INTRODUCTION

> Black autobiographers almost always focus on the racial authentication of self. Their narratives begin from a stated (sometimes disguised) position that establishes and asserts the reality of self through experience. (Nellie Y. McKay, in Smith and Watson ed. *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*, 96)

This dissertation aims to examine select Black American women's autobiographies in terms of the autobiographers' individual responses to the different ideological institutions of power that they find themselves entrapped within/under and that their respective autobiographies embody. It is argued in the course of this dissertation that these responses evolve from a manifest desire to engage in a retaliatory politics of resistance to an ethical emphasis on love and reparation as a more appropriate corrective to the socio-historical injustices suffered by Black Americans in general and Black American women in particular. We understand the autobiographers under scrutiny as 'constructs' of their specific spatio-temporal locations, who are 'interpellated' to the subject position identified in the term, 'Black woman' by the different 'state apparatuses'—whether repressive or ideological. To keep the contours of this study broad and to be able to analyse the shifts in perspectives brought about by changing times, we have selected texts that cover a wide temporal span—from the 1940s to the late 2010s. The inclusion of writers from different walks of life also accounts for the differently nuanced experiences in different fields. The autobiographical texts chosen for the purpose of this dissertation are:

- Zora Neale Hurston's *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942)
- Marian Anderson's *My Lord, What a Morning: An Autobiography* (1956)
- Melba Patillo Beals' *Warriors Don't Cry: A Searing Memoir of the Battle to Integrate Little Rock's Central High* (1994)
- Assata Shakur's *Assata: An Autobiography* (1987)
- Angela Davis' *An Autobiography* (1974)
- Elaine Brown's *A Taste of Power* (1992)
- Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of my Name* (1982)
- bell hooks' *Bone Black: Memories of Girlhood* (1993)
- Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (1983) and *The Chicken Chronicles* (2011)
- Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969)
- Maya Angelou's *All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes* (1986)

- Edwidge Danticat's *Brother, I'm Dying* (2007)
- Paule Marshall's *Triangular Road* (2009)
- Jessica Harris' *My Soul Looks Back* (2017)
- Michelle Obama's *Becoming* (2018)
- Susan Rice's *Tough Love: My Story of the Things Worth Fighting For* (2019)
- Kamala Harris' *The Truths We Hold: An American Journey* (2019)

These select autobiographies are examined keeping in mind the dissertation's primary objectives, which are as follows:

- To develop a frame for analysis of Black American Women's autobiographical works and their modes of narration
- To examine the role of language in construction of the subject within the narrative
- To examine Black female subjectivity within the parameters of race, gender and class
- To examine the strategies of masking and unmasking in articulating life experiences
- To examine the mutation of trauma in Black American women's autobiographical works

As for the hypotheses of the dissertation, it works on the following basic assumptions:

- that the autobiographical subject is not always a unified and coherent being
- that black women's writings go beyond the psychic suffering induced by racist and sexist denigration to offer interesting sites of resistance—both epistemological and ontological
- that Black women's narratives often foreground embedded histories
- that Black life writing has evolved from life history to constructed art forms

In autobiography studies—an area of scholarly analysis that has been witness to an unprecedented surge in critical and theoretical interest since the 1970s and 80s—the attention has generally remained focused on the hegemonic White male as the only or the 'ideal' producer of autobiography. Until recently, few studies have concerned themselves with the self-representational acts of minorities and marginalized peoples who have been denied the very presence of a thinking and feeling 'self' and the related agency by history. The same has been the fate of autobiographical narratives by Black American women. The

identity category denoted by the phrase "Black woman" continues to suggest an elusive 'object' surrounded by several layers of prejudiced ideologies and social stigma. The 'Black woman' remains at worst a 'fiction' and at best a 'stereotype'—one shaped and defined by the racist and sexist world around them. It is important, therefore, to critically engage with their autobiographical works so as to help facilitate a better comprehension of the issues surrounding their lives—the marginality brought in by the subject position, 'Black woman,' the struggles to defy that marginalization, the sense of displacement as well as a sense of community etc.

The autobiographical texts of Black women embody their struggles to gain respectability within the confines of an American society which always denigrates them. These texts which carry the imprint of the history of their battle against racist and patriarchal ideologies, therefore, must be credited for their own value and not be subsumed under the more generalized categories of either 'Black autobiography' or 'women's autobiography.' Their writing and their modes of expression would differ, given the reality of race and discrimination which they cannot ignore. As such their language would have to carry or express their experience, even as the writers would look to a particular kind or kinds of readership. With this in view their language would be determined to some extent by their readership (imagined or real).

Language always necessitates the presence of a listener(s) who, in a way, directs the speaker's choice of words. The person speaking out renders himself/herself vulnerable to the opposite party's reactions and judgments—whether appreciations or critiques and admonitions based upon how his/her 'language' is received. This subconscious need to frame words according to the listeners' expectations means that speech or language cannot remain an unequivocal liberating mechanism. In other words, the 'space,' wherein the speaking occurs and where it is received by a target audience modifies or conditions language. In this regard, Leigh Gilmore in *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony* comments on how testifying to traumatic experiences demands a 'public' setting and a language 'authorized' by that setting:

> [I]t isn't so much language that is sought as a public forum. The language in which one thinks to oneself…for example, do not amount to "language" ...Survivors of trauma are urged to testify repeatedly to their trauma in an effort to *create the*

> *language that will manifest and contain trauma as well as the witnesses who will recognize it*. (7; emphasis added)

In order for their voices to be recognized, then, Black women have to use a carefully modulated language. Speaking about some of the writers, who had experienced racial trauma, the "public forum" or "structured settings" (ibid) that Gilmore mentions were most definitely ones regulated by Whites. Those writing during the first half of the twentieth century, had severely limited options when it came to publishing their works and therefore, at most times, had to oblige to the demands of their White patrons, editors and publishers. Moreover, they had to keep in mind the reception of the audience, a large portion of which were Whites, if future issues of their texts were to continue. Their language had to meet the demands set forth by a complicated network of editors, publishing houses and the probable readers. The consciously mediated texts emerging out of this complex nexus speak as much through the stated words as through their absences. The absences, selective or involuntary, occur in the autobiographies over the ages.

The history of Black American women's autobiography has been a long one with the earliest experiments in the genre tracing back to the slave narratives of the nineteenth century. Over the generations, the narrative itineraries of Black American women autobiographers have been subject to many changes, in terms of the socio-political issues raised as well as the aesthetic complexities they experiment with. Joanne M. Braxton's *Black Women Writing Autobiography* (1989) and Johnnie M. Stover's *Rhetoric and Resistance in Black Women's Autobiography* (2003) engage in historical studies concerned with the shifts and changes in Black American women's autobiography. While Braxton ends her study with an analysis of Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), Stover does so with Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (1983). These critical texts help come into some understanding of the genre as it has been passed down since the nineteenth century slave narratives. Braxton, for instance, talks about how slave narratives, such as Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl,* quite naturally perhaps, showed a preoccupation with issues of survival—surviving the brutal life of slavery. The post-emancipation narratives—accounts by either newly liberated or free-born black women—marked a shift from the question of survival to matters of identity and expression. Black women autobiographers from this period such as Rebecca Cox Jackson, Elizabeth Keckley, and Susie King Taylor, Braxton comments, experimented with diverse forms—the spiritual autobiography, travelogues, adventure stories, memoirs

etc.—as they struggled to find a voice amidst the new problems and challenges that came with emancipation. Since then, the struggle for a public voice, self-definition and personal aggrandizement has continued with the efforts of women like Charlotte Forten Grimke, Ida B. Wells, Zora Neale Hurston etc. Contemporary Black American women, continuing the tradition of Black American women's autobiography, make bold attempts to define the 'black woman' in their own terms, to bring to light their distinctive concerns as blacks and females, but most importantly to define themselves, above all else, as human beings capable of indulging in the affective dimension of their personalities—of showing genuine emotions of love and friendship irrespective of social affiliations.

In including some very recent, twenty-first century Black American women's autobiographies and placing them in a narrative continuum since the 1940s, we go beyond such existing studies on the genre. Moreover, the inclusion of writers like Danticat, Marshall, and Lorde avoids any monolithic view of Black American identity—an identity which has been shaped by generations of immigrants crossing over to America in search of a better future. As globalization continues to make national borders more and more seamless, it is important to understand the diasporic dimensions of Black (as any other) identity

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

- The **first group** includes works on autobiography in general: Olney (1980), Jelinek (1980), Brodzki and Schenck (1988), Smith and Watson (1992), Gilmore (1994), Ashley, Gilmore, and Peters (1994), Smith and Watson (1998), Long (1999), Gilmore (2001), Smith and Watson (2001), Buss (2002), Alabi (2005), Anderson (2001). Olney's edited volume *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical* (1980) is a seminal collection of essays by different critics and provides some ground-breaking work on autobiography. Smith and Watson similarly have several works on autobiography, women's autobiography as well as Black autobiography and compile some of the most significant developments in autobiography studies during the late twentieth century. Estelle Jelinek's *Women's Autobiography: Essays in Criticism* (1980) arise out of the need for a different approach to autobiography criticism when it came to the question of analysing women's autobiography—a sub-genre within the genre of autobiography. It compiles fourteen authoritative essays—some concerned with the broader discipline, others

paying attention to specific works by individual authors—that propose various models, frames and patterns through which to approach women's autobiography.

Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck's *Life/Lines: Theorising Women's Autobiography* (1988) collects seventeen different critical pieces that look into how women—depending on the specificity of their material and socio-political conditions—use different narrative/textual strategies in their autobiographies, in the process rejecting imposed definitions to frame 'empowered' self-definitions that assert their agency. The essays that examine various autobiographical texts by women help theorise women's autobiography in ways that challenge earlier assumptions on the genre. Brodzki and Schenck's "Introduction" to the anthology points out how western theories of autobiography have presented the genre as an area dominated by men and urge for creating a theoretical frame that accounts for women's lives and their life-writings. Moreover, they reinstate the necessity to focus on the 'bios'—the life that is an integral part of any autobiography.

Judy Long in *Telling Women's Lives: Subject/Narrator/Reader/Text* (1999) insists that the book is a response to the need to develop critical tools that are attentive to the unique ways in which female subjectivity expresses itself and how that expression is linked to questions of representation and issues relating to publication. She goes on to assess how women have been left out of the canon of life-writing by the rules of 'genre' which prohibits/restricts any deviations from generic conventions. Women cannot conform to accepted conventions of autobiography because their trajectories of life as well as life-writing are very different from the ones men follow. Her critical study—Long insists—comes out of her quest for a feminist mode of narrating the patterns of life lived by women. Gilmore's *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women's Self-Representation* (1994) and *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony* (2001) look into how autobiography can actually be a very deceptive genre with 'reality' or 'truth' being highly constructed and socially policed areas. Her critical works offer important insights on how people who are located at a distance from the stakes of power resist the demands and constraints put forth by the genre to produce alternative templates for the narration of life. She also examines how the experience of trauma tests autobiography's accepted conventions. Linda Anderson's *Autobiography: The New Critical Idiom* (2001) collects all latest

theories on autobiography so as to provide a comprehensive view of the field. The author puts together different approaches and aspects that have come to define the genre over time: issues relating to autobiography's referentiality, the autobiographical subject, subjectivity, and the politics of representation, different positionalities of the subject, and the different ways and modes—personal criticism, testimony and so on—in which the 'autobiographical' expresses itself.

Helen M. Buss' *Repossesing the World: Reading Memoirs by Contemporary Women* (2002) starts by seeking to clarify the differences between memoir and autobiography. While she refrains from any attempts at defining the genre in narrow, fixed terms, she does mention certain distinctive characteristics that most memoirs tend to have in common: similarity with confessional narratives and the personal essay, emphasis on the socio-historical positioning of the subject of memoir, focus on specific episodes from life rather than on the life lived in its entirety as is characteristic of autobiography, and so on. She also focuses attention on the different individual experiments with the genre. According to her, women's memoirs which deal with the variety of aspects concerning their lives help them 'repossess' a sense of belonging to the world—a world in which the self can feel at home. Adetayo Alabi's *Telling Our Stories: Continuities and Divergences in Black Autobiographies* (2005) focuses on the ways Black autobiographers from different contextual and geo-political locations—Africa, the Caribbean and the United States—share similarities in thoughts and approach, such as a continued emphasis on a sense of community as well as shared resistance to racism and other social evils. At the same time, Alabi also looks into the differences marking their autobiographical texts—for instance, in terms of their views on the place that Africa holds in their hearts, the role of language, the significance of gender etc. Alabi's study intends to contribute to the still nascent field of 'Comparative Black Autobiography.'

- The **second group** focuses on critical and historical studies that relate specifically to Black American autobiography: Butterfield (1974), Smith (1974), Andrews (1983), Andrews (1988), Braxton (1989), Perkins (2000), Stover (2003), Ards (2015). Butterfield's and Andrews' works on the history of Black American autobiography provide a starting point to enter the field. Andrews in *African American Autobiography: A Collection of Critical Essays* (1974) compiles

together thirteen critical essays that deal with some of the most significant names when it comes to Black American autobiographers and their works—Frederick Douglass, Richard Wright, Malcolm X, Ida B. Wells, Zora Neale Hurston, Maya Angelou etc. Together they give a perspective to the themes and concerns that have been crucial in Black American Autobiography. Butterfield's *Black Autobiography in America* (1974), on the other hand, is an attempt to historicize the genre by conducting a study ranging from the slave narratives to the autobiographies produced till the latter half of the twentieth century. This broad historical study makes Butterfield conclude that the narrative self in Black autobiography does not engage in an individualistic journey but rather emerges as a heroic figure in a long quest for freedom. In Black autobiography, then, the self can only be realized in the context of the larger community of which he/she is a part. Braxton's *Black Women Writing Autobiography: A Tradition Within a Tradition* (1989) tries to create a unique tradition of Black women's autobiography calling it a subgenre within the genre of Black autobiography. Margo V. Perkins, in *Autobiography as Activism: Three Black Women of the Sixties*, examines the autobiographical texts of Angela Davis, Assata Shakur and Elaine Brown—three women who had been actively involved in the Black Power Movement. Although specifically focused on the autobiographies of these women, Perkins' work manages to provide important insights into the textual strategies and characteristics that are generated when activist life translates into life-writing. In her detailed analysis of the texts, she helps give shape and direction to the study of 'political autobiography.'

Johnnie M. Stover's *Rhetoric and Resistance in Black Women's Autobiography* pays special attention to the unique communicative strategies developed by Black women as part of their resistance to oppressive structures which deny them their voice. The Black woman's 'mother-tongue,' the name Stover gives to these subversive modes of communication that she identifies in the autobiographies she examines, is seen by her as a response to the socio-historical silencing that Black women have been subject to ever since the days of slavery. Although *Rhetoric and Resistance* is concerned specifically with the nineteenth century autobiographical narratives of Harriet E. Wilson, Harriet A. Jacobs, Elizabeth Keckley, and Susie King Taylor, it connects them to the works of contemporary Black women such as Maya Angelou and Alice Walker. It

understands the modes of verbal/rhetorical resistance displayed by present day Black women as continuations of the 'mother-tongue' technique developed by their nineteenth century predecessors. Angela A. Ards, with her recent work, *Words of Witness: Black Women's Autobiography in the Post-Brown Era* (2015) looks into how contemporary Black American women continue to battle with racism and racialized sexism and use autobiography as a political and revisionist tool. By situating the studied autobiographies within larger political debates, her work reemphasizes the idea that personal or individual accounts cannot be separated from the socio-cultural milieu in which they occur.

- The **third group** includes critical works on Black feminism, Black women's writings, race and identity politics, studies in postcolonialism, and socio-political contexts of Black lives: Christian (1985), Harlow (1987), Gates Jr. (1988), Collins (1990), Kosofsky (1990), Davies (2003), Leela Gandhi (2006), and Joseph (2018). Christian and Collins are important points of entry to understand Black feminist thought and practice. Barbara Christian in *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers* (1985) collects seventeen critical essays focusing on different Black women writers and written at various points of time into a single anthology. The essays, taken together, offer some valuable insights into some of the central concerns reflected in the writings of Black women and how those concerns necessitate a unique Black feminist mode of reading the texts. Patricia Hill Collins' *Black Feminist Thought* (1990) locates Black feminist thought and praxis in the everyday modes of resistance exhibited by ordinary Black women in their day-to-day dealings with the various structures of power. One significant way in which she understands Black feminist counter-resistance is in terms of Black women's rejection of stereotypical representations of Black womanhood—such as that of the 'matriarch,' 'mammy,' 'jezebel' etc. Collins goes on to highlight how one aspect of the Black feminist struggle has, therefore, to do with constructing positive images of Black women and womanhood.

  Harlow's *Resistance Literature* (1987) helps define the field while also providing a conceptual frame to understand the nexus between political activism and literature. She discusses how resistance gets embedded in different narrative forms: poetry, prison memoirs, utopian and dystopian fiction etc. Henry Louis Gates Jr. in *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism*

insists that theorizing has always been central to the Black intellectual/literary tradition. This centrality of theory, according to Gates, is reflected in the Black author's use of figurative language, which is but a means of 'signifying' meanings rather than indulging in a direct statement of facts. By projecting the idea of 'signifying' as a manifestation of the theoretical, he argues for the necessity to view the Black writer's play with language as nothing but theory in praxis. Not remaining content with mere enunciation, Gates 'performs' his theoretical propositions in the reading of individual texts—slave narratives, Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo*, and Alice Walker's *The Colour Purple*—that make up the second part of his book.

In *The Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), Eve Sedge Kosofsky taking on a deconstructionist approach, talks about how notions of heterosexuality/ homosexuality, like all other binaries, are based on a hierarchical divide between the two terms wherein "heterosexuality" always takes on precedence as "the normative" behaviour. This viewing of one set of behaviour as normative sexuality, and a simultaneous paranoia and hatred for any deviation from this norm, according to Kosofsky, forces lesbians to 'closet' themselves into hiding. This 'closeting,' however, also leads to a kind of "double-bind" situation, where coming out of the closet meant endangering oneself while remaining hidden was also always accompanied by a fear of being found out and exposed.

Ralina L. Joseph's 2018 work, *PostRacial Resistance: Black Women, Media, and the Uses of Strategic Ambiguity* contests the assumptions of postracial ideology and tries to examine the 'strategic ambiguity' adopted by powerful Black women to maintain their privilege and screen presence. Combining media studies and reception theories, her very recent work is a significant study on the everyday modes of resistance of contemporary Black American women.

- The **fourth** category deals with works on the representation of trauma: Caruth (1995), (1996), LaCapra (1999), Gibbs (2014). Caruth's pioneering works on trauma, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995) and *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* have shaped and given direction to the field of trauma studies. These texts lay the ground for some of the central propositions that trauma theory is concerned with: trauma's "belatedness," its "literality," its sudden,

unexpected and overwhelming nature etc. LaCapra, in "Trauma, Absence, Loss" (1999), differentiates between the two very different notions of 'absence' and 'loss,' and basing upon that difference, provides a model of trauma recovery that further differentiates between "acting out" and "working through" trauma. Gibbs, on the other hand, proves to be an important voice of dissent to mainstream trauma studies with his refusal to view trauma in terms of its decapitating effects. His *Contemporary American Trauma Narratives* (2014) heavily critiques Caruth's ideas on trauma and problematizes the very idea of a 'rigid' trauma paradigm that her works helped develop. As a way of refuting the Caruthian paradigm, he reads several texts that questions the conventions and contentions of what had become a dominant trauma genre.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This dissertation uses critical and theoretical tools of autobiography studies in close conversation with scholarship on Black autobiography. Theoretical concepts of postcolonial studies, Black Feminism, race and trauma studies would also be applied.

CHAPTER PLAN

Apart from the **Introduction** and the **Conclusion** the dissertation includes six core chapters.

Chapter 1: The chapter titled "Reading Black American Women's Lives" provides a brief genealogy of black American women's autobiographical endeavours in addition to discussing the critical and theoretical tools applied. It puts together a critical frame for analysis of Black women's autobiographies/memoirs through the counters of race, gender and sexuality. From representing marginalized lives to women situating themselves in "affective communities," Black American women's life writing, as this thesis shows, has emerged as a strong voice of empathy and empowerment. Black Feminist criticism is combined with postcolonial theories to mark this 'writing back' and 'writing forward.'

Chapter 2: This chapter titled "Healing and Fictive Selves" examines how strategically placed silences and gaps in texts can at times operate as techniques utilized by Black American women writers to revert power structures. It purports to analyze two autobiographies that were published during the 1940s and 1950s: Zora Neale Hurston's

Dust Tracks on a Road (1942), and Marian Anderson's *My Lord, What a Morning: An Autobiography* (1956). The chosen autobiographies have puzzled and irritated critics and general readers alike due to their unequivocal refusal to portray the atmosphere of racial inequity and hatred defining and shaping Black American lives of the time. Despite the fact that they depict the writers' experiences of growing up during the early twentieth century which is replete with numerous race riots, episodes of lynching and other forms of violence, almost none of such atrocities find direct mention in the texts.

We argue that the chosen texts' overt silences over contemporary race issues are deliberate and intended not just to appease Whites in power—the cryptic gaps on a careful reading reveal how muteness can become a mechanism of resistance. Moreover, the present chapter also tries to understand the near absolute avoidance of direct expressions of grievances against the White regime in terms of "working through" a brutal history and arriving at some sort of a dignified standing. The concerned writers' resistance to being defined by an overarching paradigm of race/Blackness is seen in the context of a healing mechanism that aids the process of psychological recovery. In so doing, the texts are read as exemplifying how consistent exposure to social trauma can challenge accepted or prevailing notions of identity and forge new trajectories of self-discovery for the autobiographical "I".

Chapter 3: This chapter titled "Narrating Resistance" aims to investigate select autobiographical texts composed by Black American women who had actively engaged or participated in resistance politics. It takes as its focus the autobiographies of four Black women actively involved with the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements of the fifties and sixties. The chosen texts are Angela Davis' An Autobiography (1974), Assata Shakur's *Assata: An Autobiography* (1987), Elaine Brown's *A Taste of Power* (1992), and Melba Pattillo Beals's *Warriors Don't Cry* (1994). It purports to explore how fresh perspectives on activists' texts might ensue when their documentation of personal experiences does not escape the purview of scholarly analysis. In studies of "Resistance Literature" under which these texts are generally subsumed, there has been a tendency to see and understand the autobiographies of activists mostly as an extension of their political works. And since the documenting of resistant activities in the narratives do put up an affront to oppressive regimes, it is such countering of hegemonies which has received the maximum attention. The present chapter, however, argues that activist narratives must also be valued and studied for their depictions of the psychological dimension to political

works. Such texts narrativize the physical as well as psycho-sexual tortures endured by the authors as part of their resistant activities. We would try to establish the cyclical pattern in which trauma and resistant political action might get implicated—with traumatic histories inspiring concrete resistance and the latter in its turn giving spur to severe psychic suffering resulting from incarceration, physical abuse, and psychological tortures in the form of threats to one's own life as well as of family members and close allies. This chapter, thus, sets out to fill, what it considers, a gap in the current literature on activists' narratives.

Chapter 4: This chapter titled "Contesting Frames, Contesting Ideology: Alternative Self-Representations" seeks to examine the many experimental forms that came to define self-representational projects by Black American women since the latter half of the twentieth century. The selected texts are Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of my Name* (1982), Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (1983) and *The Chicken Chronicles* (2011) and bell hooks' *Bone Black: Memories of Girlhood* (1993). As autobiographical narratives documenting the pain of having been marginalised in a predominantly "other" culture, they show how experimenting with the modes of telling such stories results in new strategies of representing the 'subject' of autobiography and effects new, more empowered subjectivities. The current chapter, thus, aims to analyse the modes of writing the self into existence employed by the chosen Black American women writers in their quest for self-definition. Maya Angelou questions the very possibility of a stable, fixed definition of the self and consequently, of the possibility of encapsulating one's lived life into a single text. Although the focus in this chapter remains primarily on *Caged Bird*, we argue that Angelou's seven volumes of autobiography suggest a 'fluid' self which is always in the process of emergence and can never be completely located in any isolated moment or text. Audre Lorde in *Zami* uses her linguistic ability to look at herself and others in terms acceptable to her and the world she reaches out to. Similarly, Alice Walker connects with her readers on her own individual terms in both the texts included in this chapter as her autobiographies. Walker's texts uphold the way autobiographical elements can get expressed via personal criticism. Again, bell hooks experiments with autobiographical representation as she discards a stable narrative 'I' and continually keeps shifting her subject positions—using both first- and third-person narrative styles. The writers challenge autobiography's accepted conventions: mixing mythology with history and personal

memory, including essays, stories, and myths, and decentering the "I" of autobiography as and when needed.

Chapter 5: This chapter titled "Narrating Selves, Narrating Histories" examines select autobiographies and memoirs that relate the individual stories of the autobiographers in terms of larger socio-historical backgrounds. The selected texts are Mays 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 exemplify how autobiographical narratives can serve as spaces to deliberate on the intricate ways in which history and public memories manifest in personal lives. As the autobiographers under scrutiny in this chapter engage in the narrative retelling of their lives, they invariably see themselves as anchored in a broader history—whether it be the gruesome history of the transatlantic slave trade, of Haiti and American immigration policies or the literary history of the 1970s Black America. Their texts, thus, facilitate a critical conversation between received notions of history and the autobiographers' individual responses to them. In examining the autobiographies from such a critical perspective, the chapter validates the contention that private histories are inevitably intertwined with public histories.

Chapter 6: This chapter, titled "Lives in Affective Communities: Michelle Obama's *Becoming*, Susan Rice's *Tough Love*, and Kamala Harris' *The Truths We Hold*" examines the autobiographical narratives of highly educated and powerful Black women who try to connect with the American public through humility, empathy and clarity. They lead important lives and at the same time do not forget their middle-class upbringing and their early career struggles. They remain American women and at the same time representatives of the Black American community as they work for the uplift of fellow Americans as well as Black people/women. The selected texts, as indicated in the title, are Michelle Obama's *Becoming* (2018), Susan Rice's *Tough Love: My Story of the Things Worth Fighting For* (2019), and Kamala Harris' *The Truths We Hold: An American Journey* (2019). It is argued that these texts show how Black women not only live their lives but also transform other lives through "affective communities." In other words, these texts illustrate how Black autobiographical texts carry the imprint of empathy, enabling and community empowerment. A whole series of texts of this nature can be grouped under the politics of hope. We see a case of not only writing back but also writing forward.

This thesis, thus, builds on existing scholarship on Black American women's autobiography with the distinctive objective of highlighting dialogue and community possibilities rather than exclusively dwelling on Black differences or Black women's differences. To the extent that these texts under scrutiny repeatedly write back and write forward, the dissertation underscores the value of empathy and empowerment within and beyond the community.