CHAPTER ONE

READING BLACK AMERICAN WOMEN'S LIVES

> By narrating her story…she enters history, names themes for the future, and seizes the authority of the teller of experience. The public space of discourse therefore becomes a contested space as she violates the established boundaries between silence and speech to reflect on experience, put shape and meaning to it. (Carole Boyce Davies, in Smith and Watson ed. *Decolonizing the Subject* 15-16)

The chapter aims to put forward the overarching conceptual frame of this dissertation: a critical frame to place the autobiographies under scrutiny in a literary-cultural continuum while focusing on the transition in their generic and ideological shifts. The theoretical tools discussed outline the primary concern of the thesis and trace the historical trajectory of the chosen texts as they move from emphasising resistance—whether implicit and subtle or active and confrontational—to embodying a politics based not on resisting but repairing. In so doing, the chapter also examines features and characteristics distinct to Black American autobiography in general and Black American women's autobiography in particular. Moreover, since working through racialised and gendered trauma happens to be the motive behind the autobiographers' adopting of a politics of resistance or reparation, this chapter also looks at how the autobiographies under scrutiny challenge dominant assumptions of trauma writing.

Since the late twentieth century, there has been a significant rise in academic and scholarly interests in the genre of autobiography. As the genre has evolved over time, new critical frames have come up to engage with issues of subject, subjectivity, representation and autonomy that it inevitably brings up. However, when autobiography is thought of in universalist terms, it tends to distort the complexities, differences and divergences within the genre. Depending on the positionality of the autobiographer—his/her race, gender, class, sexuality—the autobiographical narrative, of necessity, would be very different. Within the genre of autobiography, therefore, there are multiple sub-genres, with each sub-genre also holding the potential to be further divided into smaller sub-units. That Black American women's autobiography cannot be subsumed under the more general umbrella terms—say, Black American autobiography or women's autobiography—testifies to contemporary demands for multiple divisions and sub-divisions within the genre. Autobiography—a genre primarily concerned with the self or subject of the writer—tends to be divided and sub-divided according to that subject's ideological underpinnings which, in turn, derive from the multiple axes of its identity/social positioning.

Brodzki and Schenck in *Life / Lines: Theorizing Women's Autobiography* (1988), mention the odds women had to face when operating on the predominantly male domain of autobiography and observe that:

> [T]he female autobiographer takes as a given that selfhood is mediated; her invisibility results from her lack of a tradition, her marginality in male dominated culture, her fragmentation—social and political as well as psychic. At both extremes of subjectivity and publicity, the female autobiographer has lacked the sense of radical individuality….(1)

The woman writer has to struggle to articulate against preconceived notions of women's roles reducing them to the margins or subsidiary positions. They hold that women's autobiography offers a fertile ground for a feminist reconstruction of the self. Autobiography allows for: "the reclaiming of the female subject—even as it foregrounds the central issue of contemporary critical thought—the problematic status of the self" (ibid). Women writers have to look for the means to redefine the terms even as they search for the Self.

Carol Boyce Davies in "Collaboration and the Ordering Imperative in Life Story Production," mentions life writing as a collaborative process through interviews and editing where both the interviewer and interviewee talk, making the emerging autobiography "choral or plural in mode" (Smith and Watson, *Decolonizing the Subject*, 6). According to her:

> These "multiple lives" as single text are…more expansive…[and] challenge many of the generic expectations of autobiography. They are, as well, subversions of the definition of "author." (ibid)

Instead of chronology, despite editorial intervention, it allows the subject to combine different strands of information and interpretation in the narrative. Further,

> Consideration of the forms of lifestories forces a rethinking of traditional autobiographical theory. In particular, thinking autobiography through life story puts into question the notion of standard autobiography as extended, linear narrative, and invites instead more complex approaches to text, discourse, author, and narrative. (ibid)

Boyce Davies draws attention to issues of race, gender and class in Black women's autobiography and to the blurring of borders between orality and writing in their narratives. She puts the popularity of women's narratives to the advances in technology which has made them accessible to many. She says that the stories are personal, "told and presented through female agency" (7). Moreover,

> They share with male self-stories the human impulse to define, shape, and order a life. Yet, the collection activity and/or the giving of value to women's stories has its impetus in the recent feminist movement, which provides the space and the need to hear women's voices. They also come out of oral history projects designed to let peasants and working-class people speak. (ibid)

Regarding the collaborative aspect, Boyce Davies remarks that it earns a place for women's autobiography in a male domain. She refers to Malcolm X and Alex Haley's collaborative effort where responsibility for the narrative is shared by both the subject and the person to whom responsibility is given.

Boyce Davies cites two positions taken by Barbara Bate and Patricia Meyer Spacks on women's conversations which they call "women's talk" and "gossip, even serious gossip," respectively. She writes that for Bate and for herself:

> [W]omen's talk works toward cooperative goals as the speakers affirm human connection while recognizing differences that emerge. Identifying women as "rational speakers," Bate suggests that women "examine alternatives for talk in environments which often mute their voices or ignore their words." (15)

By talking about themselves women articulate issues amongst themselves and by communicating, share viewpoints. Against the dismissive attitude towards women's talk, Bate suggests that women use reason to find means of communicating with each other and the community as a whole. Similarly, Specks suggests that women's gossip is a serious matter, that "gossip provides a context for" finding new ways to think about perplexities of narrative and voice and subject." In fact, it helps them to articulate, reflect and empower both themselves and other women:

> "Serious" gossip, proposes Spacks, "takes place in private, at leisure, in a context of trust….Its participants use talk about others to reflect about themselves, to express wonder and uncertainty and locate certainties, to enlarge their knowledge

> of one another." Gossip as women's talk thus enables the silenced to articulate personal subjectivity and communal interdependency. (ibid)

Boyce Davies observes that gossip and oral communication provide the ground for women's autobiographical narratives which defy existing modes of silencing. According to her, "Oral life story clearly exists in that same liminal space between the public and the private, between oral and written discourses" (ibid). Personal matters are discussed and become part of their life narratives, and so, public. It gives them scope to define themselves:

> In its intertextuality, its open-ended, dialogic form, then, the oral life story form functions explicitly to facilitate empowerment for women who historically have been silenced, whose words are not accepted as having legitimacy in the realm of accepted public discourse where formal autobiography resides. Life stories, viewed against this backdrop, are another of those sublimated women's articulations. (15)

This observation is significant in the context of women's autobiography being seen as a means of speaking/writing back, of articulating to counter and silence established opinion, where possible.

The chapter, as stated already, proceeds by way of first trying to see and understand some concerns specific to Black American autobiography and then focusing on how Black American women feel compelled to swerve away from this model determined primarily by Black men and establish their own narrative itineraries. In "The Narrative Self: Race, Politics, and Culture in Black American Women's Autobiography," Nellie Y. Mckay points out the importance of the genre to the development of black literary culture. The scope provided by autobiography to narrate one's life story as one would like to be presented or represented proved vital for Black Americans who found in it a medium through which to reject imposed definitions and assert their own self-images. McKay, who traces the importance of the genre right to the earliest days of Black Americans' appropriation of language and writing, argues:

> As signifying metaphors, in black words printed on white pages from a black perspective, black life stories announced authentic selves secure in their individual worth, group pride, and the humanity of black people. The texts were linguistic achievements affirming a rejection of white-imposed denigration of the black self

> and, in the best of American traditions, making proud assertions of a new identity. (96)

Black Americans manipulate autobiography's preoccupation with the self and selfhood to not only include but prioritise collective racial concerns within personal narratives. Since human beings—the 'subjects' of autobiography—can assume a sense of identity or agency only in relation to an external world, the genre almost by default merges the private and public realms. However, in the case of Black Americans collectively denigrated as a race, positive self-portrayal has been specifically and intimately related to an elevation of the overall community. To quote McKay again:

> The personal narrative became a historical site on which aesthetics, self-confirmation of humanity, citizenship, and the significance of racial politics shaped African-American literary expression. (ibid)

While the historical contexts keep changing, for Black Americans embedding history into autobiographical narratives—often revising and reframing it in the process—has remained central. Attempting to rectify and reconceptualise a truncated history, which pays no heed to the erasures of specific peoples and groups, confers both agency and a sense of dignity upon the autobiographer who, via the autobiographical writing, makes his/her way into the pages of that history.

In "Black Autobiography: Life as the Death Weapon," Roger Rosenblatt mentions the two constant features—of wishing to live as one wants along with a criticism of national conditions—in black autobiography. He observes that minorities find their conception of the self to be in opposition to their perception by others. Autobiography, he suggests, offers minority people like Black Americans the chance to contest the "special reality" (171) projected for them by a mainstream society. This tendency on the part of mainstream society to impose their own impressions on the others—whether, black, or migrant, or other—to categorise them in their terms is not uncommon in America or elsewhere. As such, these people have to put up with erasure and imposition of identities by others. Given this position, for a Black writer, it is not the 'wisdom' contained in the autobiography that confers value to the text or his life. Rather, it is the very act of writing the text that infuses him/her with some sense of authority—writing being assertive of the desire for autonomy. Again, in re-evaluating and re-assessing the life lived so far—that is, via the medium of autobiography—the Black writer recognises the absurdity, verging

almost on insanity, of the circumstances surrounding him/her at different moments of his/her life.

Barbara Christian in *Black Feminist Criticism*, refers to the "persistent and major theme throughout" African American women's writing of their attempts "to define and express" themselves on their terms "rather than being defined by others" (159). According to Christian, Black women's efforts have been restricted—"opposed, repressed, distorted"—as they tried to search for/define themselves in relation to society. They were often forced "to deny essential aspects" of themselves "to fit the definition of others" (160). Either their gender, or race or class was muted to the extent that black women writers had to struggle to define themselves in their totality. Christian contends:

> In defining ourselves Afro-American women writers have necessarily had to confront the interaction between restrictions of racism, sexism and class that characterize our existence, whatever our individual personalities, backgrounds, talents. Our words indifferent shadings call into question the pervasive mythology of democracy, justice and freedom that America projects itself to be. (160)

At every turn, Black women have had to face the pressure of pre-defined terms imposed on them before they could say anything. Such labels, were denigrating and marginalising if not dismissive according to Christian. She refers to the poet June Jordan recalling the words of her childhood New York church congregation—"by declaring the truth, you create the truth"—taken from the nineteenth century abolitionist poet and novelist Frances Harper (ibid). This is to suggest what the Black woman writer could do, and did attempt.

Joanne M. Braxton, in *Black Women Writing Autobiography: A Tradition Within a Tradition* (1989) has examined how Black American women's autobiographical narratives form a tradition of their own. According to Braxton, this is a long-inherited tradition that goes back to the time when the oral tradition was the only mode of passing down one's legacy. According to her, "the juxtaposition of literary and oral forms create a linguistic vitality that informs written literature on many levels" (5). Braxton places Black American women's autobiography in a contextual frame that credits the life experiences of all women who have been in the unique position of being 'black' and 'female.' Accounts—whether oral or written—of experiences and the lessons gleaned from those experiences are brought together in a foundational form that continues to shape and inspire Black American women's autobiography. The Black woman's autobiographical tradition,

according to Braxton, provides "an occasion for viewing the individual in relation to those others with whom she shares emotional, philosophical, and spiritual affinities, as well as political realities" (9). The autobiographical subject is to be seen against the larger background of relationships and the community and society she is part of.

It is this relational understanding of the self—the sense of belonging to a larger community—that Nellie Y. McKay also asserts is distinctive of Black American women's autobiography. In "The Narrative self," referred to earlier, she argues how "black survival (their own and that of others), not the quest to recuperate lost selves" (100), serves as the motivation behind Black women's autobiographical writings. Their autobiographies emphasise the centrality of the private sphere in designing modes of subtle, but powerful resistance. In the case of Black women, a 'gendered' lens is also inescapably a 'raced' lens owing to the submerging of the two identity categories—Black and female. It follows, that for the Black woman, both experience and the narrativization of experience have to be filtered through such a race-gender specific frame.

Biddy Martin's essay on lesbian autobiography in Brodzki and Schenck's collection tries to mark the space it could create for itself. She suggests that

> sexual identity not only modifies but essentially defines a life, providing it with predictable content and an identity possessing continuity and universality…. (Life/Lines 78)

Martin points out that lesbian autobiography on one side presumes that it is different and on the other, that all lesbians have some common:

> However, differences, for example, of race, class, or sexuality, are finally rendered noncontradictory by virtue of their (re)presentation as differences between individuals, reducible to questions of identity within the unifying context of feminism. What remains unexamined are the systemic institutional relationships between those differences, relationships that exceed the boundaries of the lesbian community. (ibid)

While there may be some common ground, every individual would try to explore in her way or on her available terms:

> The isolation of lesbian autobiography here may have strategic political value, given the continued, or perhaps renewed, invisibility of lesbians even in feminist work, but it also marks lesbianism in a way that gives “women’s autobiography” a curiously unmarked and unifying quality, reproducing the marginality of lesbianism and its containment in particular types of people. (ibid)

Consequently, “Claims to difference conceived in terms of different identities…operate as interventions in facile assumptions of “sisterhood,” which has a referent in white and heterosexual (ibid). Martin goes on to add that:

> A number of marginalized communities now face important questions about the possibility of reconceptualizing identity without abandoning it and its strategic deployment altogether. I suggest that such reconceptualizations of identity and of community have emerged in recent autobiographical writing and on the very grounds of identity and community. (79)

She tries to understand the problematic nature of a group lesbian identity and the emergence of the self from its support base. She sees it as: “the production of a shared narrative or life history and on the assimilation of individuals’ life histories into the history of the group” (83). Autobiography in this case,

> has specific purposes in the (not always synchronous) histories of the community and of the individuals who write or read them; it aims to give lesbian identity a coherence and legitimacy that can make both individual and social action possible. (83)

It is expected of the autobiography to define parameters not for itself or the writer alone, but for the community. Speaking of contemporary lesbian autobiography, Martin claims that it “has an affirmative as well as a critical relationship to questions of identity and self-definition” (ibid). Moreover:

> [L]esbian identity comes to mean quite particular things in the seventies under the impact of feminist struggles for conceptual and political unity. It is now quite common to reconstruct the history of those struggles among American feminists as a shift from a “radical” to a “cultural” feminism concerned only with psychology and identity…. (ibid)

Having established its group and individual concerns, Martin points to the political and cultural hues it acquired in that period of activism and struggle till some of the politics was replaced by questions of identity.

Elizabeth Fox-Genovese examines the nature of African American autobiography in *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women's Autobiographical Writing* (ed. Shari Benstock):

> Much of the autobiographical writing of black women eschews the confessional mode—the examinations of personal motives, the searchings of the soul—that white women autobiographers so frequently adopt. Black women's autobiographies seem tom between exhibitionism and secrecy, between self-display and self- concealment. (72)

According to her, while most authors choose what to say and what to suppress in their narratives, Black female autobiographers wrote to be read by those who might influence the course of public events, might pay money for their books, or might authenticate them as authors. She observes that "[s]ubsequent black women autobiographers, many of whom have been writers or professional women, have also tended to write as much for white readers, or for black male intellectuals, as for other black women" (ibid). That however, does not prevent women, especially Black women from reaching out to each other through their shared experiences and concerns through their life writing.

Black women, according to Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, do not take the model of gender relations for granted despite its dominance in American society:

> Slavery bequeathed to Afro-American women a double view of gender relations that fully exposed the artificial or problematic aspects of gender identification. Slavery stripped black men of the social attributes of manhood in general and fatherhood in particular. As a result, black women had no satisfactory social definition of themselves as women. (74)

Because of the uncertainty over men's gender and identity, women had to nothing to model themselves on and were pressed into roles befitting both men and women. For white women in America the hegemony of the gender system has "has influenced the ways in which most American women have written about themselves and their lives, and it especially has influenced their sense of their readers" (73). Fox-Genovese explains that:

> the dominant model of gender relations has exercised hegemony…as an alternative to class relations as a system of social classification, and in part because of its invitation to different groups of immigrants who brought with them one or another version of separate male and female spheres and a commitment to one or another form of male dominance. (ibid)

According to her "gender, understood as the social construction of sexuality, mediates between sexual identity and social identity—it binds the former to the latter and roots the latter in the former" (ibid). For Black women, however, gender could be "unstuck from sexuality," and gaps could occur between sexuality and gender leading to uncertainty over both gender and identity. Black women have to live with roles and identities determined by others and in their writing too, they have to identify their readers:

The tension at the heart of black women's autobiography derives in large part from the chasm between an autobiographer's intuitive sense of herself and her attitude toward her probable readers. Imagined readers shape the ways in which an autobiographer constructs the narrative of her life. (74)

It follows that an individual's sense of herself/himself is largely determined by what she/he thinks others expect from him/her. The Black woman finds herself playing different roles at home and at work. Sometimes they even work side by side with men. That however does not deprive them of their essential femininity. At the same time, they cannot expect the men in their lives to play protective roles as in the case of White women. However, if they were to talk about their dilemmas, they may not be able to connect with some of their readers.

Given this kind of a background, contemporary Black American women writers have continued to look for new forms and strategies to represent their racialised and gendered experiences: experiences that are less visible and more insidious. In so doing, they also enter into dialogues with larger socio-political and cultural concerns. It is necessary to see how autobiographers engage in a search for new frames to understand this shift in lives and life-worlds.

While examining the chosen autobiographies and tracing the narrative transition from resistance politics to reparation ethics, this dissertation also speaks for the need to see and understand experiences of racism and racialized sexism as sufficient trauma

triggers. While not focusing on trauma exclusively, the Black American women's narratives under scrutiny in this dissertation touch upon some of their painful experiences which they cannot forget. It is here that the framework of trauma studies helps to examine those writings. In the dominant Caruthian trauma paradigm, trauma is understood as a single, overwhelmingly catastrophic event that often results in a psychic handicap of the victim. However, as more recent scholarship conducted by such scholars as Stef Craps, Gert Buelens, Judith Herman, Ruth Leys, Roger Luckhurst, Michael Rothberg etc. suggests, repeated and chronic exposure to abusive or oppressive situations should also be seen as capable of inducing trauma. Seen in this light, the absurd 'social reality' experienced by Black Americans on a daily basis, that scholars like McKay and Rosenblatt refer to (as discussed earlier), becomes sufficiently traumatic. Moreover, in that the genre of autobiography places the author in relation to a social context, examining the autobiographies of Black Americans offers us the opportunity to see the autobiographers' individual experience of racial trauma in terms of the collective experience of the larger Black community of which he/she is a part.

Such narrativization of individual and social trauma via the medium of autobiography reject the proposition that trauma is unspeakable or not representable. Instead, they vouch for the notion that if traumatic social reality is to be altered, it must first be put into language. In other words, the autobiographies of Black Americans, by projecting an unjust external reality that is the root of their misery, endorse the view that only when trauma is narrated, can one hope to come out of its hold. In its upholding of not merely the possibility but the absolute necessity of narrating stories of repeated exposure to racial abuses, Black American autobiography speaks for the fact that while trauma might affect the psychological integrity of the victim, it does not always render him/her incapable of agency. According to James Berger,

> [B]ecause trauma shatters the narratives that structure our lives, we can only be healed by telling our stories again, by representing in words the trauma that now controls our mental images, thoughts, actions, even our bodily functions beyond the reach of language. Language and especially narrative, allows us to work through trauma rather than acting out the trauma symptomatically (74).

Berger, here, refers to the role of narrative in making the difference between 'acting out' and 'working through' trauma. Indeed, much scholarship on trauma healing and recovery

have concentrated on how responses towards trauma can take the shape of ‘acting out’ and ‘working through’ such experiences and memories.

In his seminal essay, “Trauma, Absence, Loss,” Dominick LaCapra, for instance, differentiates between the two approaches: acting out and working through trauma. Acting out happens when one is trapped in a repetitive reliving and re-enactment of what one assumes to be a traumatic past or memory. Working through trauma, on the other hand, is a conscious attempt to “come to terms with…the divided legacies, open wounds, and unspeakable losses of a dire past” (698). LaCapra connects the two to an understanding of the two different concepts of ‘absence’ and ‘loss.’ Situating absence on a transhistorical level as opposed to a necessary placing of loss on a historical level, LaCapra argues:

> In this transhistorical sense absence is not an event and does not imply tenses (past, present, or future). By contrast, the historical past is the scene of losses that may be narrated as well as of specific possibilities that may conceivably be reactivated, reconfigured, and transformed in the present or future. (700)

Absence, according to him, refers to foundational anxieties that one encounters across cultures and communities. It is a futile hunt for metaphysical foundations such as a pre-Edenic or pre-oedipal state of unity. As representative of the basic fears characterising any human society, absence does not relate to particular events or periods of history and hence, is transhistorical. Loss, on the other hand, relates to specific events in the past pertaining to specific communities or societies which were affected by those events. Since loss is induced by definitive events in the past, engaging in a retrospective enquiry into that past suggests the possibility of ‘working through.’ As LaCapra writes:

> Historical losses or lacks can be dealt with in ways that may significantly improve conditions-indeed effect basic structural transformation-without promising secular salvation or a sociopolitical return to a putatively lost (or lacking) unity or community. (706)

Working through the past implies the scope for positive change even as it remains aware of the impossibility of going back to a “lost unity.” LaCapra emphasises the necessity of engaging critically with historical losses so as to make it possible to come out of them. He also warns against any uncritical mingling of the two:

> When loss is converted into (or encrypted in an indiscriminately generalized rhetoric of) absence, one faces the impasse of endless melancholy, impossible mourning, and interminable aporia in which any process of working through the past and its historical losses is foreclosed or prematurely aborted. (698)

In other words, when and if trauma ensuing from specific historical events or losses are turned into foundational anxieties deriving from the absence of certain metaphysical groundings, it becomes impossible to overcome it. Rather, one tends to remain trapped in history, constantly reiterating or acting out the historical past, thus, foreclosing any attempt to positively work through a bitter past.

When one comes to the Black American community, there is the specific "historical loss" of slavery, the ramifications of which continue till date. In fact, for Black Americans, the historical loss suggested by slavery has only changed face into that of racism. The loss, in this case, cannot just be simplistically ascribed to a 'past' because it has continued into the present, although in a changed form. For Black Americans, it is not a specific loss but a series of losses over many generations. The Black American women's situation is further aggravated by the role played by gender—the definitive problems ensuing from which again cannot be relegated to single, isolated moments of the past but must be seen in terms of their continuation into the present.

The possibility of 'working through' one's sense of loss in order to be able to invest in the future proves useful in the context of this dissertation which traces the chosen autobiographers' responses to the socio-historical 'losses' entailed by the bitter past of slavery and a continued history of racism and racialised sexism. Whether it is an emphasis on active resistance, albeit in different modes or a foregrounding of a politics of hope and reparation, they are all manifestations of the desire to 'work through' a troubled and bitter legacy so as to get over it and thereby, also to transform it for the better.

In tracing the narrative trajectories of the autobiographers under scrutiny and analysing their responses to life and life-writing, the dissertation makes use of certain critical-theoretical tools and frames. The different strategies or approaches of the autobiographers are examined in relation to theoretical propositions that help explain or justify their standpoints. In so doing, the autobiographies which display a similarity in the worldviews or outlooks guiding their respective authors and consequently, also a similar sort of narrative strategy have been clubbed together into certain groups or categories. For

the sake of convenience, this dissertation has been so organised as to examine each particular category in a chapter dedicated specifically to it. In what follows, we briefly discuss the key theoretical/conceptual frames adopted in subsequent chapters divided according to such similarities or differences of approach and tactic, as stated already.

Strategic Silence and Resistance: The maintenance of silence even in the face of physical and psychological atrocities generally tends to be read as a passive acceptance of the prevailing power structure and/or a compliance in its operation. Seen in the light of such passive surrender, silence/muteness is often understood as being 'imposed' upon by external forces. However, while discussing the autobiographical texts of Zora Neale Hurston and Marian Anderson, this dissertation argues that instead of being a forced imposition, silence can be a matter of choice and wilful adoption. When silence is deliberately manipulated and put to one's own use, it no longer remains a manifestation of oppression. Rather, it transforms into a mode of strategic, although subtle resistance.

In this regard, the dissertation primarily makes use of the ideas proposed by Doris Sommer as regards the possibility of using silence strategically. In "Sacred Secrets: A Strategy for Survival," Sommer suggests how marginalised/oppressed people employ silence as a means which allow a display of resistance, while also simultaneously staying aware of the need for "strategically responsible survival" (197). For minorities living in a regime run by the majority, language—otherwise deemed to be liberatory—can turn into a reason for further oppression if used indiscreetly. The employment of language or speech to voice differences and expose injustices can bring a person and the community he/she belongs to in direct confrontation with the holders of power thereby, endangering not only his/her own self but the community as well. Since speech becomes fraught with dangers, in such cases it is silence and its strategic manipulations and modulations that paradoxically offer the scope for resistance and agency.

The works of oppressed peoples—especially their autobiographical works—are expected to reveal all information pertaining to their exploitation. Such disclosure of intimate details supposedly strikes a connection with the reader who then, empathises with the author. Sommer, however, suggests that an uncritical acceptance or acknowledgement of this view might further serve to question the agency of the author—intimacy sought for without the explicit consent of the giver of information is a covert way of denying authority over one's private details. To quote from her:

> Empathy is hardly an ethical feeling, despite the enthusiasm for identifying with others… In effect, the projections of intimacy invite appropriations once the stretch is shortened between writer and reader… (199)

A forced demand for intimacy—which leads to identification—ironically deprives the author of his/her narrative control over the information in the text. Thus, authors, who insist on their refusal to fulfil readers' quest for complete details regarding them and their communities, actually assert their agency by doing so.

The dissertation examines Hurston's and Anderson's autobiographies, which consciously refute to talk about the racial plights affecting them and the Black communities that they are parts of, as deliberately frustrating readers' expectations and as employing silence strategically to assert narrative control and authority.

Racial/sexual trauma and political activism: While discussing the autobiographical works of political activists such as Melba Pattillo Beals, Angela Davis, Assata Shakur, and Elaine Brown, this dissertation places them in a frame that seeks to understand the relation between socio-historical, racial/sexual trauma and political resistance or activism. When one is pitted against an unjust, oppressive society, taking recourse to radical, political action so as to bring about positive, transformative changes can proffer a sense of meaning to one's life and existence. Involvement in political activism can, however, further traumatise participants in that it exposes them to further state sponsored violence: incarceration, physical as well as psychological tortures, threats to life etc. Despite this possibility of laying oneself open to extreme police/state brutality, positive social action can nevertheless still provide activists the inspiration to continue with the struggle. In this regard, the dissertation refers to Ronnie Janoff-Bulman's ideas regarding the possibilities offered by a "positive interpretation" (150) of otherwise devastating circumstances. In her book, *Shattered Assumptions: Towards a New Psychology of Trauma*, she argues:

> [T]wo types of interpretations are particularly common. The first involves evaluations of the victimization in terms of important lessons learned. Such interpretations entail perceiving the victimization in terms of benefits for oneself. The second entails understanding the traumatic experience in terms of its long-term benefits for others. This involves turning the victimization into a personally altruistic act. (150)

Janoff-Bulman's ideas speak for the possibility of agency even amidst physically and/or psychologically violent situations. She locates this agency in the power of the mind to engage in retrospective interpretations of such situations so as to come out of them. Exercising one's ability to analyse in the aftermath of a shattering event helps in "the transformation of unavoidable suffering into suffering that is meaningful and significant" (149). The lessons learnt in the light of tremendous suffering, according to Janoff-Bulman, concern, on the one hand, a re-evaluation of oneself as being endowed with the power to boldly face even the worst of situations and emerge triumphant, "[T]here is a newfound awareness of one's own strengths and possibilities. One can endure "months of hell" and come through it stronger, more able to handle life's future difficulties" (152). On the other hand, they involve an understanding of the suffering in terms of affirmative social or community action. The knowledge that one's extremely bitter and gruesome experiences can, in the long run, foster positive social change again helps in retaining the sense of meaning and agency, "Whether or not survivors can derive any benefits from the victimization for themselves, they can nevertheless…turn their traumatic experience into an altruistic outcome, either through interpretation or behavior" (153). Janoff-Bulman's arguments in this regard, thus, show how traumatic experiences or lineages perversely hold within themselves the possibility for meaning/change oriented positive reinterpretations and reaffirmations of those experiences.

Her ideas are particularly helpful in placing into perspective the psychology of political activists whose resistant activities are a response to brutal socio-political conditions and yet for whom such indulgence in resistance/activism always threatens further brutalisation. In the context of this dissertation, we apply Janoff-Bulman's ideas to examine the autobiographies of the Black American women political activists under scrutiny. We try to see and understand these texts in terms of how they embody the way socio-historical trauma and resistant political action remain linked to each other.

Narrative experimentation and resistance: For Black American women autobiographers like Angelou, Lorde, Walker and hooks, resistance to existing power structures manifest itself not just in the content but in the very 'form' of their autobiographical texts. This dissertation argues that their refusal to conform to the accepted conventions and norms of 'mainstream' autobiography suggest a more general ideological resistance to societal norms and expectations. Their texts also indicate that since the patterns of life lived and experienced by minority people are very different from

those privileged by birth, the narrative itineraries which embody those patterns also must swerve away from models of life-writing followed by the privileged mainstream. Experimenting with the forms of autobiography, then, offers the scope to contest any ideas of a universal template of life-writing.

In “Resisting Autobiography: Out-Law Genres and Transnational Feminist Subjects,” Caren Kaplan—drawing upon Derrida’s “The Law of Genre”—argues that the genre of autobiography, like any other generic division, immediately calls to mind the ‘out-law’ genres that cannot conform to its generic demands. The need for experimental ‘out-law’ forms indicates the inadequacy of autobiography to contain and cater to the self-representational demands and strategies of all communities. Speaking of such out-law genres, Kaplan argues:

> Out-law genres renegotiate the relationship between personal identity and the world, between personal and social history. Here, narrative inventions are tied to a struggle for cultural survival rather than purely aesthetic experimentation or individual expression. (212)

The very act of writing takes on political connotations as it turns into a means of “cultural survival,” of critiquing the erasures—whether epistemological or ontological—of different communities and cultures. Autobiography’s out-law genres speak for the politicised view that any self-representational act must take into account the unique representational strategies available to the individual autobiographer’s community. Incorporating the autobiographers’ “own familiar modes of expression and…own systems of signification” (213) into their texts allows the incorporation of “familiar” ideologies informing their worldviews as well. According to Kaplan:

> Out-law genres in autobiographical discourse…mix two conventionally “unmixable” elements—autobiography criticism and autobiography as thing itself. (208)

Kaplan seems to suggest that experimental forms, even as they urge their reading as autobiography, also are an implicit critique of the genre’s demands for universalist modes of self-expression and representation. Experimenting with the accepted forms of autobiography allows the scope to critique its conventions in the very act of creating variations on the genre, thus merging the two things: autobiography and criticism.

In *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women's Self Representation*, Leigh Gilmore coins the term, "autobiographics" to account for the experimental modes of writing that have come to define the genre. According to her:

> [T]he term *autobiographics*…describe(s) those elements of self-representation which are not bound by a philosophical definition of the self derived from Augustine, not content with the literary history of autobiography... Autobiographics, as a description of self-representation and as a reading practice, is concerned with interruptions and eruptions, with resistance and contradiction as strategies of self-representation. (42)

Gilmore's term recognises the formal, textual strategies adopted by writers who veer away from the techniques of conventional autobiography, which traces its roots to Augustine. These disruptive strategies offer the sites where self-representation, in the case of people who are not representative of the 'normative' subject of autobiography, takes place.

Angelou, Lorde, Walker and hooks all engage with formal experimentation while trying to locate an autobiographical 'I' that does not conform to any uncritical, monolithic definition of identity. The dissertation sees their texts as swerving away from traditional models to engage with their own definitions of what constitutes autobiography and autobiographical representation. Each refutes generic boundaries and limitations to create their own 'out-law' genre.

Revisionist historiography and resistance: Danticat, Marshall, Harris and Angelou complicate any rigid demarcation between their personal stories and the larger socio-historical backdrop against which they place themselves and their lives, as narrated and represented in their autobiographies. Anchoring their personal accounts against such historical settings allows them to see how the forces of history play a role in meaning-making and identity formation. More importantly, however, as this dissertation argues, it offers them the scope to 'rewrite' history.

Historiography or the writing of history presents a controversial ground where questions relating to who has the right to write, narrate or verify to the 'truth' of the history so recounted inevitably come in. Like all branches of epistemology, historiography, as an area of knowledge production and dissemination, has also been reserved for people whose lives are a confluence of privileged identity markers—white, male, heterosexual etc. In

this view of history written by the majority, the historical erasure of Blacks and other minority people could be taken as a given at most times. When minority people—challenging such erasures—engage in a retelling of history, therefore, it is bound to be revisionist. 'Minority historiography' is an attempt to look back and locate, in the pages of history, the accounts of people and communities who had hitherto been confined to the shadows. In as much as a sense of history, of one's lineage and ancestry are pivotal to a sense of identity, engaging in such revisionist history writing and thereby, making an entry into its privileged domain, helps minority people come up with a more empowered notion of their identity.

This dissertation sees the works of Danticat, Marshall, Harris and Angelou who embed different histories into their personal accounts as engaging in such revisionist historiography. Autobiography becomes the occasion for narrating their personal lives in relation to specific histories. In this regard, the dissertation makes use of comments regarding the intertwining of the genres of autobiography and history given by such scholars as Johnnie M. Stover. According to Stover:

> [A]utobiography…lends itself to historical as well literary approaches. As creative non-fiction, autobiography suggests the importance that place and time have on the development of the author…[T]he historical self of the author is very much a part of any autobiography. We as readers need to know out of what social, temporal or spatial location that self emerged. (4)

Stover suggests how the subject of autobiography is a product of the socio-historical conditions he/she is born into. This "historical self" of the autobiographer is anchored not only in a history he/she has lived and witnessed, but also one that has been passed down to him/her over the generations.

Similarly, in *Borderlines: Autobiography and Fiction in Postmodern Life Writing*, Gunnthorunn Gudmundsdottir points out how private memories intertwine with public, historical memories. She holds that "Autobiography is…always about stating an individuality while at the same time making it public, thereby giving individual experiences universal connotations" (6). The space presented by autobiography to see one's personal history in the context of a social/public history makes it an apt genre for a revisionist study of history—one where the minority autobiographer can carve out for

himself/herself the privileged position of a historian or historiographer, otherwise denied him/her.

Gudmundsdottir stresses the element of fiction in an autobiography: "how autobiographers negotiate the borders and boundaries between autobiography and fiction" (4). She claims that it is the writing process which is responsible for the fictionality in autobiographies because of "the dichotomy between the universal and the individual always present in autobiographies" (ibid). Further:

> As the individual autobiographer writes on universal experiences, such as mother daughter relationships, experiences of crossing cultures, or the death of a parent, he or she has to deal with the universal structure of these experiences. Universal structures necessarily contain a component deriving from conventions of representation, so they are in some sense always already 'made-up'. (5)

The writer draws upon constructions in language of experiences and emotions: "The writing process reveals a need to confirm or deny memories, and the memories themselves are embellished, interrogated, or conjured up" (12). This results in construction or reconstruction of memories and experiences.

Gudmundsdottir suggests that the processes of memory and recall are combined with their shaping and interpretation in the autobiographical text. As a consequence, past and present blend or the past comes alive in the mind and the imagination of the writer:

> Moments of interpretation and analysis of the past are strongly linked in these texts to almost overwhelming memories. These points of luminosity, these powerful memory experiences seem to invite the authors to write on them, to attempt to make sense of them. They…open up new ways into the past. Writing and memory here become…closely linked. (25)

The points of strong memories are similar to Wordsworth's 'spots of time' which allow the subject to construct his/her narrative around a selection of events. Writing about past memories opens up other related incidents/threads to make them connect and cohere.

Having established the constructed nature of autobiography, Gudmundsdottir points out the shaping act of the writer:

> Writing an autobiography entails choosing some memories and discarding others. More than that, it also means choosing a form for these memories, a narrative structure. In doing so the autobiographer consciously forgets (if that is possible) other interpretations of the same event, other memories that might contradict the one he or she writes about. (36)

The element of choice over the events selected for narration draws attention to the conscious, even self-conscious nature of the writing.

Affective communities and reparation ethics: As stated earlier, revision and resistance, however, do not happen to be the only concerns that get reflected in Black American women's autobiographical texts. Twenty-first century Black American women autobiographers writing during the late 2010s—with whose works this dissertation concludes—highlight how for them, it is no longer a politics of resistance but an ethics of reparation that seems important. We argue that their autobiographies embody their desire to forge 'affective communities' based on mutual trust, respect and genuine feelings of friendship not just amongst their own Black community, but across all racial-sexual divisions.

In order to put forth and justify this contention, the dissertation brings in Leela Gandhi's concept of "affective communities." Gandhi's concept, outlined in her *Affective Communities: Anticolonial Thought and the Politics of Friendship* (2006) and framed in the context of anti-colonial resistance paradoxically exhibited by people who were a part of the empire, suggests the possibility of genuine goodwill amongst people who otherwise belong to disparate cultures, communities and nations. For Gandhi, "friendship as the last trope of anticolonial thought" fostered the belief that differences between the "mutually quarantined categories of colonizer and the colonized" could be collapsed (14). In other words, it wasn't always necessary that the colonizer-colonized equation be based on antagonistic terms. As argued by Gandhi, anticolonial resistance history also offers examples of people who, rejecting the privileged position of colonizer, showed themselves capable of forging genuine friendships with the colonized. In such positive transactions across the colonizer-colonized divide, one could see the possibility of rising above differences in the interest of common humanitarian ideals. Friendship, according to Gandhi, in that it proposed a new frame to understand the anticolonial resistance struggle, became an effective political tool for change.

The scope offered by "affective communities" in comprehending cross-cultural ties guided by friendship is used, in the context of this dissertation, to account for the emphasis on love, hope and reparation that we find in the autobiographies of Michelle Obama, Susan Rice and Kamala Harris—all three of them eschewing a politics of hatred and hatred-fuelled resistance to project their view of an America which has risen above divisive, sectarian politics.

In this sense, this dissertation offers a critical conversation with select Black American women's autobiographies to help develop a socially accountable and culturally specific interpretive model. As we move from Zora Neale Hurston to Kamala Harris, we try to see them in a tradition of Black American women autobiographers, just as Braxton had suggested, but also remain attentive all the while to the shifts and changes in their perspectives and ideological moorings with the passage of time and change of circumstances. We see the autobiographers moving from a politics of resistance if not revenge to encompassing in their autobiographical texts an ethics based on love, hope and reparation. In the autobiographies of Hurston and Anderson, the resistance is subtle but undeniable; in those of Beals, Davis, Shakur, and Brown, resistance takes the form of political activism; in Angelou, Lorde, Walker and hooks, resistance gets manifested in the formal experiments and ideological shifts; in Danticat, Marshall, Harris and Angelou again, resistance morphs into conversations with received notions of history. Finally, when we come to Michelle Obama, Susan Rice and Kamala Harris—three powerful Black American women of distinction who wrote their autobiographies in the late 2010s—we no longer see the familiar obsession with injustice and resistance but with reparation and community empowerment.

This dissertation, thus, remains careful not to delimit itself with a narrow aim of understanding Black American women's autobiographies in terms of resistance alone. In tracing the evolution of Black American women's politics and praxis, as reflected in their autobiographies, we also see the genre of Black American women's autobiography itself undergoing changes in order to accommodate these shifts in the worldviews guiding the autobiographers. Rosenblatt had opined that owing to the circular trajectory of life in which Black Americans found themselves trapped, their narrative itineraries could not conform to the linear narrative of progress seen in the case of most White autobiographies. For Black Americans, therefore, the writing of autobiography could never suggest an end in the growth or development of the autobiographer—something that Rosenblatt ascribes

to White men who indulged in writing their autobiographies. In that he suggested how Black Americans ‘died’ into their autobiographies to start anew and afresh, we see the Black American women autobiographers under scrutiny in this dissertation as exemplifying this prospect of a new beginning at the end of their autobiographical journeys. Whether the ideology guiding them is one of resistance or ethical reparation, each autobiographer ends her autobiographical text on this note of a new found wisdom gained from retrospective introspection.

In the chapters that follow, we discuss in detail the concerns raised and theoretical frames proposed in this chapter.