

**WRITING, RECOVERY AND RESISTANCE IN BLACK
AMERICAN WOMEN'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY**

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CONCLUSION

This dissertation traces the evolution of Black American women's autobiography from being narratives of resistance—albeit in different modes and patterns—to being narratives that endorse and vouch for repairing rather than resisting the torn social fabric of America. In placing the texts under scrutiny in a temporal frame that extends from Hurston's *Dust Tracks* to Harris' *The Truths We Hold*, we highlight the shifts and changes that have come to mark the field of Black American women's autobiography even as we show how this distinctive genre has continued to shape itself in terms of a continuum and a tradition. Moreover, the charting of a narrative trajectory that takes into its corpus some very recent works—published within the last few years with the autobiographers still alive and engaged in their respective fields—gives this dissertation the scope and opportunity to fill the gap in existing studies so far as works on contemporary Black American women are concerned.

Autobiography—a genre that allows the writer to express her own subjective experiences as well as present an 'objective' external reality—continues to be employed, manipulated, and maneuvered by Black American women as they carry on their struggles against different manifestations of power. As structures and modes via which power operates and asserts itself change, so do autobiographical forms undergo change. New patterns of life-writing emerge that not only give voice to stories of domination or resistance to domination, but put forth more encouraging narratives of self-growth as well as community empowerment.

Chapter 2 shows that autobiographers consciously manipulate language and infuse meaning to what is directly stated as well as to what remains unexpressed or muted. In so doing, they transform the understanding of silence as manifestations of oppression/victimization to seeing it as an active and agentive, albeit subtle form of resistance. Wilful, deliberate employment of silence offers the autobiographers the scope to change general perspectives of Black identity as circumscribed within and therefore, preoccupied with White domination. Instead, they refrain from projecting a victimized Black identity to present a self that is dignified, composed and resilient.

Hurston in her work presents a Black woman trying to make the most out of an unjust world by not letting bitterness get the better of her. She is able to come to an unbiased understanding of the socio-historical factors contributing to the discrimination and pain for herself and other Blacks. Such an approach towards history equips her with

the foresight that a one-sided view of events—rendering one’s own party entirely free of guilt while putting all responsibilities on the other—only serves to perpetuate trauma. She tries to avoid presenting Blacks as psychologically damaged creatures obsessed with their White counterparts. To this end, she promotes a philosophy which urges for the right to work towards individual achievement as a way of fostering the growth of the Black race as a whole.

Anderson incorporates into her text implicit critiques of the way American racism affected her career. Apart from one chapter of her autobiography, “Shock,” where she speaks directly and primarily of race, she does not allot much space to such discussions. Her first real encounter with racist prejudice comes when she is refused admission to a music school because of her colour. Anderson talks about the Jim Crow laws which forced Black people to travel in segregated coaches of trains. However, even in these deliberations, though she mentions her hurt feelings, she refrains from showing any outright hatred or anger. In fact, she rounds off her discussions on racism with an insistence on how it reflected the mindset or attitudes of only a section of the people and how Americans were capable of rising above all such differences in times of crises.

Without directly addressing the injustices of racially divided society, both writers offer oblique critiques of the discrimination around them. They also refuse to accept the whole of White American society as narrow and self-serving and present White people who were kind and genuinely supportive of Black people. That being said, both Hurston and Anderson emerge as proud representatives of the African American community through their writing.

Chapter 3 examines the autobiographies of Black American women activists and shows how systemic racism is structured into the American policing and punishment system. This chapter shows that participation in resistant activities has not been a choice but a response to a painfully realised call for action. As the autobiographies narrate, radical action in the face of social injustices seemed to offer hopes for positive alterations in the socio-political fabric. However, while their activism transformed them from passive victims into harbingers of change, it also exposed them to further violence and pain. It is through this cyclical frame in which we have placed traumatic social inequities and resistant political action that the texts under scrutiny have been approached or analysed.

All the texts vouch for the fact that the cycle can be disrupted or brought to an end only when the social structure is ‘permanently’ changed for the better.

Beals’ memoir by focusing on her childhood experiences brings out her plight as a child playing an important role in the integration of students in the South. At the same time, it offers a critique of the racism in White society which chose to target a small child. Davis refers to the plight of being criminalised because of her colour and her subsequent prison experiences where she notices that most of the felons are Blacks. These experiences suggest the triggers behind her coming to political consciousness. This chapter however, limits its study of the text to the way it highlights how prison apparatuses engage in depriving inmates of their subjectivity and agency. Shakur’s autobiography focuses on the ways personal experiences incite processes of politicisation and involvement in radical action. She puts on record the psychological torture which was a potent mechanism in the hands of the prison authorities. American law and the judiciary, however, apparently remain blind to the gross human rights violations that solitary confinement represents. When Evelyn, Shakur’s lawyer, files a petition against the mental handicap that it induced on her client, she is required to back it up with “psychological data” and expert opinions. Prison memoirs like that of Shakur’s, then, document the process of re-traumatisation of activists who had sought to heal the collective social trauma of living in an unjust world order through their radical activism. Brown’s experience draws attention to the fact that women despite enjoying power are not given the same respect as men in political circles. Brown’s *A Taste of Power*, thus, shows the psychological effects of power or the lack of it within the context of the larger Black Movement. Unlike the other authors discussed here whose struggles were with the outside White world and whose activism-generated trauma ensued from their confrontation with repressive state machineries, Brown’s psychological equilibrium is troubled and tested not just by outsiders but by the power equations at play in her own party

Chapter 4 discusses unconventional autobiographical practices employed by the Black American women writers. It shows that the writers in their complex strategies of representation of the self, consciously dither from conforming to generic conventions and create subject positions which challenge the normative ‘I’ of autobiography. This chapter, thus, sees the radical, autobiographical “I” adopted by these writers as a consciously chosen position of political intervention. Countering the White woman’s projection of selfhood and subjectivity in life writing during the latter half of the twentieth century, they

create new templates of expression for the Black woman writer. The authority of the subject over her textual universe is affirmed even as they play with any uncritical, monolithic understanding of the subject as static or fixed. In recognition of the fluidity of identity markers, they distort the generic assumptions of autobiography and facilitate an understanding of multiple subject positionings as indicative of the varied and variegated experiences of Black American women. They create new spaces via their autobiographies from which to forge their entry into the restricted domain of meaning creation and interpretation.

Angelou, by giving voice to her experience of being raped by a Black man, not only documents the psychosexual abuse of young Black girls but also deflates any notion of an Edenic Black community rooted in unity. The explicit discussion of her rape by the adult author, together with the presentation of the child's voice trying to empathise with her rapist, creates a radical narrative template for self-narration. On the one hand, by presenting the 'event' in this manner Angelou develops a narrative frame with which to deal with a black girl child's sexual trauma. On the other hand, she foregrounds a unique gender dynamics in the Black community that allowed such gross violations of Black children's bodies by members of that community. Audre Lorde sets new parameters for Black lesbian autobiography. By calling her narrative a biomythography, she makes clear her intentions of breaking new ground which she does successfully. Walker shows that autobiographical writing need not necessarily equate self-inscription with the telling of one's life. In several texts autobiographical writing is created by way of a unique mode of criticism or personal reflection. In other words, what looks like a personal essay or reflection or a piece of criticism turns out, on closer analysis, to be a form of experimental autobiographical writing. Bell hooks shows that memory is not only unreliable but also context-dependent. Autobiography as an act of memory can lead to the 're-creation' rather than a passive 'recollection' of experience. hooks, therefore, instead of assuming an undeterred autobiographical "I" as the narrative voice that is tasked with recalling life events, distances the 'remembering' self from the 'remembered' self by presenting the latter in the third person. The chapter shows that for professional writers, autobiography can be a narrative space for generation of meaning.

Chapter 5 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.

Maya Angelou's *All God's Children* shows how personal narrative can be intertwined with public history and travel narrative. Her work shows how several layers of history can be embedded in an individual's life history. Danticat's *Brother, I'm Dying* shows that autobiography can have as its central unit the biography of someone dear. Paule Marshall in *Triangular Road* contends that Black autobiography cannot ignore the history of slavery in the background. While narrating her life and travels, she chooses three locations connected with slavery as major anchors in her triangular journey. Jessica Harris offers the immediate history of a group of Black writers, artists and musicians during the sixties and seventies in America, as she narrates her life story. All four authors affirm the importance of different kinds of history through their narratives.

Chapter 6 shows how contemporary Black American women, who have managed to rise to top public positions integrate real life experiences into a forward looking narrative even as they continue to look back to their origins and recognize the reality of racism and sexism. The authors examined in the chapter have all been part of the US administrative machinery—the maker and breaker of the American ideal—and as women with the capacity to bring in change and influence, they have invested in a politics of hope. Although as Black women, they know and accept that their journeys have not been easy and that they form a minority, they consciously reject hatred or identity politics to embody a new mode of resistance—one that seeks to overcome inequities by building 'affective' networks and communities. By emphasising "affect" or 'love' as the framework through which to engage in this new politics, they picture a global society where differences are transcended in the process of forming heterogeneous communities.

Michelle Obama, Susan Rice and Kamala Harris affirm their commitment to society and the American people, especially the African Americans through their affiliative practices of communicating, caring, energising and empowering the communities around them.

As a whole, reordering life in the autobiographies—memories, experiences, interpretations and influence of events—allows these women to integrate politics to possibilities and not allow the past to irreversibly dominate their action, character and thought. If they saw the power of hatred, they also saw how it was important not to play on hatred but build on hope and trust to take lives and the nation forward. These are neither stories of shallow optimism nor of escape and ambiguity. What informs these life writing texts is a sense of reparation that is possible only in a country that sees itself as a vast network of affective communities.

The autobiographies and memoirs cover the whole range of women's narratives from struggling to articulate and define themselves to reaching out to people through bonds of affiliation and community.

This dissertation ends with the call for engaging with new relational possibilities and fluid identity categories in Black American Autobiography, especially of the 21st century. While most existing studies see Black American women's autobiography as embodiments of resistance—as a way of writing back to power structures that have denied them their authority—this dissertation recognizes Black women's journey from 'writing back' to 'writing forward.' Each of the five chapters that follow the frame of the dissertation has sought to problematise and offer some novel critical insight on the different modes and strategies of understanding and narrativizing the self adopted by Black American women traversing different socio-temporal planes. In *The Chicken Chronicles*, for instance, Alice Walker, speaks for different 'marginalized selves' by designing new templates of life-writing that are devoid of direct and exclusive self-narration. Similarly, bell hooks shows how the autobiographical persona keeps changing its grammatical person (the speaking 'I') in order to challenge the referential function that defines the self. In sum, the autobiography of black women increasingly and self-consciously seeks to separate 'lived' selves from examined selves by inserting 'imagined' selves in a dialogic format. What is important is the ability of this body of

life-writing to liberate itself from its putative historical burdens and invariable racial referents.

Social networking sites and the emerging obsession with ‘vlog culture’ offers interesting and easily accessible means of moulding, manoeuvring and manipulating identity, perhaps in ways that are not possible in traditional autobiography. As technology opens up avenues for more and more Black American women to not only inscribe their selves but to reach out to a wider world community within instants, it would be an interesting area of study to see how the ‘resistance to reparation’ trajectory that we charted in this dissertation applies to such evolving narratives. This study does not include emerging modes of digital self-representation in its corpus. The insights gained from the work, however, can provide avenues of entry into projects that study the complexities of understanding Black American women’s identity in a world driven by technology. The evolution of autobiography as a genre has changed the way Black American women write lives.