CHAPTER FIVE

NARRATING SELVES, NARRATING HISTORIES

> Autobiography is, of course, always about stating an individuality while at the same time making it public, thereby giving individual experiences universal connotations. (Gunnthórunn Gudmundsdóttir, *Borderlines: Autobiography and Fiction in Postmodern Life Writing* 6)

> The relationship between private memories and public events can highlight some questions autobiography raises about our relationship with the past, and our representation of it…. (*Borderlines* 13)

> Giovanni explicitly and implicitly makes the main points: the identity of the self remains hostage to the history of the collectivity; the representation of the self in prose or verse invites the critical scrutiny of the culture. Both points undercut the myth of the unique individual and force a fresh look at the autobiographies of black women. (Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, in Benstock ed. *The Private Self*: *Theory and Practice of Women's Autobiographical Writings* 70)

This chapter examines those autobiographies/memoirs which do not just tell an individual's story but provide a background rich in history and social history. The selected texts are Maya Angelou's *All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes* (1986), Edwidge Danticat's *Brother, I'm Dying* (2007), Paule Marshall's *Triangular Road: A Memoir* (2009), and Jessica Harris' *My Soul Looks Back* (2017). These texts combine personal and public memory along with history. As the chosen authors narrate their lives, they inevitably enter into dialogues with and thereby, help reconceptualize received histories, whether it be Welfare Rights history, the history of slavery, immigration policies or literary history. It follows that private histories are intertwined with public history. As Benstock points out, "Personal experience must be understood in social context" (*The Private Self* 70).

If life writing is seen as more than documentation of a life, a product of language, a narrative, "the real is never more than an unformulated signified" (Barthes, quoted in White, *Content*. 15). White, in the context of objectivity of narrative discourse or history, says that:

> [E]very narrative discourse consists not of one single code monolithically utilized, but rather of a complex set of codes, the interweaving of which by the author-for the production of a story infinitely rich in suggestion and variety of affect… attests to his talents as an artist, as master rather than as the servant of the codes available for his use. (41)

White holds that artistic texts carry more meaning as they draw upon more cultural codes. Again, the information is presented with more virtuosity because of the cultural codes used. Apart from the richness of meaning provided by various cultural codes, multiple layers in the discourse add to its semantic depth. For him

> a discourse is…an apparatus for the production of meaning, rather than as only a vehicle for the transmission of information about an extrinsic referent. (42)

For White, the discourse of history is neither objective nor focused on capturing information alone. Similarly in autobiographical writing, as the author writes, meaning is produced from the context and the cultural codes the words bring to bear, not from information about the self alone.

Further, White observes that the historical narrative tests "the capacity of a culture's fictions to endow real events with the kinds of meanings that literature displays to consciousness through its fashioning of patterns of 'imaginary' events" (45). The narrative endows the chosen events of a person's life history "with patterns of meaning that any literal representation of them as facts could never produce" (ibid). Instead of a collection of moments or events from his or her life, the writer of the autobiography fits them into a life story, a narrative drawing upon culture and history for resonance and depths of meaning. White defends the importance of the narrative structure even as he does not dismiss the truth value of the events narrated. He contends:

> If there is any logic presiding over the transition from…fact or event in the discourse to that of narrative, it is the logic of figuration itself…tropology. This transition is effected by a displacement of the facts onto the ground of literary fictions or, what amounts to the same thing, the projection onto the facts of the plot-structure of…literary figuration. (47)

Figurative language offers nuances of meaning and interpretation to the bare facts of personal or public history. Since a person cannot operate in a cultural vacuum, he/she has to place himself/herself against a background with a culture and a society. Even when wandering alone, a person's language and meaning are culturally coded, or fed by existing structures of meaning. It follows that a narrator of a life history draw upon and refer to the background of myth and history, remote or recent.

While Maya Angelo records the experiences of African Americans who had moved to Ghana in the 1960s in response to Nkrumah's call to Americans and Caribbeans to reconnect with their ancestral roots, Paule Marshall connects to the history of slavery when she finds herself in Richmond and Barbados. She cannot overlook the long forgotten embedded/buried memories of America and Barbados. Edwidge Danticat describes the plight of her uncle who died in a US detention camp as he tried to escape from Haiti to the US. This personal story is anchored on the migration policies of the US government and its border disputes with neighbouring countries. Jessica Harris' narrative is about her friendship with Samuel Floyd and through him the circle of eminent people like James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, Paule Marshall, Rosa Guy, and Louise Merriweather to name a few. She also focuses on the literary-critical-artistic scenes of the sixties and seventies in New York mainly and in Europe at times. She also is witness to the advent of AIDS in America and the loss of a number of her male friends to it.

The hypotheses examined in the chapter are:

- That life writing is rooted in social history
- That private and public histories are intertwined in life writing
- That a person's autobiography can include the biography of someone close to the writer
- That the strands of history in life writing could be consciously researched or not by conscious design
- That history and memory are part of autobiography
- That stray events from an individual's life are often woven into a layered narrative

This chapter tries to show the interweaving of private and public histories in each of these narratives. It draws upon Gudmundsdóttir's comment in another context: "how each author has forged a unique conjunction between their own memories and public events and how that connection impinges on the borderline between fiction and autobiography" to carry forward this study (*Borderlines* 13). It will examine "the complex dialogue between public and private memory and the individual's relationship to history" (ibid). Even as the author's personal history is related to public history in a narrative, often private accounts are anchored on public events, witnessed or drawn upon as part of a collective history/memory.

All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes

Maya Angelou writes about her experience in Ghana in the 1960s in *All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes*. She had gone there from Egypt to get her son admitted to the University at Accra, but his accident and long hospitalization, made her stay there for some time. Angelou uses this period to get to know the people—fellow African Americans and Ghanaians—around her and when time allows, to explore her ancestral links. She combines elements of travel writing—in her recording of manners and customs of the natives of Ghana—along with her own life story, against the background of the Middle Passage and the history of slavery. In keeping with the focus of this chapter, Angelou's intertwining of personal and public events and history would be addressed.

In Ghana Angelou marks the dark-skinned people freely moving about, and reflects that "Theirs was the laughter of home, quick and without artifice" (*All God's Children* 24). At the same time, she is reminded of the situation in America:

> Their authority on the marble steps again proved that Whites had been wrong all along. Black and brown skin did not herald debasement and a divinely created inferiority. We were capable of controlling our cities, ourselves and our lives….Whites were not needed to explain the working of the world, nor the mysteries of the mind. (ibid)

While her reaction to the Ghanaians is not surprising, she is disappointed in her expectations from the public. Angelou meets other African Americans—who had come to Ghana as a form of repatriation, centuries removed—who reach out to help her and also introduce her to Ghanaians who are equally helpful.

She explains the circumstances of their all being there which connect their lives to the changes in Ghana's political situation:

> I was in Ghana by accident, literally, but the other immigrants had chosen the country because of its progressive posture and its brilliant president, Kwame Nkrumah. He had let it be known that American Negroes would be welcome to Ghana. He offered havens for Southern and East African revolutionaries working to end colonialism in their countries. (23)

Most of the African Americans had left their lives in America to try and settle in Ghana and help to rebuild it. They were full of hope and enthusiasm for the new republic and saw themselves as proverbial returnees: "I was one of nearly two hundred Black Americans from

St. Louis, New York City, Washington, D.C., Los Angeles, Atlanta, and Dallas who hoped to live out the Biblical story" (24). Angelou presents it as a return of the prodigal(s):

> I had finally come home. The prodigal child, having strayed, been stolen or sold from the land of her fathers…had at last arisen and directed herself back to the welcoming arms of the family where she would be bathed, clothed with fine raiment and seated at the welcoming table. (ibid)

As she explains their presence in that country, she puts it in the past context of slavery which had been the reason for their ancestors' first removal from the place. While they were expecting a warm welcome from the people of Ghana, they find that nobody pays them any attention. Rather, the "citizens were engaged in their own concerns. They were busy adoring their flag, their five-year-old independence from Britain and their president" (ibid). The trauma of slavery and its tragic history meant little to the people who had been fortunate to be not affected by it. Their lives continued, untouched by what went on in the Americas or in the Caribbean.

Angelou records the feelings of her fellow African Americans whom she calls immigrants:

> We had come to Africa from our varying starting places and with myriad motives, gaping with hungers, some more ravenous than others, and we had little tolerance for understanding being ignored. At least we wanted someone to embrace us and maybe congratulate us because we had survived. If they felt the urge, they could thank us for having returned. (25)

Having to accept that the ground reality was different, Angelou explains that they had not received personal invitations but were part of those who "buzzed mothlike on the periphery of acceptance" (ibid). That did not, in any way, rob the returnees of their enthusiasm:

> Julian's circle had stupendous ambitions and thought of itself as a cadre of political émigrés. Its members were impassioned and volatile, dedicated to Africa, and Africans at home and abroad. We, for I counted myself in that company, felt that we would be the first accepted and once taken in and truly adopted, we would hold the doors open…. (26)

Angelou finds that this group of bright young people with whom she identifies are kind and willing to make sacrifices. It is through them that she gets to meet local people like Efua Sutherland who helps her to get a job as a clerk in the University, while her son recovered from

his injuries. She is sure that they would be accepted in Ghana: "We didn't question if we would be useful. Our people for over three hundred years had been made so useful, a bloody war had been fought and lost, rather than have our usefulness brought to an end" (22). Angelou refers to the American Civil War of the 1860s fought between the North and the South to justify the potential worth of African Americans in Ghana.

Back in the University, Angelou overhears some European professors making careless remarks about black people—African Americans as well as the people of Ghana, in one of the dining rooms. She realizes that the discussion must have been occasioned by "the recent riot in Harlem which had been front-page news in Ghana" (53). A Yugoslav professor remarks that "the American Negroes are fed up with the system because Democracy does not work." A Briton adds that "Democracy was never created for the lower classes….Just like at Ghana." When a Ghanaian does not appear to mind what is being said, Angelou berates them about their careless observations. As she tries to leave the room, a waiter advises her not to allow such people to upset her: "This is not their place. In time they will pass. Ghana was here when they came. When they go, Ghana will be here. They are like mice on an elephant's back. They will pass." (56). Angelou is struck by his words and ashamed at her own outburst:

> A poor, uneducated servant in Africa was so secure he could ignore established White rudeness. No Black American I had ever known knew that security. Our tenure in the United States, though long and very hard-earned, was always so shaky, we had developed patience as a defense, but never as aggression. (54)

The cultural shock delivered by the Ghanaian's message reminds her of their lack of a stable history or tradition to sustain them in America. She is left pondering over his words with some envy:

> Their countries had been exploited and their cultures had been discredited by colonialism. Nonetheless, they could reflect…on centuries of continuity. The lowliest could call the name of ancestors who lived centuries earlier. The land upon which they lived had been in their people's possession beyond remembered time. Despite political bondage and economic exploitation, they had retained an ineradicable innocence. (55)

What stands out to her is that Africans and African culture have endured the pressures of colonization because of their being deeply entrenched in African life. Because they were on familiar ground, they could pick up the threads of their old lives and rebuild once the Europeans had left.

She feels that because of their history of slavery, African Americans "carried the badge of a barbarous history sewn to our dark skins" (78). Moreover, in America they "had matured without ever experiencing the true abandon of adolescence" (ibid). What appeared as childish actions "most often were exhibitions of bravado, not unlike humming a jazz tune while walking into a gathering of the Ku Klux Klan" (ibid). She realizes that she or other African Americans would not be able to penetrate the essence of African life, return to Africa in the real sense.

Angelou writes that they were all caught up in the positivity of President Nkrumah's acceptance of black people. They felt grateful and gratified in their faith in Africa:

> "For too long in our history Africa has spoken through the voice of others. Now what I have called the African Personality in international affairs will have a chance of making its proper impact and will let the world know it through the voices of its sons." (79)

They welcomed with gratitude Nkrumah's declaration that "West Indians and Black Americans were among Africa's great gifts to the world" and the knowledge that they "lived under laws constructed by Blacks, and…were held responsible by Blacks." They "could not lay any social unhappiness or personal failure at the door of color prejudice (ibid). They lived hard and worked hard to do the best they could for Ghana. For a while they felt good about not having to worry about colour.

Angelou writes about the visit of Malcolm X whose advice changed her life. She describes him as "America's Molotov cocktail, thrown upon the White hope that all Black Americans would follow the nonviolent tenets of Dr. Martin Luther King" (126). Even the timid admired him. When Julian asked Malcolm to tell them why he was in Ghana, he informs them that he had been touring the African nations "to confer with other African politicians. He needed as many governmental contacts as possible so that when he took the case of the Black American before the General Assembly of the United Nations, he could be sure at least of some African and maybe other nationals' support" (128). Angelou adds:

> When Malcolm mentioned arguing for our people before the United Nations, we shouted spontaneously and with one voice of approval. He said, "If our cause was debated by all the world's nations, it would mean that finally, we would be taken seriously. (ibid)

He continued to reach out to people and in a speech at the University "He spoke of America, White and Black Americans, racism, hate and the awful need to be treated as humans" (134).

He tells the Nigerian High Commissioner "We have much work to do at home. Even as you have your work here in Africa. We are lambs in a den of wolves. We will need your help. Only with the help of Africa and Africans can we succeed in freeing ourselves" (137). He identifies himself as "a Black Muslim man of African heritage" (135) and when someone comments on his complexion he explains as Angelou records:

> "As slaves, we were the property of slave masters. Our men were worked to death, our women were raped, then worked to death, and many of our children were born lookinglike me. The slave master fathers denied their children, but fortunately we retained enough Africanisms to believe that the mother's child was our child…." (ibid)

Malcolm X explains his lighter complexion with reference to the abuse of Black slave women and their children by White Americans.

Angelou writes of Malcolm X's serious advice to them: "he was a big brother advisor, suggesting that it was time for me to come home" (136). He tells them:

> "The country needs you. Our people need you. Alice and Julian and Max Bond and Sylvia, you should all come home. You have seen Africa, bring it home and teach our people about the homeland." (ibid)

His advice and finally her son's desire for independence convince Angelou to return to America. When she speaks to her friend Julian he says: "I suspect we'll all be home soon. Africa was here when we arrived and it's not going anywhere. You can always come back" (187). She decides to leave and before going drives towards the coast to see some of the villages.

On the visit to the old coastal town of Keta, Angelou is escorted by a local acquaintance, Mr Adadevo who hailed from that area, along with the daughters of Nana Niketa, the former vice chancellor of Ghana University and the chief of his tribe. As they near the ocean front market, she is taken to meet Adavedo's sister who had a stall in the market. They move further inside the market after meeting her when a tall older woman hails Angelo as someone she knows. It takes some time for Mr. Adadevo to convince her about Angelo's American identity. Finally when she understands, she leads Angelou to meet other women who all appear to be mourning something. Mr Adadevo tells her what he learns from them:

> "During the slavery period Keta was a good sized village. It was hit very hard by the slave trade….In fact, at one point every inhabitant was either killed or taken. The only escapees were children who ran away and hid in the bush. Many of them watched from their hiding places as their parents were beaten and put into chains. (198)

Informing her that that they find a resemblance in her with their own people—"They are sure you are descended from those stolen mothers and fathers"—he continues with what they tell him:

> "The children were taken in by nearby villagers and grew to maturity. They married and had children and rebuilt Keta. They told the tale to their offspring. These women are the descendants of those orphaned children. They have heard the stories often, and the deeds are still as fresh as if they happened during their lifetimes…. That is why they mourn. Not for you but for their lost people." (ibid)

Angelou is saddened by the story of those past people and their trauma, even as she is surprised and not unhappy to connect with the women. She reflects that:

> I had not consciously come to Ghana to find the roots of my beginnings…. And here in my last days in Africa, descendants of a pillaged past saw their history in my face and heard their ancestors speak through my voice. (ibid)

She realizes that without her having to search actively for her roots, her past and that of her ancestors, plucked from that land, were confronting her through these women in Keta. She now knows where they hailed from and their sad story simply reinforces the tragic history of slavery for families and individuals alike. Angelou can now anchor her life story on the displacement and re-routing of her ancestors in America.

Brother, I'm Dying

Edwidge Danticat's *Brother, I'm Dying* overlaps the author's personal story with the life stories of her family, most significantly that of her father, Mira and uncle, Joseph. By intertwining the accounts of different family members into her personal narrative, the book becomes as much a biography as it is autobiography. Danticat's narrative is, however, not limited to a mere mingling of these two genres: in retelling the history of her family she also revisits the troubled history of her home country, Haiti and its volatile, complicated relations with the United States. Haiti and its history remain the larger canvas against which her family memories are played

out. Significant events of the author's personal family history are related to dates and public events important to Haiti's history.

Danticat, who had been born in Haiti in 1969, was left in the foster care of her uncle Joseph and aunt Tante Denise when her parents—initially her father and then the mother—migrated to the United States in search of better economic opportunities. It is with her uncle's family that the author spends twelve years of her life before she and her brother are brought along to America by their parents who had by then settled comfortably enough in the new country to be able to keep their children with them. Her years spent in Haiti, however, endow her with a deep sense of attachment to it so much so that she keeps going back to it—both literally as well as figuratively through the medium of her writings. By embedding Haiti's socio-political milieu into her recounting of familial memories, Danticat's autobiography revises dominant histories on the country which often too easily glides over its complexities and reduces it to a country with no other legacy than internal conflicts and poverty. Similarly, the text is also critical of celebratory, nationalist narratives that attempt to romanticize Haitian life by taking an escapist route away from its problems.

In weaving a narrative that is attentive to the plights of Haitians even as it never completely assuages them of blame and that understands the role of foreign, especially US interventions in aggravating political turmoil within the country, the author provides a frame to engage in a more complex understanding of the country. Also, in placing the life of her father, her own life, and that of her uncle in parallel planes, Danticat's narrative has to invariably keep shifting geographies—between that of Haiti and the US. Although never made explicit, discussions of these shifts as well as the intricate ways in which these two geographical locations become implicated provide an opportunity to critique US immigration policies and laws that fail to take into account the pain of immigration.

The chapters are not chronologically arranged: different accounts, including what appears to be biographical sketches of different family members, are interspersed in no particular order so as to arrive at some cohesive meaning. In this regard, in *Borderlines: Autobiography and Fiction in Postmodern Life Writing*, Gunnthorunn Gudmundsdottir writes:

> Writing on one's family constitutes a part of the more general search for origin and identity present in autobiographical writing….They write about what was 'all there always, everywhere, layered away' and by writing on it they give these layers of family

> history a sense of coherence and they save the 'dust from going down the drain,' and thus their family history from disappearing. (183)

The interspersing of family details with personal stories helps arrive at a better understanding of one's own life in relation to one's family. Preservation of family details is an attempt to preserve in writing the writer's lineage and hence, his/her very identity. Danticat's mingling of biography with autobiography provides her the narrative frame to bring together the story of her life along with that of her father and uncle and thereby, a way to present how their lives were intricately connected to each other. The author seems to imply that the account of her life as narrated in the memoir can only be understood when placed in the context of the lives of her father and uncle. To quote Danticat:

> This is an attempt at cohesiveness, and at re-creating a few wondrous and terrible months when their lives and mine intersected in startling ways, forcing me to look forward and back at the same time. I am writing this only because they can't. (26)

The author, here, is referring to the way circumstances in the year 2004 form into a triad of events that entwine their lives together. Her narrative is an attempt to give voice to not just herself but the lives of the two men whose stories are inseparable from her own.

In fact, Danticat's narrative arc begins in 2004, a year which conjoins her life with that of her father and uncle as already stated. Although the events are isolated ones bearing no causal connection, the fact that they all happen in the same year and that their repercussions could be felt by the entire family establish a tragi-ironic relation of sorts amongst them. 2004 happens to be the year in which Danticat conceives for the first time. Yet, it is also the year which marks the diagnosis of her father's pulmonary fibrosis—a terminal lung disease, and the detention of her uncle at the Krome Detention Centre as he flees to the US compelled by circumstances in Haiti. While her uncle's tragic fate ending ultimately in his death is unfurled only towards the end of the autobiography, the author's pregnancy and her father's illness are intertwined right from the beginning of the text. In fact, Danticat's *Brother, I'm Dying* opens with the following sentence,

> I found out I was pregnant the same day that my father's rapid weight loss and chronic shortness of breath were positively diagnosed as end-stage pulmonary fibrosis. (3)

From this interlinking of the fate of the two, the narrative unwinds to show how people and events get implicated with each other by unexpected turn of events and historical forces beyond

their control. As Danticat's and her father's lives follow their own course with neither of them playing a hand in it, news of birth and death become woven into each other. The author's inability to process these two very different bits of information received at the same time highlights the more general condition of human incapacity in the face of unwanted albeit uncontrollable circumstances. As the author writes,

> *My father was dying and I was pregnant*. Both struck me as impossibly unreal. (14)

Faced with the prospect of a new life and the parallel fear of losing someone very close and dear, she fails to comprehend the magnitude or even the 'reality' of the events.

Danticat's autobiographical narrative keeps referring and reverting to this idea of the inevitable failure of human beings in the face of fate or the forces of history which take their own due course of action. This is again made evident in the memoir when even the very simple act of calling up a family member is linked to the birthday of a political figure. The first hint of the sustained link between her immigrant father and his erstwhile homeland Haiti, that Danticat gives in her autobiography, is in the context of a telephonic conversation between him and his family that he had left behind in Haiti. The author recounts her father calling up his brother, Joseph on the birthday of Jean-Bertrand Aristide:

> It was July 15, 2004, the fifty-first birthday of Jean-Bertrand Aristide, Haiti's twice-elected and twice-deposed president…Aristide was now…in exile in South Africa. However, the residents of Bel Air…had not forgotten him…[T]hey had marched…through the Haitian capital to call for his return…[T]wo policemen had been shot. My father called my uncle, just as he always did whenever something like this was happening in Haiti. (25)

Any political disturbance or revolt conspiring in Haiti is, thus, immediately related by her father to its potential consequence for his brother. Indeed, Danticat writes about how he had always been urging her uncle Joseph to leave the politically dangerous situation in Haiti's capital Bel Air and settle in a different place. Upon diagnosis of his own terminal illness, he had wanted to ensure the safety of his brother before his death and hence, had called to try and persuade him yet again.

The maintenance of familial relations, thus, gets contextualized against the backdrop of larger events of national/historical significance to Haiti. Indeed, as Danticat's narrative unfolds, there is a parallel unfolding of the country's politically turbulent history. In depicting a family

history which had, in many ways, been inadvertently shaped by Haitian history, the author also briefly traces the volatile political legacy of her home country. There are references in the text to the changing leadership of Haiti: Paul Magloire and Daniel Fignole's rule in the 1950s, the extremely ruthless dictatorial reigns of Francois "Papa Doc" Duvalier and Jean Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier beginning in the late 1950s and ending only in 1986, and the brief period of presidency of Jean-Bertrand Aristide during the last decade of the twentieth century and beginning of the twenty-first. Interspersed in between the chapters are also references to the period of 1915 to 1934 when Haiti was under the occupation of the U.S. and the 1990s when it had once again been bombarded by U.S. interventionism in its internal affairs.

While writing about the initial days of courtship between her uncle Joseph and Tante Denise and how they had decided to settle in Bel Air, for instance, Danticat reflects on the historical significance of the place in which their house had been built:

> The hill in Bel Air on which the house was built had been the site of a famous battle between mulatto abolitionists and French colonists who'd controlled most of the island since 1697 and had imported black Africans to labor on coffee and sugar plantation as slaves. A century later, slaves and mulattoes joined together to drive the French out, and on January 1, 1804, formed the Republic of Haiti. (29)

A personal family detail like her uncle's building of a new house is, thus, linked to the nationally significant history of the formation of the Haitian Republic. Danticat continues with this depiction to write of the U.S. occupation of the country:

> [A]s World War I dawned and the French, British and Germans, who controlled Haiti's international shipping, rallied their gunboats to protect their interests, President Woodrow Wilson, whose interests included…the United Fruit Company and 40 percent of the stock of the Haitian national bank, ordered an invasion…[T]he U.S. Marines landed in Haiti in July 1915 for what would become a nineteen-year occupation. (29)

The author, here, shows how Haiti's troubled legacy could be attributed to the selfish interests of colonizing missions. Through these casual mentions of historical details within her personal narrative, then, the author implicitly manages to re-engage with socio-historical evils such as colonialism so as to critique them. By tracing back the country's political upheavals and conflicts to what had been its continual occupation by other nations, Danticat shows how the ramifications of colonialism continue to hinder erstwhile colonies even long after.

As much as the author is critical of external elements disrupting Haiti's unity and stability, she is also aware of the nation's own internal loopholes exemplified for instance in the myopic vision and lust for power that has defined much of its political leadership. While sketching the brief biographical account of her uncle in the early pages of her autobiography, Danticat mentions his idolization of Daniel Fignole, who had served as Haiti's president for a brief period of nineteen days before being deposed by Francois "Papa Doc" Duvalier, whose dictatorship proves to be personally devastating to many Haitians. By way of talking about the consequences brought about by this political transformation on the lives of individual people, she notes a series of turning points that ensue in the Danticat family in its aftermath.

Joseph Danticat, inspired by Fignole had for a while thought about entering the political mechanism of Haiti, but becomes completely disillusioned with politics after his political idol is forced into exile by the new Duvalier regime. In order to come out of his "ideological void," he decides to join church and chooses "a Baptist congregation that one of his friends belonged to" (33). Leaving aside his political ambitions, Joseph Danticat goes on to become a pastor.

It is however in the turn of events that occur in the lives of her father, Mira and the adopted daughter of her uncle and aunt, Marie Micheline that one realizes how larger political and social transformations can prove to be individually traumatic. Given the socio-historical forces beyond his control, Danticat's father has to keep changing his means of livelihood. For her father, career choices, then, are determined not always by choice but inevitable circumstances. He had to first give up his tailoring business—sewing children's shirts and selling them to different vendors—in the 1960s when "used clothes from the United States…became readily available" (49) in Haiti. Forced to take up a different occupation, he starts working as a salesman in a shoe shop. It is while working here that he becomes the victim of Duvalier's autocratic regime. Danticat, again, writes about how her father's life becomes unwillingly governed by the course of events that follow "Papa Doc" Duvalier's assumption of power:

> That period in my father's life, the early sixties, was also shadowed by much larger events. Papa Doc Duvalier…had created a countrywide militia called the Tonton Macoutes…Upon joining the Macoutes, the recruits received…an indigo denim uniform, a .38 and the privilege of doing whatever they wanted. (51)

The 'macoutes,' armed not only with their guns but with an uninhibited freedom to do "whatever they wanted," would come to the shop where Mira Danticat worked and take away

the “best shoes” without paying for them (51). Talking of the helplessness of her father, Danticat writes:

> He couldn’t protest or run after them or he might risk being shot. (51)

The author matter-of-factly comments on the irony of the situation where death became a very real possibility for ordinary Haitians like her father under the Duvalier regime.

The heavy losses incurred on account of the macoutes make the owner of the shop decide to keep cheap, duplicate copies of the real leather shoes. Whenever the macoutes came, Danticat’s father was expected to show them the cheap “three-dollar shoes” (51) in place of the real ones. While they could never make out the difference, the author recounts her father always getting “a knot in his stomach when a Macoute asked him if there were other shoes” (52). This constant fear of being shot or getting killed while working at the workshop ultimately forms the basis of his decision to emigrate to the U.S. As Danticat writes:

> In the end, it was this…worrying about being shot that started him thinking about leaving Haiti. (52)

The author, thus, shows how her own family’s immigration history is a testament to the forced, painful dimension of migration. Her parents’ decision to migrate to the U.S. is not a fond choice, then, but an existential response to the political situation in Haiti.

Similarly, Marie Micheline’s unfortunate marriage to a Macoute and the physical and emotional tortures she has to endure as a result shows how political situations can facilitate the way for individually experienced, personal tragedies to take place. Micheline had hastened her marriage to a man she knew little about after having conceived out of wedlock and been rejected by her lover and the child’s father. This marriage, however, becomes the cause of unbearable agony as the man she had married in a fit of dejection turns out to be a Macoute. Married to such a member of Duvalier’s militia who forcefully take her away to a place unbeknownst to her family, Micheline becomes prey to his psycho-sexual violence and her body the site where he could assert his powers. Her foster father, however, risking his own life, manages to rescue her from the Macoute and bring her back to her family.

Marie Micheline’s story epitomises the instances of deeply shattering individual fallouts of political expediencies which often go undocumented. Her husband Pressoir Marol’s power to unabashedly sway his violence upon her—to a large extent—comes from the political situation which endowed Macoutes with unrestricted power under all circumstances. In

reportages and depictions of the violence wreaked by them, the focus is never on these isolated, private ordeals faced by individual victims. In writing the account of her cousin Marie Micheline, Danticat tries to give voice to such unvoiced episodes and also creates a platform to critique the unethical, problematic leadership that gives rise to such individual tragedies.

Marie Micheline's subsequent fate—her untimely death again makes her an unwilling casualty of political upheavals. She had been working at her uncle's newly started church clinic when she fell victim to the violence ensued in the battle between two warring military factions. Again, in the manner of a political historian, Danticat relates the events leading up to the development of such factions within the military: the fleeing of "Baby Doc" Duvalier from Haiti to France; the consequent taking of charge by "a military junta" led by Lieutenant-General Henry Namphy; the swearing in of Leslie Manigat as new president; the reassuming of power by Lieutenant General Namphy by deposing him only to be himself ousted by his rival, General Prosper Avril; and finally the creation of hostile factions within the military—with one faction supporting Avril and the other formed of Duvalier supporters. And once again, in such detailing, the author shows how important historical dates tally with dates personally significant to their family: February 7, her uncle's birthdate, also happens to be "the official date for Haitian presidential inaugurations" as "Baby Doc's departure had taken place" on that particular date in 1986 (134).

The violence generated by the conflict between the "opposing military factions" (134) which kills Marie Micheline only worsens with time ultimately forcing Danticat's uncle Joseph to flee Bel Air, Haiti, at the age of eighty-one and seek temporary shelter in the U.S. The last few chapters of the autobiography rapidly glide over Haitian politics from the 1990s to 2004—the year with which the autobiography begins and also around which it ends. The extremely baffled state of Haiti's political scenario during this period—Jean Paul Aristide's coming to power in February, 1991 followed by his ousting in the September of the same year, his return in 1994 "accompanied by twenty thousand U.S. soldiers" (140) with the launch of Operation Uphold Democracy by then U.S. President Bill Clinton, Aristide's second overthrowing in February, 2004, the passing of the Brazil-led stabilisation mission, MINUSTAH by the United Nations Security Council—and their implications for the lives of the common people of Haiti who are forcefully drawn into the desperate state of affairs are all briefly dealt with by Danticat who gloss over these issues without in any way diminishing their political or historical significance.

In writing about these political turmoils, the author also writes about how the involvement of external forces such as the U.S. or the U.N. soldiers deployed with the intention to proffer peace only further aggravates the conflicts. She recounts what she believes must have been her uncle's reflections on the morning of October 24, 2004 when the MINUSTAH soldiers as well as the CIMOs, in the name of controlling the violence perpetrated by gang members, themselves indulged in wreaking havoc upon the common public:

> [T]he United Nations soldiers…were supposed to be protecting them. But more often it seemed as if they were attacking them while going after the chimeres, or ghosts, as the gang members were commonly called. (173)

Danticat's uncle Joseph himself becomes an indirect victim of the mayhem created by the stabilisation operation that morning. Even in the absence of any authorisation from him, the roof of his church had been used by the soldiers to fire at gang members. This leads to false rumours about his complicity in the whole affair, thereby incurring for him the wreath of gang members. With threats to his life, he is forced to make the decision to leave Haiti—something which he had been refusing all his life no matter what.

In the U. S. however, Joseph Danticat falls victim to racist immigration laws which ultimately leads to his tragic death. Unaware of any dire consequences that might befall him, he had honestly told the Customs and Border Protection (CBP) officials at the airport that he was seeking for temporary asylum. Upon this statement, he and his son Maxo—despite having valid visas and passports are held by the officials and then sent to the Krome Detention Centre. In a transcript of the interview that Danticat collects from the Bureau of Customs and Border Protection and later recounts in her memoir, one can see the lack of empathy of the interviewing officer to the plight of Joseph Danticat. To quote from the text:

> "What is your purpose in entering the United States today?" asked Officer Reyes.
> "Because a group that is causing trouble in Haiti wants to kill me," my uncle answered.
> According to the transcript, Officer Reyes did not ask for further explanation or details. (217)

The officer's asking no further details regarding the situation in Haiti that forces a citizen to seek shelter in a foreign land shows his mechanical response to Joseph Danticat's statements. Danticat's uncle's old age, his valid documents have no impact on the official.

The author's remarks regarding the illogical circumstances of her uncle's detainment shows the U.S. Immigration Department's complete apathy towards Haiti and Haitians:

> I suspect that my uncle was treated according to a biased immigration policy dating back from the early 1980s when Haitians began arriving in Florida in large numbers by boat. In Florida, where Cuban refugees are, as long as they're able to step foot on dry land, immediately processed and released to their families, Haitian asylum seekers are disproportionately detained, then deported. (222)

By thus commenting on the inherent bias in immigration policies which treats immigrants from different nations differently, Danticat further reflects:

> Was my uncle going to jail because he was Haitian? This is a question he probably asked himself. This is a question I still ask myself. Was he going to jail because he was black? (222-223)

Her autobiographical narrative shows how innocent people like her uncle Joseph fall victim to Haiti's fraught relation with the U.S.

The same lack of empathy and inhuman treatment meted out to her uncle at the Krome Detention Centre results in a deterioration of his health and ultimately brings his death. While at the Detention Centre, his medications—which included a herbal syrup as well as prescription drug for blood pressure—were taken away from him. And when during the process of the asylum interview, Danticat's uncle started vomiting and showed all symptoms of having a seizure, the registered doctor kept insisting that he was faking it. When he was admitted to Jackson Memorial Hospital where he ultimately surrendered to death, no one was allowed to meet him. As Danticat writes, "[A]ny contact with the prisoners, either by phone or in person, had to be arranged through their jailers, in my uncle's case, through Krome" (241). The author's uncle, thus, becomes the victim of unfair immigration laws and has to die an unexpected death.

In the depiction of her uncle's fate, Danticat shows the irony of the situation wherein U.S. immigration laws and policies are completely indifferent to the plight of Haiti even though its military interventions in the country are to a great extent responsible for that plight. The author in her memoir, as in many of her fictions, makes a case for more humanitarian approaches to Haiti and its socio-political conditions.

Triangular Road

Paule Marshall's *Triangular Road* draws upon a history that goes back to the African slave trade. By revisiting specific episodes from her life and in that process crediting people and places that have been formative of her as a writer and person, Marshall creates a reverse journey

that pays tribute and homage to her ancestral roots. The memoir is shaped round the motif of travel. The "triangular road" of the title is indicative of these travels and traces her journey through the United States, the Caribbean Islands, and finally Africa. The travels are as much figurative as literal: the 'triangular road' that the author traverses, becomes the occasion for reflecting upon the triangular route map of the African slave trade. Marshall's narrative journey which documents her mental as well as physical itineraries, then, keeps moving back and forth across wide geographies and temporal zones.

The memoir—shaped as a series of reflections with no chronological sequence, although thematically connected—opens in the year 1965 as a young, "fledgling of a writer" (3) Marshall is asked by the United States State Department to accompany none other than Langston Hughes on a state sponsored "month-long cultural tour of Europe" (2). The author with barely one novel and a collection of short stories to her credit then all too happily agrees and the tour goes on to become a learning experience for her in many ways. As she writes of her memories of the trip: "During those Copenhagen nights, Mr. Hughes became a kind of West African griot, a tribal elder passing down black American culture and history…"(29).

It is this role of a writer—that of functioning as a mentor and a torch-bearer "passing down" his/her knowledge to coming generations—that Marshall imbibes and tries to accomplish in her memoir. Just as Hughes by "recreating for [her] the glory days" (27) of his youth had passed on the invaluable lessons that he had gathered from his experiences and through his travels all over the world, she too, by recounting her experiences and travels in her memoir, performs that function. And just as the experiences of Hughes give her a view of history "that had been all but omitted in the standard textbooks of [her] day" (29), she too fashions her memoir as a sort of narrativization of undocumented histories.

History and travel—through which the former often manifests itself—become intricately, inextricably linked in Marshall's text. In fact, in the opening chapter itself, she recalls her decision made as a teenager and again, under the inspiration of Langston Hughes to travel extensively. Reading his travel memoir, *The Big Sea*, Marshall had been so motivated by the "travelin' man" that she had determined to follow his tracks:

> Not only would I become a writer, but a travelin' woman as well. (29)

The teenage promise made to her own self becomes a passion as the author keeps embarking on a travel that is both metaphorical as well as literal. And through these travels and the first-hand view of history that they enable, she hopes of carrying forward the struggle for Black

rights and freedom left unfinished by earlier generations. As she recalls Hughes' response to a group of young Blacks who had criticized his "lack of militancy" (20) during a lecture given at Africa House, London:

> He and his generation had done their part: marching, demonstrating, picketing….[I]t was for [the younger generation] to educate themselves and understand the complexity of a struggle that fundamentally involved people of color around the world. (21-22)

The Black struggle in America and elsewhere was a continuum with each generation putting in their contribution to it. Marshall's memoir embodies her idea of contributing to the cause of Black people: re-visiting and revising history to counter the erasure of Black people from major historical studies.

In travelling back through time and retelling, recreating the history of Black people, Marshall recognizes the primacy of different water bodies to that history. And this recognition also reflects in the text. In fact, in the "Author's Note" to her memoir, she mentions how the memoir developed from a series of lectures given in 2005 at Harvard University "on the theme of "Bodies of Water"—specific rivers, seas and oceans—and their profound impact on black history and culture throughout the Americas."

The first 'body of water' that she reflects upon in *Triangular Road* is the James River, "America's most historic river" (36) to go by her words. The ruminations—occasioned by a leisurely trip that she and her friend, Virginia make to the north bank of the river and where she encounters a group of youths rafting down the James along its south bank —take Marshall down the lanes of history to see the complicity of the James River in generating White America's massive wealth over the course of time. Speaking of the way the river bifurcated into two once it "reach[ed] the heart of downtown Richmond" (44), she writes:

> The city's downtown marks "the Falls," meaning the end of the rock-bound James, "where the water falleth so rudely and with such a violence, as not any boat can pass," and the beginning of the river's long, smooth tidal basin that is navigable all the way to historic Jamestown and the Atlantic Ocean some sixty miles downstream. (44)

Marshall continues to reflect on the way the river's characteristic co-presence of heavy current and smooth tidal waters facilitates the growth of industry and economy:

> Rough water and smooth. They lie side by side… Indeed, it was the combination of the whitewater power of the James fueling the new industries, together with the tidewater

> offering safe passage to the ships up from the Atlantic, with their chattel cargo, that made for the wealth and status the Old Dominion would enjoy for nearly two centuries. (45)

A casual holiday by the bank of the James, thus, sparks off reflections on the history of slavery, of the "chattel cargo" brought in to America via the tidewater of the James. From this observation on the part played by the James in fostering the industrial growth of the place, Marshall engages in a metaphorical travel further down the river. To quote her:

> [T]he truant part of my mind continues along what is now the tidal James, even though it knows what it will encounter there: all those wrenching landmarks—and all of them within the city limits. They begin, those landmarks, with the replacement of the notorious old Mayo's Bridge that had been the first to link the river's north and south banks. (45-46)

Marshall, thus, assuming the role of the "travelin' woman" takes her readers along a backward journey all the while pointing out and commenting on the relics of the brutal past of slavery. The "Mayo's Bridge," she informs her readers, was built for the sole purpose of facilitating the operation of the slave trade, its "nightly traffic" being the "chained and coffled" (46) slaves marched from the docks on the south bank to the town of Richmond on the north bank.

Relating how 'free muscle power' became the basis of the cultivation as well as railway industry, she again ponders:

> The Old Dominion…needed an endless supply of John Henry muscle, brawn and sweat to produce what became the cash crop of all time. Tobacco….[T]he same muscle, brawn and sweat also figured in the rail system (CSX) that soon reached from Florida to Mississippi, with its hub Olde Richmond Towne. (48-50)

Marshall's imagination, as she sits by the bank of the James River, thus, serves to bring alive the extremely inhuman and shameful past of slavery and the Atlantic slave trade which made it possible. She thinks of the utter degradation of the victims of the slave trade as they were commodified and bought, sold and exchanged as such. The author mentions how scrambles—about which "she had never…come across so much as a word" (53) in the pages of 'standard' history books—were conducted for the exchange of the 'chattel cargo':

> In a "scrambles," the chattel cargo was taken from the hold, off the boat, and herded into a fenced-in yard or pen or stockade with a locked gate. Waiting outside would be

> a crowd of eager buyers, each with a long rope…[T]he "scrambles" began, with the buyers dashing about…desperate to lasso and corral as many chattel as possible never mind…the stench, the running sores, the caked shit. (47-48)

By making her memoir a platform to highlight such ignored dimensions of the slave trade, Marshall's memoir sets about 'rectifying' what had been missing in authoritative accounts of history. Similarly, she throws light on a different view of Richmond, Virginia when she links the town to its role in the slave trade. To quote her again,

> Richmond, VA. It was the principal port of entry for Africans brought to the New World in the eighteenth century. (47)

The ruminations go on till the imaginary reverse journey through history ends at Jamestown. Interspersed in between such ponderings on history, are also reflections on her life and her time at VCU—a two-year teaching tenure at which, brings her to Virginia in the first place. The library at the university becomes the place where she starts her "private crash course in southern history" (52). The books she finds there on Early Southern History gives her a chance to "finally…redress the truncated, once-over-lightly, deliberately sanitized version of the antebellum South" (52) that is generally presented in accounts of history. Marshall comments on how conventional histories on the subject taught as part of academic courses never do justice to the extent of brutality with which that history is marred. The library, thus, helps her come out of the "educational shortchange" that she had so far been suffering from:

> At long last making up for having been educationally shortchanged. (53)

In her memoir, too, Marshall tries to dispel the myopic views of history passed down as authoritative accounts. In one instance, she mentions her coming across the "Eddict of 1808" in one of the books she discovers in the library. The Eddict, which she quotes, states the following:

> Be it enacted, by the Senate and the House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, that from and after the 1st day of January, 1808, it shall not be lawful to import into the United States from any of the kingdoms of Africa any Negro with the intent to be sold or to be held to service or labor... (53)

Marshall notes the irony of the situation where the white traders, notwithstanding the law passed, come up with alternatives to perpetuate the trading of slaves:

> The Tidewater big houses: the Shirley Plantation, the Sherwood Forest Plantation, the Flowerdew Hundred Plantation, Monticello, Mount Vernon, the Swan's Point Plantation et al. began the purposeful breeding and sale of homegrown chattel. The enterprise proved so successful that, by the mid-1800s, there was a surplus of a quarter million chattel labor and more. (54)

The author, thus, refers to the inhuman commodification of slaves whereby the very natural and human instincts of sexuality are mechanised and turned into a tool for business or commerce. Continuing with her description of the whole mechanical process by which slaves were bred and the "surplus" made another tool for profit-generation, she writes:

> The surplus was simply, periodically, herded by cart into Richmond Towne, where it was quickly sold in the Bottom ; then, as quickly, packed into the cattle cars of the CSX Railroad and into the holds of the ships at the Manchester Docks to be railroaded and shipped due south, deep south: New Orleans. The Mississippi Delta. (54)

By presenting these reflections on the breeding and selling of slaves, Marshall highlights the ways slavery functioned as an enterprise in its own right with natural geographies, modes of navigation and commercial houses all manoeuvred and made use of in its operation.

These contemplations that the river James incite in the author make way for other memories to emerge as well. Marshall remembers the time her white, Jewish editor had come to visit her and another Southern white writer named Lee Smith. What she seems to remember more specifically, however, is her sense of fury at the short-sightedness and lack of understanding displayed by the editor who was all too excited to visit the Tidewater plantations along with the other southern writer Lee. Marshall is shocked by the editor's failure to comprehend the role played by those plantations in the tragic history of Blacks. To quote from her:

> Although my editor has been impeccably educated…she was shortchanged in certain aspects of the country's history…Equally appalling is the fact that my editor is Jewish. How, I wonder, would she have reacted had I announced that I was on my way to visit Dachau or Buchenwald to pay my respects to the millions who had perished there while doing the boogaloo and snapping my fingers? (56)

The editor's behaviour is representative of the more general lack of lack of empathy towards the historical plight suffered by Black people. The very fact that the plantation houses which

are relics testifying to the brutality of the whole enterprise of slavery serve as "favourite" (ibid) tourist spots indicates this inability. That the editor's Jewish background does not in any way help her in understanding the gravity of the history the plantations are suggestive of shows not only her own short-sighted view of Black history but also the general atmosphere of negligence or unwillingness to promote better, more empathic understandings of the subject.

After recounting her meditations roused by the James River, Marshall's memoir goes on to share her reflections on the Caribbean Sea and the island of Barbados. The island and the sea again suggest how convenient natural geographies contributed to the perpetuation of the slave trade. Speaking of Barbados, the author writes:

> When the trade in chattel cargo began in earnest, diminutive Barbados was invariably the first bit of terra firma sighted on the long, grueling Atlantic run. The island was at once landfall and a safe haven, with a natural harbor along its Caribbean coastline. Thus, it was often the place where the chattel cargo—those that had somehow managed to survive the crossing—were prepared for market. (62)

Barbados with its convenient geographic location became the transit point where the "chattel" brought from the African countries via the Atlantic Ocean and the Caribbean Sea were kept for a while before they could be transhipped to various locations. As Marshall mentions:

> Barbados being, circa 1600, as important a holding pen and transshipment point as Richmond,Virginia, would become, circa 1820, owing to a surplus at the time of locally bred chattel. (61-62)

In recreating the route of the trans-Atlantic slave trade in her memoir, Marshall, thus, points out the strategic location of Barbados, whose own slave population also grew as a result of this. She notes how the country's Black people owed their origins to the Africans who were left behind to fuel the country's tobacco and sugarcane industries while the rest were traded to different places. Amongst those left behind were also the slaves who refused to succumb to the atrocities meted out to them and hence could not be sold. To quote Marshall:

> Then there were the incorrigibles, those among the consignment who somehow withstood the whipping post and the pillory, their resistance unbroken. Difficult to sell, they, too, were left behind on the little wallflower island. (63)

It is to these group of "incorrigible" slaves that Marshall would like to trace her own ancestry.

From contemplations on the historical significance of Barbados in the success of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, then, the author moves on to deliberate on her family's roots in the place. These deliberations in as much as they provide readers with biographical information regarding her life are also tributes to the people who consciously or unconsciously direct her writings and form the basis of many of the characters in her fiction. Moreover, the portrayal of the strength, resilience and complexities of these people also serves as an indirect way of modifying and rectifying a history loaded with images of Black people reduced to nothing.

Marshall's mother Adriana Viola Clement, to whom her birth had been a "grievous and permanent disappointment" (82) and with whom her relationship had never been smooth, nevertheless, turns out to be the one informing her craft. As the author writes:

> I couldn't have known it at the time, but I had my first lessons in the art and craft of writing while being forced to listen to Adriana and her friends in the kitchen at 501 Hancock. Decades later, I would christen them the "Mother Poets" and pay grateful homage to them in an article called "The Poets in the Kitchen." (89)

The gossips and conversations which her mother had amongst her Bajan friends—women from Barbados who had all immigrated to America—become the basis of Marshall's own craft. In their everyday apparently mundane tasks and talks, she realises, there was beauty and poetry.

Similarly, Marshall's grandmother M'Da-duh, whom she meets only once at the age of seven when Adriana along with the children are called by the former to Barbados, remains a lasting inspiration in her writings. In her words:

> Decades later, still taken with her authority, I would write a story about her and her island world. Indeed, she appears, in one guise or another, in every book I've written. (70)

M'Da-duh was the matriarch who with her financial acumen had put to good use the "Panama Money" sent to her by her eldest son, Joseph Fitzroy Clement. In noting her grandmother's proper use of that money, Marshall provides another bit of historical information—the building of the Panama Canal and the exploitative use of Black labour in it. Talking of the inhuman conditions in which workers like her maternal uncle Joseph Clement had worked, she writes:

> [T]he legion of young men from the islands…work(ed) from the time God's sun rose till it set, hacking away at the near-impenetrable jungle, draining the huge pestilential swamps, carving a waterway to link the two great oceans. A hellhole of mud, torrential

> rains and brutal sun, with temperatures at 120 degrees well before noon. Close to 5,000 would die over the course of the construction. Malaria. Yellow fever. Bubonic plague. (66)

In the hope of making money, many young men from Barbados had gone to work in the construction of the Panama Canal in 1905. While they did manage to make some money, many had to surrender their lives to the extremely unbearable weather and environmental conditions which made the site of construction a breeding ground of diseases. While the Panama Canal is seen as a significant achievement of human history, the exploitation of human labour that went into its making is often ignored.

In *Triangular Road*, Marshall mentions how the islands of West Indies provided her the most comfortable spaces to work on her writing projects as the cost of living there happened to be much lesser there than anywhere else. As she writes, "I kept returning to the West Indies as simply the best and cheapest place to get the writing done" (122). These travels that she makes—first to the island of Barbados in order to work on her manuscript of *Brownstones, Browngirls* and next to Grenada while working on a new historical novel she was attempting to write—also offer her the chance to reconnect with her ancestral roots. While in Grenada, the author gets a chance to visit Carriacou where she witnesses a collective dance performance celebrating the African roots of the performers:

> Each time the old men drumming announced the theme of a particular "nation," the women who claimed it as theirs swept onto the dusty circle…Led by the elders…the group repeatedly toured the circle—dancing. They sang, hailing in patois the "nation" to which they traced their lineage while their bare feet spelled it out in a dusty calligraphy on the ground. (144)

The Black community in Carriacou had, over the centuries, attempted to retain their African ties by claiming origin to specific nations from Africa. Severed from their nations centuries back, the Black people there had still held on to their roots by such ritualistic performances. The festival shows how the Black community has utilised the power of oral tradition and cultural memory as a way of preserving their lineage.

Marshall, thus, anchors her memoir on the history of Black people in America and the West Indies—a history whose making has been intrinsically related to natural geographies. The author, by recounting her travels to the specific sites, locations and routes via which the slave

trade operated and flourished, offers insights into a gruesome past. At the same time, she also shows how autobiography, when it depicts individual stories that can only be understood as part of a long historical continuum, offers the scope of merging the genres of history and autobiography.

My Soul Looks Back

Jessica B. Harris' *My Soul Looks Back* documents the period of the 1970s—a period of tremendous boom so far as Black intellectual and cultural life was concerned. Her autobiography, anchored in the memories of her encounters and friendships with some of the greatest figures of Black America—James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou amongst many more—serves as a historical recording of the 1970s intellectual/cultural/literary scene of Black America mirrored through her personal lens. Like the other autobiographies discussed in this chapter, Harris' narrative, too, offers history in hindsight—the author's retrospective inspection of a burgeoning period of Black American literary and cultural achievements. Instead of African Americans, the term Blacks will be used in the context of Harris writing as she includes her Caribbean friends and acquaintances as well. In her depiction of that period, she also renders an 'impersonal' history 'personal'—bringing to life vignettes of the private lives of people considered celebrities and icons in their respective fields. Through a portrayal of her life vis-a-vis the lives of the luminaries she discusses from an insider's perspective, then, the author manages to create a narrative that attempts to re-examine her own life for sure but also provides access to a very intimate, private world of friendships, conversations and parties shared by these public figures.

As a book reviewer for New York magazines, Harris got to meet a lot of writers and publishers who were becoming successful, at parties publishers hosted "where authors mingled with editors" (39). She writes that "Random House and Doubleday were two of my favorite stops":

> The gatherings were filled with those that Zora Neale Hurston had baptized the "niggerati" decades earlier….I was a regular invitee because Black books were being published. The books and the book parties seemed to indicate just how much progress was being made—at least in getting the word out. (40)

Harris not only points to the earlier writers like Hurston who was part of the Harlem Renaissance but draws a connection between those writers and her contemporaries or seniors

who had established themselves and who would continue to produce their work for a long time like Toni Morrison and Maya Angelou. Baldwin died in 1987.

Harris mentions how she had developed a friendship with the publishing houses who gave her copies of all their books. They also persuaded her to interview new writers and that is how she got the chance to interview Alex Haley for his *Roots*.

For the most part of the narrative, Harris' point of view remains that of an erudite yet enthusiastic participant, in events she feels too privileged to be part of. Her access to those events is gained primarily through her then lover, Samuel Clemens Floyd, a colleague at Queens College, Albans where she worked and who happened to be fifteen years her senior. Harris, whose voracious reading habit had led her to work as 'book review editor' at Black publications such as Encore and Essence, had already been in personal terms with the calibre of writers like Toni Morrison whom she had met at Random House. As Harris writes speaking of the contribution of the publishing house to her professional growth:

> [T]hat building on East Fiftieth Street treated me to an even greater treasure: a fledgling friendship with Toni Morrison. She was still working as an editor at Random House but was clearly an heir apparent to Baldwin's throne. (40)

The friendship with Morrison educates the young Harris regarding the nuances of the literary world, so much so that the former becomes "an unspoken big sister/semimentor" (40-41) for her. She writes that "At one point, she even asked me to read the French translation of *The Bluest Eye* to make sure that they'd gotten the nuances. I was much honored and did so" (42). This shows a respect on Morrison's part for Harris' command of the French language as well as a sensitive reader of fiction. What Harris does not mention at this point is the close friendship and mutual respect between Morrison and Baldwin, which she sees in Paris.

Harris notes Toni Morrison's efforts to shape Black writers and their writing not only as editor at Random House but also in her own time:

> Masked behind her true name, "Chloe" Morrison…she mentored writers young and old and worked to form the vision of much that is the Black literary canon of the period, introducing writers like Gayl Jones and Henry Dumas, spearheading works by Toni Cade Bambara and Lucille Clifton, and…Rudy Lombard. (40)

Each of these writers she helped became famous later on. Harris' autobiography records periods/moments from her life alongside simultaneous developments in some public area like

Black Writing. In fact, because of her own love of reading and her work as a reviewer of books, she continues to acquaint herself and report on developments in Black writing from time to time.

Harris writes about herself as a person on the fringe of a lot of things: "I was a conundrum, a pile of insecurities about not being Black enough or pretty enough or anything enough: too light to be dark and too dark to be light" (43). She came from a middle-class family without financial want like some of the other struggling African Americans she met. She could not identify with particular groups because of a feeling that she might be considered not one of them. This brings to mind Toni Morrison's *Paradise* where lighter skinned Black people were considered outsiders. Accepting that "color counted," Harris notes that she tried to look like one of the more visible African Americans:

> I had my thick but fine hair whipped up into an Afro and wore aviator glasses in the style of Angela Davis. Inside, I still had the little "bourgie" girl from Queens who wanted desperately to belong with the in crowd—who was at odds with the socially aware SEEK Program teacher who wanted to fit in with colleagues, and who was dueling with the newly emerging international sophisticate. (ibid)

On one hand, she was a college teacher with exposure to European schools. She had studied French in Paris and had returned to the U.S.A. to build her career as a teacher and literary critic. That is where she met Sam. On the other hand, she was the only child of caring, protective parents who wanted to her to get married and settle down. For all her exposure to interesting people and places, Harris writes of her yearning to be one of the swinging crowd of brilliant artists, academics and musicians in New York.

Through her friendship with her colleague Sam Floyd, she gets to know Durham in North Carolina, as it was his home. Visiting with Sam, she notes:

> Like all other southern cities of the period, Durham was segregated; Blacks lived in the south and southeastern quadrants of the city in an area known as Little Hayti (pronounced Hay-tie in an erudite if mispronounced reference to the hemisphere's first Black republic). But Durham was different. (46)

Despite the segregation, Durham was a significant place for Blacks:

> From the turn of the twentieth century onward, Durham had a unique place in the history of Black America because it was, in the words of no less than W.E.B. DuBois, "the business Mecca of the South." (ibid)

Durham had thousands of prosperous Black people making it the "incubator for Black success" known as "a southern Black bastion of aspiration and attainment…an incubator for business" (ibid). She sees the contradiction; the segregation and the success of the Black community:

> Parrish Street, Black Durham's main drag, boasted a section of Black-owned banks, insurance companies, and other businesses. There were a Black-owned hotel, two theaters, and numerous restaurants, clothing stores, and other businesses. It was known as the Black Wall Street. (ibid)

Even as she saw the city, she got to see another part of her friend and his background—his family, the church, the college and the numerous joints he frequented as a young man. Harris sums up her trip to Durham as an adventure and a gift.

Harris' associations with the literary/cultural/intellectual world of the Black America of the time were, however, primarily forged as a result of her relationship with Sam. She recounts his close relationship to literary luminaries like Baldwin:

> [B]eing with Sam was being with someone who was a major part of a twentieth-century literary court: that of James Baldwin. Their proximity as neighbors had led to Sam becoming…one of Baldwin's "closest and most trusted friends." If Jimmy, as I learned to call Baldwin, was the sun king…around whom the court revolved, Sam was…its master of the revels and depended on by all of the members. (48)

This intimate association with Baldwin gives the author an access to his personal life and the opportunity to know him as a human being beyond his known public profile as a famous literary figure. Finding entry into his personal world, Baldwin becomes Jimmy for her. Harris also offers some personal details regarding him in her autobiography, such as his unsuccessful desire to enter into a relationship with economist Mary Painter. Her autobiography, thus, becomes an occasion to provide readers with less known aspects of the heroes—literary, cultural or otherwise—they look up to. Talking about Baldwin's relation to Painter, she writes:

> Mary had met Baldwin in 1950…She became his rock and often his salvation, and the woman he truly loved. He'd even dedicated Another Country to her…Baldwin once said of her, "When I realized I couldn't marry Mary Painter, I realized I could marry no one." (70-71)

In her autobiography, then, Harris takes on the role of a biographer of revered public figures, detailing before readers the very human dimensions—fragilities, frustrations, love etc.—that lie beneath the façade of fame. In doing so, she offers a more humanized version of Baldwin, the king or magnate of Black American literature. Other information regarding his personal life such as his rootedness to family is also provided. To quote Harris again:

> Mother Baldwin's home was special and seen only by the intimate inner circle. There, Jimmy was comfortable in the heart of his family. Fame often distances "golden ones" from friends and family. That was not the case with Baldwin; he was blessed. His family remained a family, and he was treated as another member, albeit a famous one, within the circle. (80)

As a young woman getting a chance to see some of the most intimate details of iconic figures such as Baldwin, the author seems awestruck by the ordinary humanity of these personalities.

Harris' relationship with Sam Floyd also introduces her to a wider network of intellectuals and intellectual discussion. It is through him that she comes to know personally some of the prominent names featuring in the literary field of the time: Maya Angelou, Paule Marshall, Rosa Guy, Louise Meriwether etc. Again, in her depictions of the friendships they shared amongst themselves, their intellectual and personal discussions, Harris gives us the views of an insider privy to details not known to many. In her words:

> Rosa and Louise were friends of Sam's and intimates of Maya's. (In fact, Maya had roomed with Rosa on her arrival in New York.) In my mind, they formed a triumvirate with Paule Marshall, another pivotal member of the group. If Louise and Rosa were accessible, Brooklyn born Paule Marshall was more of a cipher. (63)

Harris mentions Paule Marshall's Barbadian roots although she had grown up in Brooklyn. Marshall's first book *Brown Girl, Brownstones* was significant to Harris because it deals with the immigration experience in America. According to Harris: "She wrote about her life on the hyphen between American and West Indian and was one of the first to talk of the challenges

facing those who arrived from the Caribbean" (ibid). Marshall was one of the earliest writers to address that problem in her writing and Harris records that fact.

Harris' rendering of such social and intellectual networking amongst these writers help see the Black literary community in terms of a closely knit group sharing ideas, perceptions and together shaping the literary scene of the latter half of the twentieth century so far as Black literature was concerned. Talking of Sam's role she recalls: "Our love of language and literature resulted in long conversations about everything from the denizens of the Harlem Renaissance, whom Sam had known, to chats about the latest books that were coming out" (56). Looking back to the years 1973, 1974 and 1976, she writes:

> In 1973, we compared notes on *In Love and Trouble* by Alice Walker and *Sula*…by Toni Morrison….1974 saw Angela Davis's autobiography, Maya Angelou's *Gather Together in My Name,* and *If Beale Street Could Talk,* by Baldwin himself. By 1976, there was a tidal wave of work, including Alice Walker's *Meridian* and *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas*, the third instalment in Angelou's autobiographical saga…. Then there was the publishing juggernaut that was *Roots*: *The Saga of an American Family*. (ibid)

In her retrospective accounts of these social transactions amongst major literary figures, her autobiography becomes a history of some of the most formative years of Black American literature, albeit one that looks at the period not with the distanced parlance of scholarly investigation but with the emotionally charged language of a person who has been a participant in the unfolding of that history.

In a continuation of her deliberations on the intimate circle of these writers, she further writes:

> This…was the way of their world: profound conversations about all aspects of life, heart-felt rage tempered by equally intense laughter…It was a time of life lived fully, deeply…[B]ut always underneath it all, there was the heartbeat of work and writing and speaking and teaching and all of the daily madness of life. (75)

Harris' autobiography, thus, recreates the private world of major literary figures—otherwise mostly thought of in isolation—in their relation to each other and in the contributions they make to each other's growth as writers and intellectuals.

My Soul Looks Back is, however, not just limited to the 1970s literary scene of New York City. It evokes how the cultural and literary worlds morphed into each other. The writer,

for instance, recounts how Mikell's—a jazz club in New York's Upper West Side zone—served as a regular venue where Baldwin socialised with his circle of friends and acquaintances. As one of the leading jazz clubs, it happened to be the place where many well-known musicians and bands performed. But it was also the place which served as a meeting point where all sorts of intellectual discussions concerning Black life was held. In the memoir, Harris recounts:

> Mikell's was a literary as well as a musical landmark. Journalists and those whom they were covering, as well as literary lights, all met up at Mikell's, including Charlayne Hunter-Gault, Novella Nelson, Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor, and Jayne Cortez. Jimmy and his world also made this spot their spot. In so doing, they made it a cultural epicenter of Black New York life. (86)

Mikell's offered the space where leading figures from different areas met and hence, where convergence and confluence of different ideas took place. The club, therefore, turned into a place where the future of Black America was discussed, deliberated and given shape. Harris, continuing with her emphasis on the significance of the place, writes:

> In the 1970s, Mikell's was the special hub of that world, where to cross the threshold was to know that something important was going on, something new was being created…The place had a sense of possibility that was palpable. It was a spot where the world was debated and re-created nightly. (87)

During the 1970s, the Black literary-cultural field was speedily evolving and the coming up of spaces like Mikell's was a part of this evolution. It presented a place, a space, a mentality and a mood for bright Black people to interact and enjoy themselves.

Like the changes in the cultural landscape, the residential areas, occupied by Blacks in New York were also changing. Greenwich Village which had been popular amongst "writers, artists, dancers, actors, and others who toiled at the impecunious end of fame's equation" was soon becoming too expensive. According to Harris, this gentrifying resulted in people moving to other locations with cheaper rent— "the East Village and Alphabet City" or "the Upper West Side" (83). A new class of Black intellectuals and artists coming from different parts of the U.S.A. and the Caribbean had to be accommodated in New York and there was a demand for better and more housing spaces. Even as things were improving for some sections of the Black community, the contrasts remained:

> [T]ownhouses were being renovated and apartments slowly being turned into co-ops or condos. The apartments were grand, and the brownstones were bastions of nineteenth-century glory. However, around many corners, drug addicts, welfare hotels, and appalling schools still lurked. (82)

Harris notes the changes in other areas as the old residential buildings were pulled down to be replaced by new buildings. She recalls some of the early localities:

> Blacks had traditionally lived in San Juan Hill, the area south of Sixtyseventh Street, since the turn of the twentieth century. It was demolished in the late 1950s to make way for the construction of Lincoln Center. The…former old-line tenements with their cramped rooms and their fire escapes did their last public duty before demolition as the sets for the movie West Side Story. (ibid)

Both the city of New York and the Black people who had made the city their home, were 'in transition,' old landmarks giving way to new and within the same place, new buildings replacing old ones.

Harris notes how this demand for change in infrastructure is also reflected in the new housing projects that catered to the needs of the new gentry—formed mostly of different artists, writers, editors of emerging publishing houses etc. The memoir documents the construction of "Park West Village" which became a "West Side mecca for many of the Black intelligentsia" (ibid) with writers like Angelou, Rosa Guy, Louise Meriwether, and Paule Marshall having their apartments in it. As the author mentions, Park West Village was part of an emerging "West Side hub that attracted many other African American artists and writers to the neighbourhood" (ibid). These artists and writers included singer Harry Belafonte, actor Morgan Freeman, editors in chief of Essence, Marcia Ann Gillespie and Susan Taylor amongst others.

In her memoir, Harris also brings alive a culinary culture that was rapidly evolving with inputs from different cuisines of the world. She writes that Sam taught her "how to love cooking and to entertain lavishly" (54). She gives credit for her later interest in food and cooking completely to him:

> Sam fine-tuned my entertaining skills. I'd certainly cut my teeth on my mother's parties of my youth, and I had inherited her flair for the dramatic along with my father's love of spectacle, so I had a lot going for me. Sam, however, cultivated my cooking skills and saddled me for the rest of my life with the shopping habits…. (ibid)

Harris refers to the interest and vitality that Sam brought to cooking as to everything else:

> Sam was never happier than when puttering around in the kitchen preparing some elaborate feast that he'd devised in his head. A gourmet and gourmand, he'd plan a menu, shop for the best ingredients, and serve it proudly to friends. (ibid)

Their mutual interest in food took their friendship further:

> So we bonded over cooking and cooked together, and even though we lived in apartments several blocks apart, it seemed as though there was one larder and certainly one set of cooking equipment. Our batteries de cuisine cohabited even if we didn't. (55)

Apart from serving food to their friends, this training helped her to take an interest in the food served in different places. Food became a topic of research in addition to being a means over which people connected and bonded. The author's own "developing love of food" (71) and her "burgeoning work in the area of food and culture" (64) is indicative of this interest in food or culinary habits as another area of interest. Her travels across the African diaspora researching on its diverse food items and habits and how they have influenced cuisines all over the world become the basis of her cookbook *Iron Pots and Wooden Spoons: Africa's Gifts to New World Cooking.*

Harris' memoir, thus, brings to the fore the Black America of the 1970s—a period of huge growth and change in virtually every aspect of Black life. It was during that time that Americans became aware of what turned out to be a dreaded disease—AIDS. Gradually as people became infected and died, Harris' circle of friends had to live with that shock. Harris' earlier lover and long-time friend, Sam was infected by AIDS and after his death they became aware of the fact that he had been secretly gay. Maya Angelou flies over to New York to mourn with Harris the loss of their dear friend. Soon other known and unknown gay figures from their circle died of AIDS, making everybody conscious not only of the disease but also of the shadow of mortality.

Harris continued with her life and gradually her friendship with Maya Angelou became stronger till the latter's death. This memoir also touches the lives of numerous other writers like Rosa Guy, Paule Marshall, Louise Merriweather to name a few. Before Maya Angelou rose in stature the scene was dominated by Toni Morrison and James Baldwin. Harris provides the chance to see and understand Black literature, culture and even architecture of the time as part of a common enterprise of intellectual growth and expansion. Told from the perspective

of a young person who has been a participant in this change and who has lived to see the implications of these developments for the future, Harris' memoir offers unique access to the private lives of some of the people instrumental in bringing about that change and also the opportunity to understand literary history in relation to the larger socio-cultural history.

To conclude, this chapter has tried to show how autobiography's ability to merge the private with the public is manipulated by the writers under question to incorporate larger historical concerns into their autobiographical narratives. They defy received histories and by evoking in their autobiographies the complex socio-political/cultural factors that go into making those histories offer a better and more nuanced understanding. Their autobiographical texts become a medium of self-presentation that no longer remains obsessed with the self but that seeks to elevate the Black race as a whole by representing larger public issues. By offering their own versions of the histories they discuss, the chosen authors resist myopic understandings of Black life. Resisting received histories, in this regard, becomes a means of challenging stereotypical representations of Blacks and of forging their entry into major epistemologies like the writing of history for posterity.