

ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines Black American (African American and Caribbean American) women's life writing from the middle of the twentieth century to the present. Early African American women found it difficult to articulate their thoughts about themselves in the sense that they were made to see themselves as the majority White American mainstream saw them. Their own consciousness and experience were not the same as that of White women, nor could they adopt the frames used by the latter to write about themselves. Black women's roles were different and their consciousness of gender differed from that of White women. Given this kind of background early writers of memoirs consciously avoided alluding to the rabid racism around them and resorted to strategic silences where possible or prudent. Gradually the writers became more forthcoming and experimental in the writing of their autobiographies/memoirs. The different chapters in this dissertation map some of the writing strategies and the types of life writing that Black American women have produced over the years ranging from recognition to resistance to recovery.

Chapter 1 offers a critical frame for examination of the different kinds of life writing, especially Black American women's autobiographies. It looks at the types of life writing, the different formats and the experiments in the genre over the years. It looks at the narrative strategies, the types of communication, the elements of fiction, the framework of race and gender which is a constant in reading their autobiographies/memoirs. It also looks at the incorporation of different kinds of history and public discourse in Black American women's life writing as individual writers set out to define themselves and present their lives to the readers.

Chapter 2 examines the narratives of Zora Neale Hurston and Marian Anderson with their silences and strategic turning away from the politically volatile subjects. They were no doubt looking to connect with White as well as Black readers, both female and male. At the same time the cryptic gaps or silences mark their conscious approach to writing as a means of self-discovery and a reaching out to others.

Chapter 3 examines the narratives of women activists who had to fight their way through a hostile world of prison and purgatory, as they experienced systemic racism and gender bias, pointing towards abuse. The physical and psychological harassment that these political women—Beals, Davis, Shakur and Brown—underwent throws light on some of the darkness in the legal and political system of America. Their narratives bring out the

tenacity of their resistance underlying the dark moments of their trauma and pain that they can barely write about, as they find themselves from time to time in the grip of a dominant patriarchal and racist system.

Chapter 4 examines the autobiographies/memoirs of professional writers who experiment and push back the frames as they discover newer and alternative forms of representation/self-narration at the same time. This chapter shows how Maya Angelou, Audre Lorde, Alice Walker and bell hooks creatively try to write and define their selves in narratives contesting accepted conventions of autobiography.

Chapter 5 examines the rooting of life history in social history and history of the distant past. The chapter shows how Maya Angelou, Paule Marshall, Edwidge Danticat and Jessica Harris narrate the history of the Middle Passage, of the slave trade in particular locations, the imprisonment of undocumented migrants in The U.S.A. and the rich literary and social history of the sixties and seventies of the twentieth century when art and literature flourished only to be shadowed by the reality of little-known AIDS which killed many. The autobiographies bring out the layers of cultural and historical significance that individuals and communities have to negotiate in their lives.

Chapter 6 examines the autobiographies of women who have moved beyond resistance towards recovery and building of affective communities. The writers of the narratives in this chapter lead important lives but reach out to connect with the people of middle and lower classes around them. Michelle Obama, Susan Rice and Kamala Harris represent successful American women yet faithfully represent the Black communities they grew up in. Their writing resonates with empathy, enabling and community empowerment and generally signals the spirit of wellbeing power and kindness could spread amongst the people.

As a whole, the thesis shows the range of Black American women's autobiography where, despite race and gender remaining constant, class is presented as a moving factor for women wishing to compete with men, Black and mostly White. From struggling to define and place themselves in their memoirs/autobiographies, Black American women's life writing had come a long way, in keeping with the advances in other areas. The literary artists and thinkers have left their mark on the genre just as the political activists did through their documentation of personal pain and resistance against a background of prejudice and systemic cruelty. The power women in the present are seen shaping policy

and implementing projects for a better world. No longer speaking for their community of Black women, their voices reach out to the world in general and America in particular.