

# BOOK REVIEWS



## **The Odyssey of an African Slave By Sitiki**

Edited by Patricia C. Griffin

University Press of Florida, 2009

192 pp., illustrations, maps, index, \$24.95 hardcover

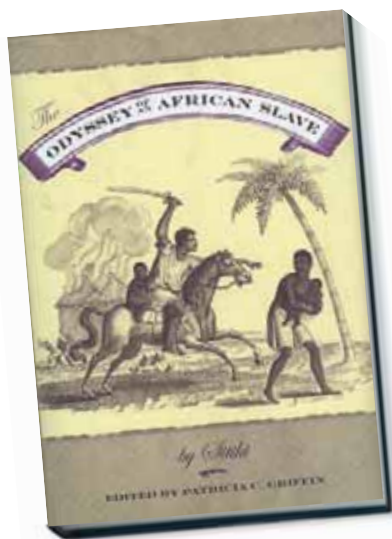
Reviewed by Eric Kimball

This important book vividly restores the remarkable life of the African Sitiki, renamed Jack Smith by his Anglo-American enslavers. Born in Africa in the mid-1790s, he survived the Middle Passage across the Atlantic to endure slavery in the United States, including bondage in Connecticut in the early 1800s and laboring in Florida, before dying in 1882. It is an amazing life story of slavery and freedom.

Editor Patricia Griffin effectively divides the book into several sections. The preface explains the creative process by which Sitiki's narrative and the book originated. Additional methodological information, especially concerning Griffin's editorial decisions and her uses of the narrative, emerge from the short, crisp introduction. Griffin's explanations raise questions that are both particular to the narrative as well as universal in their application when dealing with complex primary sources. Thus, this book provides both a teaching tool in methodology, and restores the experience of an enslaved African American.

Griffin refers to the narrative as an "autobiography," but in truth it is more like a biography, as it was written by Sitiki's former master, Buckingham Smith, and then later by Griffin herself, who tries to restore Sitiki's "authentic" voice. Unlike many other more

famous narratives, such as that of Frederick Douglass, it went unpublished during Sitiki's lifetime. While Griffin restores Sitiki's voice, she also provides her own carefully crafted interpretations concerning areas in which Smith likely made changes or, just as importantly, deletions or omissions. Thus, Griffin's voice becomes as important as Sitiki's, but she is both careful and deliberative about her choices, and her reasons for making them. This allows the reader to make the additional intellectual step of deciding to agree or disagree with each of these choices. The result is an even closer interplay with the narrative, and a deeper exchange with Sitiki's life.



Following the preface and introduction, Griffin wisely includes the narrative first, before following with expansion on the various individuals, situations, and environments found in the narrative. Because the bulk of the narrative discusses Florida, and more specifically Saint Augustine, Griffin spends the majority of her analytical time there. This yields numerous insights, including identifying the orange grove plantation Sitiki worked on as well as his subsequent days in post-Civil War freedom.

The book also includes a useful set of appendices, including a chronology of Sitiki's

life, another on the condition of the manuscript in the New York Historical Society, an analysis of Sitiki's language, Buckingham Smith's Last Will and Testament, and Sitiki's obituary from a contemporary newspaper.

Throughout the book, Griffin (and presumably her own editor) provides relevant visual supplements to guide the reader and provide additional context. These include maps, manuscript photos, and paintings. The collective effect helps the reader visualize the story of Sitiki's life. This compact book is an important addition that deserves a wide readership from students, scholars, and the general public.

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## **Teenie Harris: Image, Memory, History**

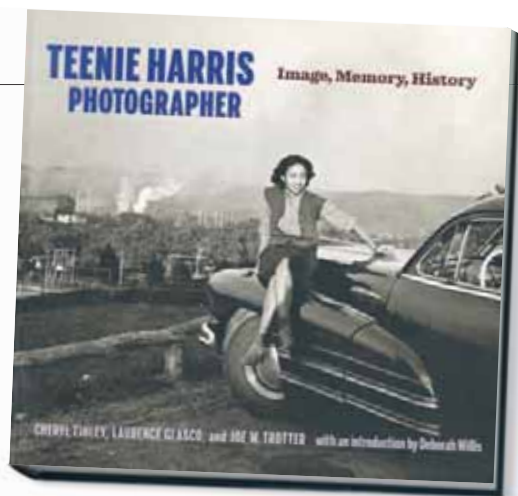
By Cheryl Finley, Laurence Glasco,  
and Joe W. Trotter

Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011

192 pp., photographs, \$55 hardcover

Reviewed by Regennia N. Williams

Document-bound though they may be, many historians are unashamedly proud that they play a crucial role in writing the stories of the past. Working in tandem with their archivist colleagues and others, academicians and independent scholars contribute to the creation of works that are grounded in bodies of documentary evidence. If abundant visual evidence is also available, then the resulting publications might pair amazing photography with insightful essays, thereby offering the best of two thought-provoking worlds. I am convinced that this is exactly what happened in the case of *Teenie Harris: Image, Memory, History*. This book, the companion catalog for an exhibition by the same name, is a valuable contribution to the already rich body of knowledge on African American social



thought, urban history, and photography.

Published by the University of Pittsburgh Press in cooperation with the Carnegie Museum of Art, the work is at once the story of a great photographer, Charles “Teenie” Harris (1908–1998), and an intimate portrait of Pittsburgh’s African American community. Harris was a longtime photographer for the *Pittsburgh Courier*, the nation’s largest black weekly when he joined the staff in 1938. Here one finds images from the Great Depression and the lingering poverty of the 1940s juxtaposed with photographs documenting the prevalence of the arts and entertainment, particularly in the era of World War II. Information in the book suggests that Duke Ellington, Lena Horne, Billy Eckstine, and Sarah Vaughan were as likely to appear on the pages of the *Pittsburgh Courier* as the bride and groom in a local Tom Thumb wedding or one of the many black-owned businesses in the Hill District.

In addition to his work for the newspaper, Harris also ran a thriving studio, and worked off and on as a freelance photographer, publishing images in *Flash News Picture Magazine*, for example. Despite the meager earnings from

his full-time work with the *Courier* (\$35 per week in 1938 to about \$100 per week by the 1970s), Harris was dedicated to his craft. He became known as “One Shot” Harris, the photographer who could capture the perfect image on the first try. The subjects of Harris’s photos, their relatives, friends, and other members of the community were among the oral history narrators who helped the

contributors place the photographer’s work within the larger context of the city’s history, and the storytelling about the life reflected in the photos is quite good.

Harris, a reluctant retiree, published his last photo in the *New Pittsburgh Courier* in 1983, but his work, like that of Harlem-based photographer James Van der Zee, is still available to a growing audience. According to Louise Lippincott, Carnegie Museum of Art purchased Harris’s negatives and all rights from his estate in 2001. The Teenie Harris Archive contains approximately 80,000 negatives, and many of the images have already been digitized and are currently available online at <http://teenie.cmoa.org/>.

Thanks to the museum’s web-based archive and publishing efforts, we can rest assured that Harris’s legacy will not be lost.

**Regennia N. Williams** is an associate professor of history at Cleveland State University and the founder and director of the Initiative for the Study of Religion and Spirituality in the History of Africa and the Diaspora.

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