

CHAPTER FOUR
**CONTESTING FRAMES, CONTESTING IDEOLOGY:
ALTERNATIVE SELF-REPRESENTATIONS**

Each day... different memories... came in a surreal, dreamlike style that made me cease to think of them as strictly autobiographical because it seemed that myth, dream, and reality had merged... As I wrote, I felt that I was not as concerned with accuracy of detail as I was with evoking in writing the state of mind, the spirit of a particular moment. (bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* 264-265)

What has been designated as Western autobiography is only one form of “life writing.” There are other modes of life story telling...to be recognized, other genealogies of life story telling to be chronicled, other explorations of traditions, current and past, to be factored into the making and unmaking of autobiographical subjects in a global environment. (Watson and Smith, *De/Colonizing the Subject: The Politics of Gender in Women’s Autobiography* xviii)

In *The Exploded Form: The Modernist Novel in America* (1980), James Mellard suggests that the historical trajectory of most literary forms—the modernist novel in America included—follows the Hegelian system of thesis-antithesis-synthesis. Mellard uses three terms—naïve, critical and sophisticated—to describe the three major breakthroughs in the modernist novel written by Faulkner, Joseph Heller and Richard Brautigan. Each new experiment tried to break away from its immediate predecessor, and created the conditions for the ‘exploded form’ of the modernist novel. While Mellard’s terms and tiering may appear a little ungainly in retrospect, his thesis on the mutual engagement of historical contexts with genres and vice versa is still useful, and more so when applied to the ‘exploded forms’ of other genres. This chapter seeks to examine Black American women writers who have experimented with traditional self-representational projects and offered an exploded form of life writing. It aims to analyse the autobiographical texts written by four Black American women writers—Maya Angelou, Audre Lorde, Alice Walker, and bell hooks—in their quest for self-preservation and self-definition. 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). Like most Black autobiographies, the autobiographical narratives under scrutiny in this chapter document the pain of marginalization in a predominantly “other” culture. However, they also show how experimenting with the modes of self-telling effects

differently empowered subjectivities. The writers under question challenge autobiography's accepted conventions by experimenting with different forms and decentering the "I" of autobiography as and when needed. These women perceive existing forms of self-representation available in life writing as limiting not only of life writing but of life itself, hence the contest of form and ideology.

The present chapter has the following hypotheses to begin with:

- that western templates of autobiography proved inadequate for the chosen writers;
- that formal experimentation breaking the conventions of autobiography was a conscious and deliberate moving away from the norms;
- that such experimental modes of writing facilitated the emergence of narrative itineraries that better encompassed the complexities of Black women's subjectivities.

In "De/Colonization and the Politics of Discourse in Women's Autobiographical Practices," the introductory piece to their critical anthology, *De/Colonizing the Subject: The Politics of Gender in Women's Autobiography*, Watson and Smith use colonization and decolonization as tropes to understand the material as well as the psychological/intellectual domination of minorities by majoritarian cultures, and the subsequent battles and struggles waged by those minorities to overthrow the chains of hegemonic oppression and assert themselves and their agency. 'Autobiography,' according to them, presents itself as one such site of intellectual power play—traditional autobiography, with its idealization of the privileged Western, White male as 'the only' producer/practitioner of the genre, forecloses any possibility of minoritized individuals ever assuming the position of the autobiographical 'subject.' However, just as the physical enterprise of colonization is toppled over by the desire of the colonized to gain access to their freedom, similarly intellectual colonization via exclusions and erasures is challenged by subverting the conventions and norms of the colonizers' knowledge systems. The exclusionary nature of autobiography, for instance, is resisted by the diverse modes of writing the 'self' into existence employed by occupants at the margins or peripheries of the 'mainstream' society. To quote Watson and Smith:

While popular practitioners carry on the old autobiographical tradition, other practitioners play with forms that challenge us to recognize their experiments in subjectivity and account for their exclusion from “high literature.” (xviii)

The authors, here, are referring to self-representational writings that diverge from autobiography’s accepted traditions. Continuing with their arguments, they further write:

For the colonial subject...her narratives do not necessarily fall into a privatized itinerary, the journey toward something, the personal struggle toward God, the entry into society of the *Bildungsroman*, the confessional mode and the like. Such Western modes both define and collusively maintain the narrow range of narrative paradigms, holding the politicized dimension of identity and self, as of cultural consciousness, in abeyance. (xx)

In ‘mainstream’ autobiography, the narrative traces the “privatized” journey of an individual whose privileged position in the society guarantee his success. The various modes of representation—spiritual, confessional, or the *Bildungsroman* for that matter—are ones that allow him the ‘glory’ of knowledge and wisdom at the end of the narrative no matter the hardships faced on the way. Watson and Smith point out how such fixed narrative patterns emphasizing the individual are restrictive and fail to recognize the individual as part of larger political structures. Rejecting this “privatized itinerary,” social minorities like Black women have to find narrative frames and patterns that can express “the politicized dimension of identity and self.”

The “play with forms” is also discussed by Caren Kaplan in “Resisting Autobiography: Out-Law Genres and Transnational Feminist Subjects.” Kaplan’s “out-law” genres of autobiography, rather than depicting the individual, private journey of an ‘autonomous’ self, depicts a politicized self who is aware of how her location in the hierarchical balance of power shapes her world and worldview. She argues:

[P]ower dynamics construct genres and counter-genres, including autobiography and criticism...The deconstruction of autobiography...marks the constitution of “writing autobiographies” that can work *for* and *with* women so that the law of genre will no longer dominate the representation and expression of women from different parts of the world. (215)

Kaplan's incorporation of "women from different parts of the world" speak for a 'culturally-specific' mode of feminist resistance to the generic demands and conventions of autobiography. Such deconstructionist engagement with autobiography makes the otherwise exclusionary genre available to different women across different spectrums of the society.

Gilmore, similarly, in *The Limits of Autobiography*, is interested in "discerning when and how self-representation operates at a distance from the conventions of autobiography" (7). She makes an expansive study of different texts which brings to the fore the "limits" of a genre focused on the 'self.' According to her:

[A]utobiography is characterized less by a set of formal elements than by a rhetorical setting in which a person places herself or himself within testimonial contexts as seemingly diverse as the Christian confession, the scandalous memoirs of the rogue, and the coming-out story...to achieve [a] proximate...relation to what constitutes truth in that discourse. These contexts are reproducible; repetition of the forms...establish expectations in audiences. (3)

Gilmore, here, points out the problematic relation between truth-telling and autobiography. Autobiography's demands for the 'truth' of the autobiographer's life also sets out the "contexts" and the "forms" in which that truth can be narrated. These "expectations" about 'form' that Gilmore talks about, of course, come with associated notions of conformation to certain rules—rules that ultimately defines the particular form or genre. As she argues, however, one needs to be cautious against any universalist application of such 'generic norms':

Yet conventions about truth telling, salutary as they are, can be inimical to the ways in which some writers bring...stories into language. The portals are too narrow and the demands too restrictive. (3)

Minority writers are already under suspicion when it comes to the authority assigned to them and their lives. The dominant autobiographical modes, therefore, with their strict conventions regarding authenticity and truth-depiction can further jeopardize writers from marginalized communities whose truths and realities are very different from the majority, and hence, cannot conform to available conventions or models.

In *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women's Self-Representation*, Gilmore examines how norms regarding genre and gender converge in the medium of autobiography. Gender as a means of identity construction lays down certain normative rules of behaviour in order to differentiate between the sexes. Similarly, the term 'genre' entails specifications as to what texts could be included under a particular category such as autobiography. Fixing the terms with normative assumptions and expectations, however, ignores their fluidity and flexibility. Indeed, Gilmore shows how "the various positionings of women within and against constructions of gender provides a powerful illustration for claims against the "naturalness" of gender" (20). Drawing from De Lauretis, she writes:

Gender, as de Lauretis has shown, should not be conceptualized as sexual difference, which boils down to woman's difference from man, but as both "representation and as self-representation...the product of various social technologies...and of institutionalized discourses, epistemologies, and critical practices, as well as practices of daily life." (24)

Gender as the expression of the multiple, complex subject positioning of women, then, is not a static label as is often projected. As such any attempt to incorporate the complexities or multiplicities that "woman" as a gendered identity subsumes under it into a fixed narrative pattern proves problematic. Many women fail to conform to autobiography's generic demands and feel compelled, as this chapter argues, to experiment with new narrative itineraries of the self. Such "non-recognition," to quote from Gilmore, can be conceived as "an act of resistance" (20). She argues that the 'autobiographical subject' can emerge as an active agent in 'autobiographical production' by rhetorically positioning herself vis-à-vis the narration and the event. She says:

The autobiographical subject is produced not by experience but by autobiography. This specification does not diminish the autobiographer; rather, it situates her or him as an agent in autobiographical production...[W]hen an autobiographer wishes...to represent herself in opposition to a certain standard of "truth" ...she knows what she's doing rhetorically and is not merely telling what happened. (25)

The writing of autobiography, thus, is a manipulation, a performance with the autobiographer actively 'producing' or 'creating' a certain version of *her* truth and

identity. It is in such performance that Gilmore's concept of "autobiographics," discussed earlier in "Chapter One" comes in.

As the writers under scrutiny in this chapter suggest, for most Black American women, too, a narrative itinerary that charts the steady progression of the individual through hurdles to ultimate success, with her individuality and autonomy asserted at all points of this journey, cannot suffice. Their life stories cannot unproblematically follow the model of the bildungsroman or for that matter, the 'rags to riches' story of the American dream. Instead of the linearity of progress, what their lives offer are isolated moments of success (if any) which cannot gather into a cumulative narrative of growth. Black American women wanting to write their autobiographies, therefore, have to search for "out-law" modes of life-writing like most minority people.

It is in the light of these arguments that the present chapter tries to understand the unconventional autobiographical practices employed by the Black American women writers discussed in the current chapter. With their complex strategies of representation of the self, their self-representational writings consciously dither from conforming to generic conventions and create subject positions which challenge the normative 'I' of autobiography. This chapter, thus, sees the radical, autobiographical "I" adopted by these writers as a consciously chosen position of political intervention. They create new spaces via their autobiographies from which to forge their entry into the restricted domain of meaning creation and interpretation.

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings

Maya Angelou, with her seven volumes of autobiography—*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), *Gather Together in My Name* (1974), *Singin' and Swingin' and Getting' Merry like Christmas* (1976), *The Heart of a Woman* (1981), *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* (1986), *A Song Flung Up to Heaven* (2002) and *Mom & Me & Mom* (2013)—questions the very possibility of a stable autobiographical self and instead presents the notion of a contingent self constantly subjected to variations and reformulations. If the autobiographical subject is a construction of autobiography, the writing of multiple volumes of one's autobiography suggests how this subject is always in process. In other words, Angelou seems to be implying that as a Black woman writer she cannot isolate a single, specific point which she can claim as the moment enshrining her

success and thereby, suggesting a completion to life and its meanings—something that Western, White, male and therefore, privileged autobiographers can proudly do.

For Angelou, like for other minority writers, life is continually a series of obstacles and difficulties, interspersed, at times, with small moments of triumph. Hence, the idea of a single autobiography enumerating some specific events as emblematic of her life seems redundant to her. In fact, sometimes the same events depicted in an earlier volume are repeated, retold in latter volumes from different perspectival points. Angelou, thus, challenges and disrupts any idea of the self-sufficiency of the autobiographical text. In “Maya Angelou Writing Life, Inventing Literary Genre,” Eleanor W. Traylor discusses the author’s conception of the fluidity of all identity markers. According to him:

Maya Angelou’s...[texts]...constitute a genre which dislocates received concepts of self and liberates an antecedent life-writing genre chained in time-bound categories of reductive designation. The narratives chart a continual motion of becoming, consciously interrogating every manifestation of an emerging and emergent self...asking who is she and who is she to me? (102)

Traylor points here to the impossibility of assigning a fixed name or “designation” to the narrative selves that we encounter in Angelou’s autobiographical writings. Her autobiographical self is always in the process of “emergence” and never completely there in the text. Continuing with his idea of the mobility or volatility of the subject(s) in the author’s texts, Traylor again writes:

[T]hey are clauses in the endless syntax of identity. They permit no end-punctuation because the self, insists the narratives, is a process.... [Angelou] has recorded this process in “ago time, now time”...for time to come. (102-103)

To think of identity in any rigid, definitive terms, then, is misconstrued as it is always ‘in formation.’ Angelou’s multiple autobiographical texts suggest how for the Black woman subject, the sense of self becomes increasingly contingent with time and experience in spite of the contexts and events being the same. The past, “ago time” and the present, “now time” is repeatedly interrogated and in the process revised to leave a template of an “emergent” Black female subjectivity for future readers.

While doing justice to Angelou’s autobiographical oeuvre in its entirety would demand an expansive study specifically dedicated to the author, the present chapter as

stated in the beginning seeks to focus its attention only on the first text in the series, *Caged Bird* (in the latter chapter, we discuss another of her autobiographies, *All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes*). The text, which almost reads like a novel in its arrangement and evocative language, starts with a traumatised child Angelou trying to make sense of her life and ends with her embracing of motherhood at the age of sixteen. Even within this single text, the author speaks from multiple subject positions—that of the displaced, alienated child tormented by what she sees as the parents,' especially the mother's abandonment of her, the prepubescent rape victim, the adolescent vehemently trying to anchor herself within a racist society, the sixteen-year-old young, immature but excited mother, and that of the adult author analysing and commenting upon all of these voices. As the narrative progresses, these shifts in the positionality of the speaking subject are made obvious.

The "Prologue" to Angelou's first volume makes clear the sense of displacement and alienation that the child Maya is subjected to. It starts with the opening two lines of a poem which she was supposed to recite at the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church:

'What you looking at me for?

I didn't come to stay...' (3)

This direct question put forth to the audience at the church as well as to readers reading her transformation to a "specular object" (Henke 108) open to everyone's scrutinising eyes makes her uncomfortable and she can no longer go on with the recitation. The child author's assertion that this inability is less a betrayal of memory than a deliberate forgetting—"I hadn't so much forgot as I couldn't bring myself to remember"—highlights her separation from and defiance towards the people she is addressing her poem to (ibid). The young Maya is tired of her objectification as a coloured girl with "dirty like mud" skin and ugly "skinny legs" (4). And as a source of respite, she tries to create an alternate subject position. The assertion, "I didn't come to stay..." signifies, to the child, the fleeting nature of her current identity as a Black girl in a Southern community (3).

Indeed, young Maya concocts a fantasy of being actually "one of the sweet little white girls who were everybody's dream of what was right with the world" (4). She builds on an elaborate account of how her Black identity was an "ugly dream" (ibid) or how the people who had laughed at her would realise her real beauty and come begging for forgiveness. Ashamed of her identity, Maya starts fantasizing about her 'real' 'White' self,

forced to hide, as it were, beneath the “too-big Negro girl” due to the curse of a “cruel fairy stepmother” (5). Contriving this imaginary identity and assuring herself of its truth, the child defiantly asks her audience—the gathering at the church as well as the projected community of readers—to not only recognise the temporary status of her Black identity but also to identify her with her self-fashioned ‘white’ self.

When the young Maya is forced to come out of her dream and take account of her only true identity, she becomes highly self-conscious and desperately wants to flee from the place. Emotional anxiety turns into physical discomfort as the child is faced with a sudden, uncontrollable urge to pee (5). Giving in to her body’s natural tendencies, she wets herself on the way to the toilet itself. Ashamed of herself and fearing an inevitable whipping at home, the child starts crying. Yet at the same time, she feels a sense of relief that her head would not be “busted” from the pressure to control her urges.

Just as the child is relieved by prioritising her body’s needs over and above the society’s expectations and rules surrounding such needs, the final realisation and recognition of her identity as a Black girl, no matter how tormenting and shameful, is also equally comforting. The “Prologue” ends with the voice of the adult author taking over that of the child. Angelou having not only looked back at her child self but also having placed herself in that position, realises how the Black girl child’s awareness and knowledge about her precarious position as Black and female in the society threatens her very existence:

If growing up is painful for the Southern Black girl, being aware of her displacement is the rust on the razor that threatens the throat.

It is an unnecessary insult. (6)

The author’s understanding comment on her predicament as a child serves to heal her own long felt battered sense of self. With her mixing of the reality of a Black girl child’s actual, lived conditions and the very different ‘reality’ of her dreams, Angelou shows the interior psychic world of the child. As Oprah Winfrey comments in her “Foreword” to *Caged Bird*, Angelou, right from the “Prologue” reveals “insights and feelings” (viii) that she and perhaps every poor, little Black girl could bond with.

Another significant episode in *Caged Bird* which breaks the conventions of Black women’s autobiography is the one in which an eight-year-old Maya is raped by her

mother's boyfriend, Mr. Freeman. The incident is intensely traumatic and shattering for the child with the pain and confusion aggravated by her inability to comprehend what had happened to her. Young Maya's guilt and shame is further enhanced by the fact that she had indeed initially taken pleasure in her perpetrator's abuse of her. When Mr. Freeman had tried to satisfy his sexual desires through her body, initially for the first two times, he had limited himself to merely pleasuring himself to gratification. Indeed, as Angelou recalls, her child-self had even enjoyed his sexual overtures which she had mistaken for warm fatherly embraces,

He held me so softly that I wished he wouldn't ever let me go. I felt at home...I knew he'd never let me go or let anything bad ever happen to me. This was probably my real father and we had found each other at last. (79)

Angelou, speaking from the subject position of eight-year-old Maya, shows how the child's innocence is betrayed by an adult she places in her father's position. In Maya's 'odd' welcoming of Mr. Freeman's physical moves and gestures, we see an ironical substantiation of her persistent craving for paternal/parental affection. Left in the care of her grandmother from the age of three, *Caged Bird* highlights the child's sense of having been betrayed by her parents. When Mr. Freeman molests her, therefore, ironically, she cannot help enjoy his act as one of fatherly love and attention. In fact, after the first instance, she actually starts craving for his attention again, "I began to feel lonely for Mr. Freeman and the encasement in his big arms" (81). Maya so desperately wants the validation of what she imagines to be paternalistic physical warmth that the second time it is she who demands physical contact with Mr. Freeman: "I went over to him and sat quickly on his lap...I buried my face in his shirt and listened to his heart, it was beating just for me" (ibid). It is only when Mr. Freeman actually rapes her, that the child is able to register that something grossly wrong had taken place which was causing her immense bodily pain.

Her fear is amplified by the fact that the perpetrator warns her of killing both her and her brother Bailey Jr. if she ever dared to speak up. When the rape is finally discovered by her family, she is forced to name her rapist and even testify in court. The defendant of Mr. Freeman deliberately makes her uncomfortable by asking her ridiculous details like whether there had been any physical contact between them before the actual rape. A terrified Maya answers in negative and when her rapist gets killed that very day after being

released on bail, ascribes his death to her lie, “[A] man was dead because I lied” (93). Linking her ability of speech to potential deaths of others, she decides to stop speaking at all,

Just my breath, carrying my words out, might poison people and they’d curl up and die...I had to stop talking. (ibid)

Fear, guilt, and shame, thus, force Maya to shield herself in a protective layer of silence. In the depiction of the rape episode and the subsequent agony, Angelou, once again, keeps shifting between subject positions. The child’s confused handling of her situation—and the fact that she does not have a proper narrative within which to place and understand rape—draws the empathy of the adult author who at one-point comments,

The act of rape on an eight-year-old body is a matter of the needle giving because the camel can’t. The child gives, because the body can, and the mind of the violator cannot. (84)

Bringing in the biblical reference of a camel passing through “the eye of the needle”—the extremely narrow passage to Jerusalem, Angelou notes the forced, yet innocent and sacrificial surrender of the child’s body in the face of the depravity of the perpetrator.

By giving voice to her childhood sexual assault, Angelou deviates from many earlier Black American women autobiographers who felt burdened under the pressure to preserve their respectability by maintaining silence around sexual assaults. The politics of respectability has dictated Black women’s autobiographical writings since the nineteenth century slave narratives. Joseph in *PostRacial Resistance* looks into how resistance for Black American women had taken the form of everyday survival rather than organised violence. Enslaved Black women through their very act of surviving and striving to protect their dignity were engaged in subtle modes of resistance. A sense of personal integrity and dignity was sought to be achieved by challenging the projection of Black women as promiscuous. This was usually done through a refusal to give voice to the sexual assaults on them. In *Incidents in the Life of the Slave Girl*, Harriet Jacobs, for instance, abstains from focusing on her sexual abuse by her master. Darlene Clark Hine has referred to such disavowal as a “**culture of dissemblance**” whereby Black women seek to “protect the sanctity of inner aspects of their lives.” The dissemblance, although a way of tacit

resistance, prevented Black women from documenting their experiences of physical and emotional abuse.

In *Caged Bird*, Maya Angelou swerves away from such models of respectability politics. By giving voice to her experience of being raped by a Black man, she not only documents the psychosexual abuse of young Black girls but also deflates any notion of an Edenic Black community rooted in unity. The explicit discussion of her rape by the adult author, together with the presentation of the child's voice trying to empathise with her rapist, creates a radical narrative template for self-narration. On the one hand, by presenting the 'event' in this manner Angelou develops a narrative frame with which to deal with a black girl child's sexual trauma. On the other hand, she foregrounds a unique gender dynamics in the community that allowed such gross violations of Black children's bodies by members of the community. Commenting on how the household was always dominated by the presence of her mother, Vivian Baxter, with Mr. Freeman's role reduced to passively waiting for his lover to return home at night, Angelou, from the subject position of eight-year-old Maya, writes,

He simply waited for mother and put his whole self into the waiting...I felt very sorry for Mr. Freeman. I felt as sorry for him as I had felt for a litter of helpless pigs born in our backyard sty in Arkansas. (78)

Through a recalling of Maya's innocent albeit ironical linking of Mr. Freeman to helpless pigs, the author hints at the supposed emasculation of Black men by the figure of the strong, Black matriarch.

Angelou's depiction of her childhood not only does away with the politics of respectability grounded in silence but also creates a new narrative template with which to give voice to and account for a phase of life that does not have a fully developed language for sexual fear and desire. In the words of Suzette A. Henke, *Caged Bird* serves as an "act of scriptotherapy...that allows Angelou to read meaning into her own life-story" (116). Just as her teacher cum mentor, Mrs. Bertha Flowers had helped the child Maya recover from a silence that was conditioned by a plethora of conflicting impulses—self-preservation and self-flagellation being the two most visible—by invoking a language that has both analytical and therapeutic power of therapy. However, only an adult would have access to such language of power. In this case the adult author Angelou utilises the power of language to create a narrative that cures by de-scribing (hence 'scriptotherapy') the

fragmented social ethos that haunt Maya, a poor, little Southern Black girl. Angelou converts the spectres of stigma—the child Maya’s confusion and pain fed by the indifference and prejudice of the adult world—into a frame of Black female subjectivity that is always ‘emerging’ and ‘emergent.’ With her experimental mode of bringing her personal stories to readers, Angelou contributes to the formulation of new theories with which to read and analyse Black women’s writings.

Zami: A New Spelling of My Name

In *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, Audre Lorde experiments with the conventional autobiographical preoccupation with truth telling by mixing fact, fiction and myth to create new spaces for subjectivity. Indeed, the fact/fiction binary is a consequence of analytic strategies that see autobiography as inseparably related to truth, hence bringing forth ideas of an ‘authentic’ or ‘truthful’ subject position. However, ‘truth’ or ‘reality,’ as enunciated earlier, is a conflicted zone, politically and historically determined and inseparably related to the contemporary power dynamics. For marginalized communities, truth can denote a position they are not allowed to occupy and a language that they do not have the authority to speak. Since an ‘authentic’ subject position cannot be assumed by Black women, Lorde’s *Zami* exemplifies how they are forced to swerve from available models. In it, the author transforms autobiography into “biomythography,” the term she attributes to her experimental form. In the words of Gilmore,

In the transposition of autobiography to biomythography, the self, “auto” is renamed “myth” and shifted from the beginning to the center of the “new spelling.” Lorde’s mythmaking attaches less than to the life she retells than to the self who can tell it. (*Autobiographics* 27-28)

The use of the term, ‘auto-bio-graphy’ which often translates into ‘self-life-writing’ emphasizes the centrality of the life that is being described. By her refusal to use the term, Lorde, as Gilmore suggests, establishes the primacy of the self who does the telling while the life being narrated becomes nothing more than a myth. A sense of agency is, thus, imparted to the writer who can manipulate her memories to carve out a desired identity. Through her mythmaking project, she maps an alternative space where the self can feel at home.

Zami breaks conventions in the very way it begins. The “Prologue” to her text is preceded by a series of questions put forth to her ‘empowered’ self that we meet at the end of the text. These questions and the answers to them form a litany of the various people—mostly women who contribute in the growth of that self. Lorde, thus, shapes her expression of gratitude to these people as a rhetorical exercise,

To whom do I owe the power behind my voice, what strength I have become,
yeasting up like sudden blood from under the bruised skin’s blister....To whom do
I owe the symbols of my survival....To whom do I owe the woman I have become?
(3-4)

In answering these questions, she writes,

Images of women flaming like torches adorn and define the borders of my journey,
stand like dykes between me and the chaos. It is the images of women, kind and
cruel, that lead me home. (3)

At once, Lorde sets the note of resilience that is characteristic of the many women she has come across in her life. Like Shakur’s introductory poem discussed in the previous chapter, these questions that she puts forth must also be looked at for their contrasting images of strength and weakness. The use of such words and phrases as “chaos” or “bruised skin’s blister” indicate the mental as well as bodily trauma that the Black woman subject has to endure on the way of gaining “the power behind [her] voice” and reaching “home.”

Indeed, ‘home’ as a metaphor frames the text’s narrative arc. Lorde traces her journey of self-discovery from a feeling of geographical as well as emotional alienation and estrangement to finally being at ‘home’ with herself. This journey motif—hence ‘mythography’—is seen from the very first pages of the text. There is, for instance, a retrospective ordering of the narrative journey in her mother Linda’s fond remembering of her life before coming to America. For Lorde’s family, all throughout her childhood, America remained “the stranger’s country” (10), a temporary sojourn, a place which suggested economic possibilities but not home. The real home is a place left behind in the mother’s birthplace, Carriacou, which could only be lived vicariously through ‘re-invented’ memories.

As a child, Lorde sees her mother holding on to this idea of home through her attempts at finding bits and pieces of it in America. Her “search for tropical fruits...burning

of kerosene lamps...her treadle-machine...and her love of fish and sea” were all a means of keeping “little sparks of it...alive” (ibid):

This now, here was a space, some temporary abode, never to be considered forever nor totally binding nor defining...[I]f we lived correctly...then someday we would arrive back in the sweet place, back home. (13)

Home, thus, takes on mythic proportions for the child Lorde as it becomes a place longed for and yet never experienced. The loss of home is as much epistemological as it is ontologically experienced. Carriacou which Lorde comes to know through her mother is a place she could never locate on a map:

Carriacou...was not listed in the index of the Goode’s School Atlas nor in the Junior Americana World Gazette nor appeared on any map that I could find...I never found it, and came to believe my mother’s geography was a fantasy or crazy...and in reality...she was talking about the place...Curacou, a Dutch possession on the other side of the Antilles. (14)

The notion of “home,” thus, presents an epistemological crisis for the child who is forced to think of it as a “magic place,” a “fantasy” contrived by her mother. Lorde’s childhood disbelief of her mother exemplifies the way Western knowledge systems can obliterate actual geographies and thereby, also eradicate any information about the people and the ways of life in those places. She mentions, “I was twenty-six years old before I found Carriacou upon a map” (ibid). Lorde manages to locate Carriacou in the *Atlas of the Encyclopedia Britannica* when she opts for a degree in Library Science and, as part of the requirements for her degree, does a comparative study of different atlases of the world. That she needs twenty-six years of her life in order to find the place that meant “home” during her childhood and that too in only one atlas suggests the limitations of Western cartography as well as other epistemologies. *Zami* is an attempt to revise genealogies of received knowledge bases in order to bring marginalized histories and erased geographies to light.

Such revisionist attempt is of course arduous and problematic at times. But in a statement which can be read as a remark on the difficult process of writing her revisionist autobiography or “biomythography” as she calls it, Lorde notes her propensity for extremes: “[E]xtremes, although difficult and sometimes painful to maintain, are always

more comfortable than one plan running straight down a line in the unruffled middle” (15). Instead of engaging in the straightforward, middle path of writing a conventional autobiography, Lorde chooses to write a mythic journey of the Black woman. In that process of writing, she revises and refutes negative stereotypes of Black women, creating more positive, alternate frames to view them, their history and sexuality. By projecting positive images of powerful Black women, for instance, she refutes stereotypes generally associated with them.

Much of Lorde’s energy indeed goes into finding a term that would do justice to the power and resilience of Black women. Speaking of her childhood days, she mentions how the combination of “woman” and “powerful” not only appeared odd but also was “almost unexpressable...unless it was accompanied by some aberrant explaining adjective like blind, or hunchback, or crazy, or Black” (ibid). The placing of Black along with such terms as blind, hunchback, and crazy shows the kind of prejudice against Blacks. Thus, to talk about a powerful Black woman was indeed potentially derogatory rather than empowering, invoking the spectre of a dangerous, emasculating, and volatile Black woman. In order to remove this stigma, Lorde has to think of another conceptual frame, a new term, to understand the power and strength denoted by independent women like her mother:

[W]hen I was growing up, powerful woman equaled something else quite different from ordinary woman, from simply “woman.” It certainly did not, on the other hand, equal “man.” What then? What was the third *designation*? (ibid; emphasis added)

The search for a “third designation” frames Lorde’s relationship with the women she comes across. The search comes to a close when she accepts that the term ‘woman’ holds within itself multiplicities as well as differences. Any attempt to restrict ‘womanhood’ into a set or rigid criterion only exposes the patriarchal notions of a unified subjectivity represented by the Western White male. In one of the most persuasive passages of *Zami*, Lorde writes:

Being women *together* was not *enough*. We were *different*. Being gay-girls together was not *enough*. We were *different*. Being Black together was not *enough*. We were *different*. Being Black women together was not *enough*. We were

different. Being Black dykes together was not *enough*. We were *different*. (226; emphasis added)

Lorde, thus, looks away from for the accretion of identities. Woman, black, and lesbian—none of these terms meets, as Lorde says, the collective that accurately sums up the Black woman's identity that is unique and undeniable.

It is in her maternal roots that Lorde finds the term that holds the complexity she is looking for and that does “not settle for one easy definition, one narrow individuation of self” (ibid). This term is ‘Zami,’ “A Carriacou name for women who work together as friends and lovers” (255). The word denotes the ability of women to not only transcend differences but make them a source of strength and self-growth. ‘Zami,’ according to the author, is a word which justifies the presence of all the “[s]istah outsiders” (226), that go into the making of the self. In claiming it as “a new spelling of [her] name” in the subtitle to her text, she equates “Audre” with “Zami” and thereby, suggests how she is a unique amalgamation of all the women who have left their traces in her,

Every woman I have ever loved has left her print upon me, where I loved some invaluable piece of myself apart from me—so different that I had to stretch and grow in order to recognize her. And in that growing we came to separation, that place where work begins. Another meeting. (255)

In this open embrace of difference, Lorde does away with any fear or anxiety regarding the “other” so typical of Western modes of knowing and relating to the external world.

Rather than thinking in terms of binary constructions of the “self” and the “other,” she creates a version of the self that is an extension as opposed to being a negation of the other. Lorde realises that ‘home’ serves as the very “house of difference” rather than “the security of any one particular difference” (226). In this sense, the word ‘Zami’ offers the possibility of building on that house of difference. In fact, throughout Lorde’s text, we come across several “powerful and women-oriented women” (15), with whom Lorde identifies, establishes relationships—whether erotic or platonic, and yet comes to separate from them. The separation which ensues from a realisation of difference is however, not a painful rejection of the woman concerned but a moment of growth when the author, having imbibed her full potential, is ready to look out for newer meetings and encounters.

The absence of names and the subsequent desire to name the ‘nameless’ runs as a kind of motif through Lorde’s text. For much of the author’s childhood, racism is a problem that does not have a name. Her parents try to shield the children from the pain and humiliation of having to deal with it by refusing to name it in front of them: “[T]hey could best protect their children from the realities of race in America and the fact of American racism by never giving them name, much less discussing their nature” (69). One of Lorde’s first encounters with racial prejudice comes in the form of being often spat on as a small kid: “I remember shrinking from a particular sound, a hoarsely sharp guttural rasp, because it often meant a nasty glob of grey spittle upon my coat or shoe an instant later” (17). Her mother tries to protect her from the sense of utter humiliation and degradation by linking the event to poor manners and “low-class people” (ibid). Choosing not to name—for naming is legitimizing and empowering—such racialised attacks, she believes that she can create an alternate world free from racial ideologies.

As Lorde sees it, however, in their refusal to name and discuss racism, people like her parents may have contributed to its perpetuation. When the underlying reasons behind the prejudice—difference and erasure—are not made explicit, they soon transform into inscrutable monsters for the affected person or group. Much of the author’s childhood pain and humiliations can be attributed to this lack of understanding. The absence of a frame to place and understand difference turns it into a threat that the author cannot deal with:

I had grown up in such an isolated world that it was hard for me to recognize difference as anything other than a threat...[S]ometimes I was close to crazy with believing that there was some secret thing wrong with me personally that formed an invisible barrier between me and the rest of my friends, who were white. (82)

Lorde’s narrative, as has been discussed, traces the course of her journey from treating difference as a “threat” to accepting and embracing it. Coming back to the questions that she asks at the beginning of her text, Lorde ends her listing of the women figures from whom she believes she has derived her strength with the following lines:

To the journeywoman pieces of myself.
Becoming.
Afrekete. (5)

The author's narrative journey, thus, culminates with her 'becoming' or imbibing the characteristics of "Afrekete." If as Lorde claims, her autobiographical narrative is, in fact, a "biomythography," this particular figure forms a central part of her myth making project. Afrekete or Kitty—her shortened name comes in the form of a dream-like character that she first meets when she, along with her then lover Muriel, attend a party in St. Albans, Queens. Referring to herself as "the Black pussy-cat," Afrekete with her playfulness captivates Lorde's attention (243). It is, however, the author's subsequent meeting with her two years later when she was no longer with Muriel that becomes a sort of turning-point in her life. Afrekete, in the real sense, teaches her how identity can be fluid and slippery allowing one to embody multiple personalities in one body.

Several scholars have looked into Lorde's use of this mythic character. M. Charlene Ball, for instance, in "Old Magic and New Fury: The Theophany of Afrekete in Audre Lorde's "Tar Beach"" looks into the way *Zami* can be read as a revisionist quest narrative where the author gathering from "feminist archetypal theory, African American women's literary criticism, and African myth...hope(s) to show how African American women's writing...can provide correctives to the truncated and incomplete mythic images of women found in Western literature" (Ball 61). Afrekete, according to Ball, is representative of the repressed dimensions of a woman. The generally received images of womanhood elevate stereotypically feminine ideals and suppress the erotic. Lorde's *Zami* "fills a need in women's mythology, helping women of all colors re-vision their mythic journeys" (ibid 63). Similarly, Ana Louise Keating comments on how the author writes in "transformational" ways that "politicise" the subject and in the process restructures dominant patriarchal ideologies.

Indeed, as Ball points out, the reclaiming of the erotic as an integral part of identity is a central theme in Lorde. The author's coming to consciousness, as has already been discussed, is in many ways ushered by her meeting, knowing, and loving the women she comes across. In this regard, the meeting with Afrekete crowns the text's climax wherein Lorde realises the full potential of the erotic dimension of her personality and unashamedly accepts her identity as a Black lesbian. The erotic, then, is constitutive of a woman's very being—the core of her identity and her creativity.

One of the first instances where we are made aware of the author's lesbian identity is her chance encounter with a little girl, named Tony when she was merely four years old.

Just like Afrekete, Toni comes as a sort of mythical creature—a magical, make-believe “doll-baby” who appears out of nowhere (37). Moreover, the fact that she comes as the fulfilment of a “lifelong dream” (ibid) shows the young child’s yearning for a female companion, an early hint of her lesbian inclinations. Indeed, Lorde’s choice of words makes the sensuous nature of this meeting obvious. Toni is a “delectable creature” whose desirability for the author comes from the fact that unlike the image of a boy which her name concocts, she is “most certainly a girl”—one that she wants to claim as her very own (38). From this first confrontation with her alternate sexual desires, Lorde goes on to meet several other women in the course of her life who help her realise her true sexuality—Gennie, Ginger, Eudora, Muriel, and of course Afrekete.

The death of her “first true friend,” Gennie who also happens to be “the first person [she] was ever conscious of loving” (87) and the fact that they could never consummate their love leaves an emotional void in the author which haunts her relationships with the other women. When Lorde has her first real sexual relation with Ginger, she has the fulfilment of physical gratification but still suffers from an almost ‘forced’ emotional disconnect:

As long as I convinced myself that I wasn’t really involved emotionally with Ginger, I could delight in this new experience...I congratulated myself on how cool I was. (142)

This sealing of the emotional dimension of her carnal desires comes as a sort of protective mechanism against the pain of separation. Lorde is unable to come out of the emotionally shattering experience of losing her childhood friend and hence surrounds herself with a shield:

But people died or changed or went away and it hurt too much. The only way to avoid that pain was not to love anyone, and not to let anyone get too close or too important. The secret to not being hurt like this again, I decided, was never depending on anyone, never needing, never loving. (141)

It is this decision to consciously refrain from establishing any emotionally passionate relationship that ultimately leads to their separation despite Lorde’s assertion that, “[l]oving Ginger that night was like coming home to a joy I was meant for” (139).

When the author visits Mexico, she forms a relationship with a woman named Eudora. Unlike her relation with Ginger with whom she had been apprehensive of making the first move and then of being found lacking in performance, she fully understands her physical attraction towards Eudora and is more fully acceptant of her sexual ‘skills.’ As she expresses her desire for Eudora, Lorde writes,

As I spoke the words, I felt them touch and give life to a new reality within me, some half-known self come of age, moving out to meet her. (167)

Despite her deep feelings for the woman, the relationship however, abruptly ends when the author visits Guatemala for a while only to find Eudora missing when she returns. The complicated state of affairs she had landed herself in with the assertion of her political beliefs make Eudora unwilling to allow Lorde in to her life and problems.

With Muriel, who is a White, Italian woman, the writer finally manages to forge a relationship, the “camaraderie and warmth” of which “breached places within [her] that had been closed off and permanently sealed...when Genevieve died” (194). Notwithstanding the fact that she was White, Muriel becomes an extension of Lorde,

Slowly but surely, Muriel became more and more like a vulnerable piece of myself....I fashioned this girl...into a symbol of surrogate survival, and fell into love like a stone off a cliff. (190)

With Muriel, then, the author seems to come to a full realisation of her sexuality in all its physical as well as spiritual dimensions. Confident in their love for each other, the two also for a while experiment with the idea of “communal love” when both openly express feelings for a woman named Lynn and even lets her stay with them. Like her earlier relations however, the relationship with Muriel also comes to be strained with the latter’s increasing depression and sense of inadequacy when compared to Lorde’s achievements, and the two ultimately separate.

The deeply passionate affair with Muriel however, allows Lorde the scope to ruminate on how race comes to play in same-sex relationships. While the lesbian community of which the author was a part comprised of women from different racial and class backgrounds, there was a tendency within the community to believe that the very fact of their lesbianism turned them in to one uniformly oppressed group. Lorde and Felicia, another Black lesbian, however, realise that even as they shared the most intimate detail

about their lives—their sexual orientation—with their White lesbian friends, yet the question of race was something they could neither forget nor ignore. And despite their shared allegiances and relationships, Blackness always remained an invisible barrier dividing their sexual identity against racial lines. This held true even with Muriel whom Lorde otherwise deemed an essential part of her own being:

Between Muriel and me, then, there was one way in which I would always be separate...I was Black and she was not...[I]t coloured our perceptions and made a difference in the ways I saw pieces of the worlds we shared, and I was going to have to deal with that difference outside of our relationship. (204)

Muriel as a White woman cannot comprehend the way racism shaped the course of development of a Black woman's psyche and hence fails to see the fundamental differences between Lorde's and her modes of relating to the world.

The alienation of Black lesbians even within the lesbian community, according to Lorde, can be made out from the way they preferred or were rather forced to remain closeted. As she writes:

It was hard enough to be Black, to be Black and female, to be Black, female, and gay. To be Black, female, gay, and out of the closet in a white environment...was considered by many Black lesbians to be simply suicidal. (224)

The author relates how she longed to find other Black lesbians in the "gay bars" (ibid) she visited. Knowing the lack of support in both the Black and gay communities, they remained suspicious and afraid of revealing their true identities. And when they did come out of the 'closet,' it was often always in fixed roles as "butches". Lorde comments on how role-playing in the lesbian community mimicked the gender divisions and expectations of the straight society. Black women knew that with their nonconformity to accepted standards of beauty, they could never be acceptable in the feminine role of "femmes". Hence, they compensated for any such rejection by assuming the role of "butches" who compete "to have the most "gorgeous femme" on their arms" (ibid).

Lorde's understanding of her sexuality fostered by the women she first loves, and then lets go, leads her to recognizing differences within the Black community. The recognition helps her assume a subject position that celebrates difference as the very basis

of identity. The women whom she meets, and draws her strength from, are strong women bearing, for Lorde, the mark of the Amazonas:

Their shapes join Linda and Gran'Ma Liz and Gran'Aunt Anni in my dreaming, where they dance with swords in their hands, stately forceful steps, to mark the time when they were all warriors. (104)

The mythmaking never stops. *Zami* is an autobiography that textualizes difference. Lorde's text not only breaks the conventions of autobiography but also accepted societal norms and conventions.

In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens and The Chicken Chronicles

It is clear that Maya Angelou and Audre Lorde experiment with the very form of life writing in different ways. Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* shows how personal criticism can be an experimental form of life writing. While the text does not conform to the traditional definitions of autobiography, the essays that make up the text show the evolution of the author's consciousness as a Black American 'womanist' writer. Although the essays and chapters are not arranged chronologically and are a mixture of personal reflections, anthropological studies, social analyses, and literary criticism, among others, together they evolve as a narrative of the writer's journey. The text also carries traces of all of Walker's literary foremothers who are given a vicarious existence through her. Speaking of *Mothers' Gardens* with which she concludes her study of African American women's autobiography in *Rhetoric and Resistance in Black American Women's Autobiography*, Johnnie M Stover writes:

It is autobiography, it is anthropology, it is history, and it is literature. Walker demonstrates with this collection the continuation of black women's merging of genres and their embrace of creative outlets that free their art and voices. (194)

In compiling the different chapters of the text, Walker, thus, experiments with the intricate and inevitable ways in which criticism—literary, socio-historical or personal—remains connected to one's life story.

Linda Anderson, in her discussion of the autobiographical in personal criticism, in *Autobiography: The New Critical Idiom* (2001) talks about how most "advocates of the personal within criticism speak from 'minority' positions, as gay, immigrant, black, Asian

or female” (127). She cites Joonok Huh to suggest how the merging of personal elements into criticism breaks away from available models to seize opportunities of speaking and reaching out (see 127). Similarly, Anderson also discusses Nancy K. Miller’s “understanding of the personal as itself theoretical” (129). By implicating the personal within the theoretical and vice-versa, Miller believes that one can overcome the problems that emerge when the “subject of theory” is “absent” (128). When the geo-political or socio-historical positioning of the subject of theory is not taken into consideration, h/she risks assuming a universalist agenda, “speaking *as* and speaking *for*” all without accounting for differences (ibid).

In *Mothers’ Gardens*, Walker by mixing autobiography with criticism, proposes a new theoretical/conceptual space that is uniquely attentive to the concerns of Black women and that contests their erasure from major epistemologies, including literary history and theory. Walker’s search for her “mothers’ gardens” is a search for heritage, traditions and the legacy of Black women’s creativity. The figure of “gardens” serves as a metaphorical representation of the Black woman’s creative spirit. The eponymous chapter wherein the author discusses these things and around which the text is structured was originally a lecture that she gave in 1974 at Jackson State University, Mississippi. It shows her ruminating on how Black ancestral mothers, grandmothers or great-great-grandmothers strove to keep alive their creativity in everyday, mundane acts like quilting or gardening. Walker highlights the strength and resilience of these women who, despite the extremely exploitative environments which threatened their talents, kept their creative spirits high and passed on the same to their progeny.

The author starts the essay with a reference to Jean Toomer’s meeting with Black women on his visit to the South during the early 1920s. These women who could do nothing but give in to the abuse of men who exploited them were compelled to take on a kind of sainthood: “In the selfless abstractions their bodies became to the men who used them, they became more than ‘sexual objects,’ more than even women: they became ‘Saints’” (232). The association of the oppressed and exploited women with ‘saints,’ shows the kind of self-sacrifice that was demanded of Black women. Walker instinctively puts forth the rhetorical question:

Who were these Saints? These crazy, loony, pitiful women? Some of them, without a doubt, were our mothers and grandmothers. (ibid)

From this tracing of the women as being progenitors of contemporary Black women, the author goes on to deliberate on how they were not ‘saints’ but artists—artists “driven to a numb and bleeding madness by the springs of creativity in them for which there was no release” (233). Instead of words, they had to find some other means of expression as mentioned in the earlier paragraph.

In what can be seen as a revising of Virginia Woolf’s preoccupations in *A Room of One’s Own*, Walker again asks:

What did it mean for a black woman to be an artist in our grandmothers’ time? In our great-grandmothers’ day? It is a question with an answer cruel enough to stop the blood. (ibid)

The eponymous essay, however, has to do less with crying over the absence of any avenues of creative expression and more with the persistence of Black women who, overcoming all oppression, transformed their labour into artistic creations. The author, for instance, mentions an exquisite quilt that is on display at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. This quilt “made of bits and pieces of worthless rags” (239) and depicting “the story of the Crucifixion” has no definite artist claiming it. A note below the piece of art comments that a Black woman from Alabama whose identity could not be traced or verified any further had probably stitched it a hundred years ago. The author goes on to deliberate upon how Black women like the creator of that particular quilt have given vent to their creative skills using whatever “materials she could afford, and in the only medium her position in society allowed her to use” (239). That old quilt stands as a reminder of someone’s craft which with the passage of time had become signature art.

Walker traces contemporary Black women artists’ works to this quite ancient, although unacknowledged, heritage. At one point, referring to the influence of her mother in her works, she writes: “[S]o many of the stories that I write, that we all write, are my mother’s stories” (240). The author, here, refers to the ways the crafts of Black women including her own have been a reflection and extension of the stories they grew up listening and the skills they unconsciously imbibed from their mothers. In her personal case, Walker notes her mother’s love for gardening. Burdened with multiple tasks since daybreak up till late night, her mother converted the garden into a canvas for expressing that otherwise stifled creative dimension of her personality. Amidst all her sufferings, gardening gave the woman an outlet to indulge in her creativity.

Walker observes her mother's work in the garden as her time away from her daily chores, creating a space of her own:

[I]t is only when my mother is working in her flowers that she is radiant, almost to the point of being invisible—except as Creator: hand and eye. She is involved in work her soul must have. Ordering the universe in the image of her personal conception of Beauty. (241)

Walker's mother, like the anonymous quilt-maker, has transformed what was meant to be another laborious task into a piece of art, an expression of her very "soul." It is this "love of beauty and a respect for strength" (243) that the author has inherited from her mother. In a tribute to the woman and a recognition of the influence she had on Walker's own art, the author writes: "[I]n search of my mother's garden, I found my own" (243). Her mother had shown her how one could create something of beauty against all odds.

This tracing of the legacy of Black women artists to mothers and foremothers provides an answer to the questions she had raised in the opening chapter of her text: the Black artist's search for models. Insisting on the necessity of earlier examples which would guide the artist at his/her own work, Walker comments:

The absence of models...is an occupational hazard for the artist, simply because models in art, in behaviour, in growth of spirit and intellect—even if rejected—enrich and enlarge one's view of existence. (4)

Since the Black artist/writer did not have models to follow, they had to create their own. Drawing upon Toni Morrison's assertion that her books were indeed a reflection of what she as a Black woman wanted to read, Walker points out that Black writers, in writing their texts, both "point the direction of vision and follow it" (4). She finally revises Morrison's statement by adding that Black writers write not only what they wanted to read, but what they "*should have been able to read*" (13). She gives new direction to Black women's writing.

According to Walker, the absence of models for the Black artist is more than compensated for by the "sense of community," of beauty amidst adversity that s/he inherits. Community and beauty provide a freshness of thought, a richness of imagery which only the Black writer can access. Cautioning, however, against any ill-conceived "romanticising" of Black life, Walker says:

Nor do I intend to romanticize the Southern black country life.... I am simply saying that Southern black writers, like most writers, have a heritage of love and hate, but they also have enormous richness and beauty to draw from...[T]hey, too, know that “though all is not well under the sun, history is not everything.” (21)

The Black writer creates a unique legacy of his/her own by fighting the shackles of history while, in fact, drawing upon that history to create something for the reader.

In *Mothers' Gardens*, a sisterhood of Black women writers emerges, bound by a sense of kinship not only to contemporary writers but to literary foremothers having no place in the canon of written literature. Like Lorde's glorification of “the journeywomen pieces of herself” who leave their traces upon her, Walker celebrates the creative spark of the Black artist. She foregrounds the work of Black female artists—whose oppression far exceeded that of the men—who managed to sustain and consolidate their creativity despite tremendous adversities. That indomitable creative spark continues to inspire present generation Black women writers. Through the author's deliberations on how her works, in many ways, are a retelling of the stories she had heard from her mother, of the folklore that was an intrinsic part of her growing-up years, we are given insights into the forces that form and shape the worldview of a Black woman writer.

With Walker's *Mothers' Gardens*, therefore, we argue that autobiographical writing need not necessarily equate self-inscription with the telling of one's life. In several texts autobiographical writing is created by way of a unique mode of criticism or personal reflection. In other words, what looks like a personal essay or reflection or a piece of criticism turns out, on closer analysis, to be a form of experimental autobiographical writing. As discussed earlier, Walker's *Mothers' Gardens* contains several pieces that appear to be essays or reviews. The point is that in these reflections we find revelations of Walker's observations on her own life. The autobiographer puts herself in proxy in the lives of the writers and events examined by her. In other words, she repeatedly allegorises self-writing through criticism. The self is no longer revealed via a coherent narrative recounting personal experiences. Rather it is highlighted through different modes and practices of reading/criticism. To this end, the act of reading/writing itself becomes an allegory of life and life-writing.

In a similar vein, in *The Chicken Chronicles*, Walker presents a series of experiential self-observations, primarily detailing her experiences and moments of

epiphany with her chickens over a period of time. These self-observations point to her life, writings, travels and relationships, all refracted through her letters to or conversations with her chickens. In the book, she gives names to the birds—one of them called Gertrude, after Gertrude Stein—as she would have given names to her own children. She addresses the chickens as her children and through a series of epistolary revelations, she offers significant tit-bits of her own life. The world of the chickens is both affective and non-human. Clearly, the observations on her bonding with the chickens allegorise inter-species bonding on the one hand and the bonding of human beings treated as non-humans (Blacks/marginals /LGBTQs) on the other. In this case, Walker’s friendship with the chickens also suggests the friendships between women, Blacks, marginals and the LGBTQ people. The reflections on her bonding as a Black woman with chickens, whom she invests with independent personalities and traits, is another example of life-writing devoid of direct and exclusive self-narration.

Walker’s text begins with her contemplations on the human tendency to ignore the non-human world despite their overwhelming presence. Recounting how she had been suddenly made aware of the existence of chickens, she writes:

ONE AFTERNOON, I noticed, as if for the first time, a chicken and her brood crossing the path in front of me...I was stopped in my tracks, as if I had never seen a chicken before. And in a way, I hadn’t. Though I grew up in the South where we raised chickens every year, for meat and for eggs... (*Chicken Chronicles* 11)

The invisibility rendered to chickens by human beings in general seem to reflect the invisibility ascribed to minority cultures and communities by the majority. Walker, herself a victim of the exclusions and erasures marking the lives of Black women, had been re-enacting the same exclusionary behaviour when it came to her dealings with chickens—representative of the non-human and hence ‘powerless’ world—until one day she is suddenly forced to acknowledge their presence. The author seems to be suggesting how ‘invisibility in visibility’ is a real concern whenever there is an unequal balance of power.

However, a shared understanding of the pain of being ignored or being rendered invisible can and does become grounds for solidarity and unity of purpose. Walker’s own experience of the ‘invisibility’ faced by Black women, for instance, makes her empathise with the chickens once she is able to recognise their presence. In a rhetorical ‘rebuking’ of her earlier ignorance, she writes: “Why hadn’t I noticed? *Had I noticed?*” (ibid) Walker’s

encounter with the chicken that crossed her path and supposedly compelled her to “notice” the species for the first time, also forces her to acknowledge certain qualities in it that are generally reserved for humans:

She was industrious and quick, focused and determined. Her chicks were obviously well provided for and protected under her care. (ibid)

The author, thus, infuses the chicken with a sense of agency. Its ‘merits’ no longer remain confined to being a source of food for human beings. In recognizing its individual characteristics and qualities, Walker renders it ‘visible.’

Walker, as she recounts in the text, goes on to have her own chickens and “find [herself] pulled into the parallel universe that all the other animals exist in, simultaneous with us” (13). Mutual co-existence and not domination is the hallmark of this “parallel universe” where chickens take on human qualities:

What wonderful people you are. Chicken people, I stressed, to discourage any thought of human arrogance. (16)

Walker’s equation of chickens with human beings seeks to do away with any anthropocentrism. The idea of chickens as having human-like agency also makes her reflect on what might be ‘their’ likes and dislikes. Such reflections prompt close observations on the behaviour and characteristic features of the chickens. As Walker writes: “THEY LIKE TO take naps....They like to eat and their favourite thing may be fresh corn” (17-18). In her rendering, chickens and the non-human world that they represent do not exist merely to satisfy human needs and demands but are agentic beings with minds of their own.

Her conversations with the chickens also find her ruminating on the history of their domestication and thereby, subjugation. In these ruminations, Walker’s critique of the human desire for profit at the cost of the inhumane exploitation of other life forms becomes apparent. In one of her conversations with the chickens, she posits the following questions:

Did you ever fly wild like that...Did you ever know such freedom? Did you also once upon a time know when the season was ripe (so to speak) for you to fly south, then north, then south again...Or were you domesticated so long ago that this isn’t even a memory? (34)

Walker here points out the brutality with which humans sever animals and other organisms from their original habitats in order to maximise their comfort and profit. Continuing the thread of conversation, she further writes:

I'm sure humans domesticated you very early because they discovered...that cooked, you are delicious, and that uncooked, safe and happy, you produce eggs. No doubt you were enticed into captivity by being offered items of food. Or shelter. This happens to many of us. No doubt humans learned early to clip your wings. (ibid)

Chickens which like other birds once roamed free were domesticated for human consumption. Walker's description of the process of capture by being "enticed into captivity" has undertones of the way Blacks were 'lured' into slavery and the slave trade. Her own history of slavery as a Black woman makes her better able to connect with the plight of non-human sufferers of human greed such as chickens.

The author, however, uses the medium of her book to debunk any notion of human superiority over the non-human world. She, for instance, finds in her chickens sufficient 'intelligence' to be able to live their lives as chickens happily:

Some humans think highly of big brains. They have done much damage to other creatures because they think their own big brain is of major importance and any being with a smaller brain is somehow deficient. I've never believed this. For instance, your head is small and your brain as well. Yet they both seem adequate for what you appear these days to enjoy most in life. (ibid)

Walker critiques the tendency of those in power to project their thoughts on to others and to use their own yardsticks in judging the 'intellectual acumen' of these 'others'—whether other human beings lower down the social line, or other species and life forms. When humans apply their own mental capacities to other beings whose constitutive reality might be very different, they fail to consider a simple thing—whether their so called 'intelligence' is at all needed or not.

As Walker continues with her deliberation on what chickens might 'enjoy' doing, it brings to mind Ted Hughes' admiration for the singleness of purpose in the thrush (from the poem "Thrushes") as it goes about its business:

Being with your friends, eating well, sleeping when you want to, enforcing or enduring the pecking order when you feel like it, and making sounds that seem to this human to indicate, at the very least, a sense of integrity of being, contentment, and even, stretching it perhaps, a bit of (chicken) humor. (ibid)

The order of ‘intelligence,’ thus, tends to be reversed in the author’s presentation of the human and the non-human world—the chickens seem to be content in their lives, leading a harmonious existence and therefore, gifted with a sort of ‘affective ability’ whereas human beings are the ones who, in their ego, make the folly of judging all life-forms according to human standards and notions of mental functioning. In other words, Walker’s text speaks for the fact that the pride of self-knowledge that human-beings monopolise needs to be re-examined.

Walker also implies the superiority of the non-human world in the way it refuses to adhere to strict gender stereotypes proposed by the human world. She relates how she herself had determined the gender of her chickens based on their behaviour:

What...I identified in Rufus was the same quality of rooster-ism...Many times I have needed to use a stern voice and manner with Rufus and Agnes: they are such firm believers in enforcing the pecking order they constantly terrorize the other chickens. Roosters they are, surely. (27)

Guided by gender divisions that pertain to the human world, Walker decides that the aggressive natures of Rufus and Agnes—two of her chickens—suggest their ‘masculine’ gender, their “rooster-ism.” However, she is pleasantly surprised one morning when she discovers these two chickens laying eggs. Her words to Rufus, whose egg she first discovers, are suggestive of the pride she feels:

Rufus, I said, going to the door, Thank you! What an amazing spirit you are. So strong and aggressive. A bit pushy, “protective,” and dominating of the flock ... and you lay eggs too. (28)

Rufus and Agnes highlight how the world of nature does not follow gender norms and conventions. In their portrayal, Walker exposes how such divisions are arbitrary ones imposed by human beings.

Her deep relationship with the chickens also makes her ponder upon the idea of vegetarianism. When she talks of her visit to the Gandhi Samadhi in India, she instantly relates Mahatma Gandhi to his vegetarianism. Like her chickens, Gandhi had eaten “only plants and grains” (40) in his life. While Gandhi’s vegetarianism can be a reflection of his greatness and goodness, Walker problematises any uncritical, unquestioned, or generalised association of the practice to notions of kindness. To quote her words:

In India it is easy to be a vegetarian because the Hindus who live here don’t eat meat. Some of them do, I guess...but there is a tradition of nonharming and nonmeat-eating among them, which makes a Hindu person pretty safe for chickens. *Though some of them are quite violent against other humans.* Alas! (42; emphasis added)

Walker points out the irony whereby a vegetarian Hindu person is “pretty safe” for animals like chicken who are killed for their meat, but are “violent” against fellow humans.

This irony is further heightened by the fact that even the Dalai Lama, a symbol and personification of unity and compassion, used to eat pork/animal meat as a child, and that his current food habit—whether he had turned vegetarian or not—was something Walker was not sure of. That the Dalai Lama’s holiness was not in any way related to his being vegetarian suggests how short-sighted such easy associations of vegetarianism and humanitarianism are. Indeed, Walker relates how even after the adoption of her chickens she continued eating chicken meat for a while, although she ultimately turns complete vegan (42). Through her deliberations, she seems to be upholding the law of the natural world—killing other animals for nourishment and food is a nutritional necessity for many and therefore, justified as long as one respects all life forms. What is unjustified are acts of violence carried out against other lives—humans and animals alike—with no explainable reason and often only to prove oneself superior and boost one’s ego.

The reflections, that Walker’s association with the chickens trigger, allude not only to philosophical or ethical issues but also gives us glimpses of her mind and personality. Walker’s interactions with her chickens and her letters to the chickens in *The Chickren Chronicles* are, therefore, an example of alternative autobiographical writing.

Bone Black: Memories of Girlhood

bell hooks' *Bone Black: Memories of Girlhood*, instead of being a straight chronological account, is a loosely connected string of vignettes of different memories that make up the author's girlhood. Like *Caged Bird*, hooks' memoir, too, evokes the voice of the child in its simplicity of language and description. The author suggests that experience and memory are separate entities. Memory is not only unreliable but also context-dependent. Autobiography as an act of memory can lead to the 're-creation' rather than a passive 'recollection' of experience. hooks, therefore, instead of assuming an undeterred autobiographical "I" as the narrative voice that is tasked with recalling life events, distances the 'remembering' self from the 'remembered' self by presenting the latter in the third person. Indeed, her autobiographical persona keeps changing its grammatical person in order to challenge the referential function that defines the self in two related ways: (a) by toggling between the authoritative first-person singular "I" and the collective first-person plural "we" and (b) by using both the singular and plural forms of the third person pronoun without any explanation. Such flexibility in the use of pronouns not only allows the author to account for the playfulness of memory but also to separate her narrative identity from the events described. The episodes narrated in the third person give the impression of an adult author observing the remembered version of her childhood self come alive. The distancing paradoxically allows the generation of empathy and thus facilitates the process of recovering her traumatised childhood self.

In writing her autobiography the author saves the "Gloria Jean of [her] tormented and anguished childhood" ("Writing Autobiography" 30) from being annihilated by the forces of memory. In her essay "Writing Autobiography," hooks refers to this power of narrative to forge a coherent understanding of one's life as had been lived up to that time:

Writing the autobiographical narrative enabled me to look at my past from a different perspective and to use this knowledge as a means of self-growth and change in a practical way.... Remembering was part of a cycle of reunion, a joining of fragments, "the bits and pieces of my heart" that the narrative made whole again.
(35)

Although memories present themselves to the mind in an incoherent manner—recollections neither come in time bound chronological order nor are their manners of presentation static or able to be determined by the person concerned—placing them together in the form of a text helps arrive at some sort of meaning. As hooks says, writing

one's autobiography allows the writer to view her memories "not as singular isolated events but as part of a continuum" (34). It is this sense of a "continuum" that, in its turn, offers glimpses into the author's mind and the processes/events which have shaped her developing consciousness. To quote from hooks' essay again:

Reading the completed manuscript, I felt as though I had an overview not so much of my childhood but of those experiences that were deeply imprinted in my consciousness. Significantly, that which was absent, left out, not included also was important. (ibid)

Interestingly, those very portions that were excluded from the text play as important a role as the ones included in revealing the author's psyche. If the experiences included in the memoir highlight what has impacted the author's life at a certain point and explain certain aspects of her character, the absences of certain people and events from the text point to events, impressions, and interpretations that lead to estrangement or alienation.

In the opening chapter of *Bone Black*, we find reference to a particular "hope-chest" belonging to hooks' mother, a holding place for all the things that have been worth treasuring. This hope-chest is a testament to all "the secrets of her youth, the bittersweet memories" (1) that had been formative of her mother's life. When hooks is allowed to participate in its opening, she is witness to her mother's attempts at holding on to her past:

I see her remembering, clutching tightly in her hand some object, some bit of herself that she has had to part with in order to live in the present. (2)

The hope-chest is her mother's way of remaining connected to her own private history and continuing its legacy on to her present. It is in the manner of this chest—the symbolic autobiography of her mother—that hooks designs her own autobiography. Just like the chest was a place where the mother had safely stored pieces of her life, the writing of her autobiographical texts allowed the safe-keeping of hooks' own memories. It helped confer a sense of permanence to memories which with each passing day "grow much more vague" ("Writing Autobiography" 34). *Bone Black*, crafted like the hope-chest, helped "liberate" memories that were "dark and deep within her, unconscious but present" (ibid).

The opening chapter, also, refers to a dream which the author had dreamt after having been witness to her mother's opening of the hope-chest. This dream serves as a kind of symbolic prefiguring of her future role as a writer—someone who will save her

own as well as her family's histories from being wiped away. hooks dreams of going somewhere and returning to find her house engulfed in a fire with nothing or nobody in sight. She is terrified and starts weeping. At this moment in the dream, however, her mother along with other family members appear out of nowhere and together with lighted candles they look for things that may not have been destroyed in the fire. When they "find that the hope chest has not burned through and through" (*Bone Black* 3), they weep with joy. However, a voice commands them to stop weeping and gather together in a circle with the burning candles at the center. The burning of the candles also seems like a fire, albeit a fire which "warm(s)...hearts" (ibid) rather than burn bodies. The voice then goes on to narrate a story—an account of "all that has been destroyed in the fire" (ibid). The story is pacifying and by the time hooks comes to the end of the dream, the entire family is once again happy.

When hooks asks her maternal grandmother, Saru who, according to her, is an "interpreter of dreams" (ibid) regarding her dream, the latter makes her understand that the story-teller had been none other than she herself:

She says that a part of me is making the story, making the words, making the new fire, that it is my heart burning in the center of the flames. (3)

The dream, thus, is a premonition of the role assigned to hooks. It is she who has been entrusted with the task of gathering the 'remains' of her family's history and creating them into a whole once again through the medium of her autobiography.

Indeed, dream sequences are pestered throughout the autobiography. They are an important part of the almost mythical narrative that hooks weaves. In what forms an epigraph to this chapter, we see hooks discussing the presence of "surreal, dreamlike elements" in her text. Like Lorde's fusion of myth and reality in forging a new definition of her identity, hooks also is more concerned with shaping and defining identity in her own terms rather than with the limiting notions of truth or veracity. In her "Foreword" to *Bone Black*, the author writes:

Writing imagistically, I seek to conjure a rich magical world of southern black culture that was sometimes paradisaical and at other times terrifying. While the narratives of family life I share can be easily labelled dysfunctional, significantly

that fact will never alter the magic and mystery...that was deeply life sustaining and life affirming. (xi)

In her own words, then, hooks' autobiography is composed "imagistically" or as a series of images or vignettes, as has also been stated earlier. Images have the capacity to freeze time as well as the experiences that mark moments of time. The author, therefore, uses the medium of autobiography as a sort of "black box," a camera to capture her images of growing up as a Black girl in the South. These images, as much contradictory to each other at times as complimentary, merge in the text to evoke a picture of the author, who gearing upon her "terrifying" as well as "life affirming" experiences, discovers the identity that is most consequential or meaningful to her—she is a writer, a "warrior" who wields the power of the pen.

Speaking about "terrifying" experiences, hooks in "Writing Autobiography" writes about how her autobiographical project had started with a desire to "release" the memories of her tormented childhood from her conscious/subconscious mind by paradoxically writing/locking them into her text:

To me, telling the story of my growing-up years was intimately connected with the longing to kill the self I was without really having to die... I wanted to be rid of...the past...to break its hold. This death in writing was to be liberatory. (30)

By releasing her painful memories into the autobiography, the author believes she would be able to come out of the psychic hold these memories have on her.

Indeed, many of the episodes depicted in *Bone Black* show the author's intense sense of alienation from her family and friends and an even greater desire to form bondings—to belong. In what can be seen as the re-enactment of a Freudian family drama, hooks writes about her deep passion turned into deep resentment for her mother:

I AM ALWAYS fighting with mama...She no longer stands between me and all that would hurt me. She is hurting me...I understand that it has to do with marriage, that to be the wife to the husband she must be willing to sacrifice even her daughters for his good...She has decided in his favour. (151)

In her mother's siding with her father, hooks feels betrayed by and alienated from her own mother. She craves for support and some understanding from her mother, the absence of

which agonises her. Similarly, her non-conformity with societal norms distances her from almost everyone. Unable to make herself understood, hooks, as a child, is further driven into loneliness:

SHE WANTS TO express herself—to speak her mind. To them it is just talking back. Each time she opens her mouth she risks punishment...When she learns the word scapegoat...she is sure it accurately describes her...Even though she is young she comes to understand the meaning of exile and loss. (130)

Here, the use of third person narration suggests the author's distancing of her subject position from that of the child. The memory of being 'scapegoated' is so intensely traumatic and deep that hooks dissociates herself from the child self being described.

However, as much as the autobiography was intended as a mode of release for the author's "anguished and tormented childhood," it also came to be a celebration of all the people and things that were to her "life sustaining" and "affirming"—her maternal grandparents, Saru and Daddy Gus, the books that gave her company, the music she loved, the "old men" of the village with whom she felt most comfortable etc. In the end, it is a book, Rilke's Letters to a Young Poet and Daddy Gus' lesson "not to be afraid of...pain" that teach hooks to turn her "bone black" cave of loneliness into a place where she can "belong":

I lie in the darkness of...the place where they exile me from the community of their heart, and search the unmoving blackness to see if I can find my way home. I tell myself stories, write poems, record my dreams...I belong in this place of words. This is my home. This dark, bone black inner cave where I am making a world for myself. (183)

It is in her capacity as writer, then, that hooks finally feels at home. She discovers it as her only means to belong.

Although hooks had started the project of writing her autobiography as a nihilistic exercise in "killing" her embittered and anguished childhood, it is this writing that ultimately makes her confront that past and come to terms with it. In the process, instead of annihilating her child self, she rescues her. hooks concludes "Writing Autobiography" with the following assertion:

In the end I did not feel as though I had killed the Gloria of my childhood...In writing about her, I reclaimed that part of myself I had long ago rejected, left uncared for...Remembering was part of a cycle of reunion, a joining of fragments, “the bits and pieces of my heart” that the narrative made whole again. (35)

Just as the mother’s hope chest had been her way of collecting and connecting the “bits and pieces” of her life, hooks’ autobiography is her way of connecting individual “fragments” of her life into a narrative whole. The images or episodes connected in no logical order and narrated assuming different persons, nevertheless, proffer insights into the most intimate and formative details of her life.

The current chapter, thus, has tried to understand the chosen writers and their texts in terms of the challenges they put forth to the conventions of autobiography. Countering the White woman’s projection of selfhood and subjectivity in life writing during the latter half of the twentieth century, they create new templates of expression for the Black woman writer. The authority of the subject over her textual universe is affirmed even as they play with any uncritical, monolithic understanding of the subject as static or fixed. In recognition of the fluidity of identity markers, they distort the generic assumptions of autobiography and facilitate an understanding of multiple subject positionings as indicative of the varied and variegated experiences of Black American women.