter, cherishing "the footprints of the people [who] served as a testimony of the movement," the memoir itself serving as a collection of their stories interwoven with her own (p. 106).

Despite these achievements in reflection, the memoir can best be described as rhizomatic, at times almost tangential, exploring the seemingly extraneous nuances of human experience in Jans-Thomas' journey to Montgomery, such as President Andrew Jackson's guitar-shaped driveway at his Nashville plantation, "The Hermitage," or her overwhelming love of breakfast at local diners, her favorite meal of the day. While these details provide insight into the mind and the spirit of the author, they are ultimately distracting from the central narrative that the memoir promises to explore: reflections of the 1965 Freedom March and the larger cultural lessons that Jans-Thomas learns along the way. For instance, in chapter two, entitled "Starting the Journey," she writes, "History is decided by major historical leaders . . . Omitted from textbooks is the struggle for human rights by ordinary citizens"—a statement she somewhat awkwardly ties to Ronnie Gilbert's rendition of "Down by the Riverside" (p. 13). Such reflections would instead be placed more appropriately in her examination of Uncle Alfred in the following chapter, an under-recognized slave born in 1812 and caretaker of the Jackson estate—a figure, she argues, is lost yet essential to history.

Such miscues in organization frequent the pages of this memoir, suggesting an analytical lens more forced than organic as well as a series of reflections more like afterthoughts than the intentional retrospection of an author trying to make sense of the complex issues of race. In the end, organization is the primary obstacle to the memoir's success. Developed across eighteen chapters too short for sufficient exploration, the memoir potentially leaves readers yearning for meaning (and detail) that may never come. The memoir would also have been better served had it started in chapter five, "The Freedom Walk," arguably one of the more pertinent chapters of the narrative. Up until that point, readers may have been left too long amidst Dr. Jans-Thomas' recurring nostalgia for magnolia blossoms and the consistent pull she experienced for the South that they may stop reading and miss the vital reflections that later chapters hold (though these reflections are also insufficiently fleshed out). Coupled with the numerous grammatical mistakes throughout, these shortcomings detract from the overall quality of *Reflections* and are hard to ignore, indicating that perhaps it is a memoir unfortunately before its time—a few drafts too early for the press.