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

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DECLARATION

This is to certify that the research material embodied and conclusions derived in the present study titled **"Writing, Recovery and Resistance in Black American Women's Autobiography"** are based on my original research work. It has not been submitted in any form or part for any diploma or degree of any university. My indebtedness to other works/publications has been acknowledged in the body of the thesis at appropriate places.

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This is to certify that the thesis titled "**Writing, Recovery and Resistance in Black American Women's Autobiography**" submitted to the School of Humanities and Social Sciences of Tezpur University in part fulfillment for the award of degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of English is a record of research work carried out by **Smriti Deori** under my supervision and guidance.

All help received by her from various sources have been duly acknowledged.
No part of this thesis has been submitted elsewhere for any award of any other degree.

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ABSTRACT

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

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

CHAPTER PLAN

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 5: This chapter titled "Narrating Selves, Narrating Histories" examines select autobiographies and memoirs that relate the individual stories of the autobiographers in terms of larger socio-historical backgrounds. The selected texts are Mays Angelou's *All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes* (1986), Edwidge Danticat's *Brother, I'm Dying* (2007), Paule Marshall's *Triangular Road: A Memoir* (2009), and Jessica Harris' *My Soul Looks Back* (2017). These texts exemplify how autobiographical narratives can serve as spaces to deliberate on the intricate ways in which history and public memories manifest in personal lives. As the autobiographers under scrutiny in this chapter engage in the narrative retelling of their lives, they invariably see themselves as anchored in a broader history—whether it be the gruesome history of the transatlantic slave trade, of Haiti and American immigration policies or the literary history of the 1970s Black America. Their texts, thus, facilitate a critical conversation between received notions of history and the autobiographers' individual responses to them. In examining the autobiographies from such a critical perspective, the chapter validates the contention that private histories are inevitably intertwined with public histories.

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

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

CHAPTER ONE

READING BLACK AMERICAN WOMEN'S LIVES

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER TWO

HEALING AND FICTIVE SELVES

> My interest lies in what makes a man or a woman do such-and-so, regardless of his color. It seemed to me that the human beings I met reacted pretty much the same to the same stimuli. Different idioms, yes. Circumstances and conditions having power to influence, yes. Inherent difference, no. But I…was afraid to tell a story the way I wanted. (Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks* 171)

> The stuff of my being is matter, ever changing, ever moving, but never lost; so what need of denominations and creeds to deny myself the comfort of all my fellow men? The wide belt of the universe has no need for finger-rings. I am one with the infinite and need no other assurance. (Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks* 226)

This chapter examines the ways Black American women in their autobiographies tried to present themselves—not as White women, nor in their accepted roles but as care givers, providers as well as career women pursuing goals. The autobiographers during the period of segregation cannot afford to completely ignore it nor remain confined to its narrow structures. They have to look for means of articulation to connect with their own sisterhood as well as other readers. The chapter aims to look into the ways strategically placed silences and gaps in texts can at times be techniques utilized by Black American women writers to revert power structures. It purports to analyze two autobiographies that were published during the 1940s and 1950s: Zora Neale Hurston's *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942), and Marian Anderson's *My Lord, What a Morning: An Autobiography* (1956). The chosen autobiographies have puzzled and irritated critics and general readers alike due to their unequivocal refusal to portray the atmosphere of racial inequity and hatred defining and shaping Black American lives of the time. Despite the fact that they depict the writers' experiences of growing up during the early twentieth century which is replete with numerous race riots, episodes of lynching and other forms of violence, almost none of such atrocities find direct mention in the texts.

As a point of departure, the chapter starts with the following primary hypotheses:

- That the chosen writers despite being severely limited by the system of patronage in which they were entrapped find their own unique ways of confronting it;
- That a recourse to speech/language as an unproblematic medium of resistance is not always accessible by or available to the chosen writers;

- That silence rather than being a passive acceptance of enforced domination can be a weapon of dignified opposition;
- That the writers exemplify how trauma can be "worked through" rather than being "acted out".

It is shown that the chosen texts' overt silences around contemporary race issues are deliberate and intended not just to appease Whites in power—the cryptic gaps on a careful reading reveal how muteness can become a mechanism of resistance. The autobiographers under scrutiny consciously manipulate language and infuse meaning to what is directly stated as well as to what remains unexpressed or muted. In so doing, they transform the understanding of silence as manifestations of oppression/victimization to seeing it as an active and agentive, albeit subtle form of resistance. Willful, deliberate employment of silence offers the autobiographers the scope to change general perspectives of Black identity as circumscribed within and therefore, preoccupied with White domination. In other words, the texts under scrutiny in this chapter refrain from projecting a victimized Black identity to present a self that is dignified, composed, and that helps promote the view that despite all atrocities Black Americans have been able to retain their mental equilibrium. We see in them an illustration of how a forcefully imposed deprivation of speech/language can be subverted and put to the victim's own use. By consciously avoiding explicit discussions of race, the autobiographers engage in 'strategic' sustenance and survival of the community while also highlighting how race cannot/should not be the only prism refracting views and perceptions of Black American identity.

In this context, the observations of Marin and Sommer may be referred to in support of the argument. In her discussion of female visual artists' use of silence in their works, "Dignity and voice in silence: contemporary female visual artists' quiet empathy," Candela Delgado Marin writes,

> [W]omen, at many points in history, have had to acquire a communicative system to be integrated in the existing discourses, where, traditionally, their voices have been marginalised or silenced. Therefore, they have built a channel to access cultural memory through silence. (71)

Without elaboration, they use their medium to present or state their view/vision. Marin draws attention to "the women artists [who]… have regained possession of the previously imposed muteness," to use it as part of "a discursive rebellion of the no-longer social and

cultural subaltern" who will adopt a strategic silence when brought to "the podium of representation and visibility" (72). Seen in this light, Marin holds that,

> silence in their works becomes a countertale, based on the principle of never overwhelming either the piece of art or the experience of the spectator with words. Conversely, the audience will be granted the chance of reflecting on art, aiming to interpret and to enrich its original indeterminacies. (ibid)

Marin, here, comments on how strategically used muteness can help avoid appropriations of the artist's work and establish a more egalitarian and fruitful relationship in its place. Placing her perspectives in our context, the gaps force readers to question as to the reason behind the omissions and thereby, force them to leave aside their own preconceived notions of the text, if any. Much as they might assume superiority over the writer's textual universe, they are met with a knowledge of their inadequacy in claiming full access to or knowledge of the text.

Doris Sommer has also pointed out how strategic omissions in a text can revert power structures, with the writer skilfully manoeuvring through the expectations and demands put upon her. The exercise of the author's 'choice' makes all the difference between viewing her as a passive participant or as willingly and actively frustrating the expectations of readers through the text's silences. The desire for an uninhibited entry into the author's life through the medium of the written word can actually be a covert attempt at gaining control. In the words of Sommer:

> Maybe empathy...is a good feeling that covers over a controlling disposition, what Derrida calls "an inquisitorial insistence, an order, a petition...To demand the narrative of the other, to extort it from him like a secretless secret." (198)

The seeking for a bond of familiarity with the textual world, then, is an implicit way of denying the writer's exclusive authority over his/her text. With their assumptions of gaining complete access to the narrator's life, readers tend to deprive the author of his/her right to individuality and privacy, despite "the text's rhetorical…performance of a politically safe distance" (ibid). When the distance between the textual 'I' and the reader as an 'other' is sought to be removed, it leads to unstable and untenable interpretations/identifications.

It is here that the employment of silence, instead of being an enforced limitation or barrier, becomes an active means of resistance as mentioned above. It allows the writer the requisite agency to fight against her own annihilation in the battle over narrative control. The gaps in the texts pertaining to familiar or expected materials serve to pass the message of her particularity and "cautions privileged readers against easy appropriations of Otherness into manageable universal categories" (199). It is seen that not only is this a feature of Black women's life writing but a part of such narratives by men (and women) irrespective of colour.

Referring to such strategic use of silence, Sommer cites Henri Lefebvre's use of the term, 'screen' to mean both an apparatus that displays as well as a means of cover. The silences in the text are a sort of screen that allows the writer the ability to show or cover of her own will. Calculated muteness, thus, becomes a powerful narrative technique of resistance or exclusion or for privacy.

The straitjacket within which writers like Hurston and Anderson had to work is traced by Claudine Reynaud to the time of the slave narratives which demanded some sort of authenticating documents by their White abolitionist sponsors in order to be published. While the need for authenticators or guarantors no longer remained after the system of slavery was legally abolished, authoritarian power continued to be exerted by the system of patronage and through editorial restrictions and demands. In her deliberation on the tight limits put on the subject's agency by such power regimes, Raynaud quotes Robert Stepto's rephrasing of Bloom's "anxiety of influence":

> In Afro-American letters…[t]he competition has rarely been between artist and artist for control of an image, line, or trope; rather it has been between artist and authenticator (editor, publisher, guarantor, patron) for control of a fiction—usually the idea of history or of the artist's personal history—that exists outside the artist's text and functions primarily as an antagonistic force with regard to this text's imaginative properties. (56)

The real tension at the heart of the works of Black American women writers like Hurston and Anderson is to get their voices, trapped within a multitude of pressures from different ends, heard. The demands of the patrons, editors, publishers, and the plausible readership create a cacophony of noises amidst which the writer's voice tends to get drowned. To quote Reynaud again:

> The editor…carries on; acting as authenticator, he or she actively competes with the author for control over the production of the text. The resulting unequal dialogue mirrors the racial, sexual, and class tensions of society at large, the Jim Crow laws, the status of women, and especially black women, in the United States of the 1940s. (ibid)

The struggle, therefore, is about "controlling" the narrative. And since prevailing circumstances, as has been discussed, did not leave much scope for direct assertion of the authorial voice, the writers under question had to find alternate narrative strategies—strategies which a careful reading reveals to be coded into the texts. In this regard, the present chapter, as already stated earlier, argues that the chosen texts' explicit avoidance of discussions regarding contemporary racial atrocities is a consciously chosen narrative technique.

Silence, then, is a tacit form of resistance which also pays heed to "ethically responsible survival," to use one of Sommer's phrases again (Sommer 199). It is an especially useful rhetorical device in the case of writers for whom the self-representational project is enmeshed with feelings of anxiety over "excessive self-exposure" which might ultimately endanger the entire community (Smith and Watson 12). The texts examined in this chapter, as stated already, bring to light the plight of Black women writing in the first half of the twentieth century who looked forward to challenge denigration and assert narrative control, but were compelled to do so within the narrow constraints put forth by the very regimes of power they sought to challenge.

It is in the light of these arguments that we intend to examine the self-representational trajectories of the chosen texts. The authors trigger observant readers to see their refusal to detail painful and humiliating racial encounters as strategic omissions. While pain and racial trauma are coded into the texts, they consciously refrain from projecting a victimised Black identity. We finally place the selected writers' use of silent resistance within the framework of LaCapra's "working through" of trauma rather than "acting (it) out," which has been mentioned in the frame chapter.

In what follows, we look into each of our chosen texts individually while trying to justify our arguments.

Dust Tracks on a Road

Dust Tracks starts off with a sort of forewarning regarding the socio-cultural and temporal specificity of Hurston's experiences and the role played by those experiences in moulding her views and opinions. To quote from the text:

> Like the dead-seeming, cold rocks, I have memories within that came out of the material that went to make me. Time and place have had their say…[Y]ou will have to know something about the time and place where I came from, in order that you may interpret the incidents and directions of my life. (10)

Such phenomenological approach is also evident elsewhere early on in the autobiography:

> Nothing that God ever made is the same thing to more than one person. That is natural. There is no single face in nature, because every eye that looks upon it, sees it from its own angle…Naturally, I picked up the reflections of life around me with my own instruments, and absorbed what I gathered according to my inside juices. (44)

In passages such as these, Hurston's autobiography accounts for an 'objective' reality as well as a subjective understanding and rendering of that supposed reality. She firmly asserts that the worldview she has come to be endowed with is grounded in the experiences of her life. By validating the views she holds in terms of individual experiences garnered from life, she suggests how assumptions regarding the 'shared' worldview of particular communities fail to take into account the differences of circumstances into which different members from even the same community are born into. Such differences colour perceptions and mindsets.

Hurston's autobiography which allows her to retrospectively shape and narrate her life, thus, becomes a sort of defensive justification of her perspectives on race and Black-White relations. The statements regarding unique, individual patterns and trajectories of experience explain Hurston's seeming oblivion to any vicious racial dynamics despite, as Maya Angelou points out in her "Foreword" to the text, being born in a time when "[t]he southern air around her most assuredly crackled with the flames of Ku Klux Klan raiders" and despite having "lived through the race riots and other atrocities of her time" (7). Her birth in the relatively cocooned atmosphere of an exclusively Negro town, the autobiography suggests, forms the basis of her secured outlook:

> I was born in a Negro town. I do not mean by that the black back-side of an average town. Eatonville, Florida, is, and was at the time of my birth, a pure Negro town—charter, mayor, council, town marshal and all. It…was the first to be incorporated, the first attempt at organized self-government on the part of Negroes in America. (10)

In the description of Eatonville and her family lineage, Hurston's sense of pride is obvious. The picture she paints of her initial formative years, when her mother was still alive, is one of self-sufficiency: the family had sufficient foods, sufficient rooms for each of the children and never had to depend on others for anything. Moreover, her father was the "elected mayor of Eatonville for three terms" (17) and had also "formulated" (ibid) the laws and guidelines on which the town functioned for a long while. Hurston also credits her mother's upbringing, who always inspired her children to dream big. As she mentions in her text:

> Mama exhorted her children at every opportunity to "jump at de sun" We might not land on the sun, but at least we would get off the ground. (20)

Hurston, however, is also aware of the way Eatonville came into existence amidst the wilderness of Florida as a byproduct of the quest for new frontiers. From the very first chapters of her autobiography, she shows an understanding of the way the wilderness is cut down and cleared for plantation of cotton and other crops. Prior to her parents' shifting to Florida, Hurston gives a brief account of her parents' early life in Alabama.

She mentions that her father John Hurston had been a poor worker who had learnt to read and write even as he carried on his work for farmers. Her father's background draws attention to a class divide within the Black community: the poor people lived "over the creek" which signaled "the wrong side of the railroad tracks" (15). Her mother's family on the other hand was financially secure and she married Hurston despite the family resistance. In fact, Mrs. Potts, the mother, refused to speak to her daughter after her marriage. The father, Mr. Potts was more supportive and escorted his daughter to her wedding along with her brother. John Hurston continued to work for a better life and after the birth of three children he went out to Florida:

> Months later he pitched into the hurly-burly of South Florida. So he heard about folks building a town all out of colored people. It seemed like a good place to go.

> Later on, he was to be elected Mayor of Eatonville for three terms, and to write the local laws. The village of Eatonville is still governed by the laws formulated by my father. (17)

Hurston's father was part of the group of Black men who set up the village of Eatonville, mostly occupied by Blacks. Her mother joined her husband a year later and set up their new home together.

Hurston describes her parents beginning a new life in Florida and their gradual rise up the social and financial ladder: "Both of them swore that things were going to better, and it came to pass as they said" (19). Further, according to Hurston:

> They bought land, built a roomy house, planted their acres and reaped. Children kept coming—more mouths to feed and more feet for shoes. But neither of them seemed to have minded that. (ibid)

Hurston presents a picture of their growing up in that house full of love and care. Not only did their mother care for their basic needs she also attended to their homework. Since there were eight of them, the evening sessions were like a mini classroom:

> After supper we gathered in Mama's room, and everybody had to get their lessons for the next day. Mama carried us all past long division in arithmetic, and parsing sentences in grammar, by diagrams on the black-board. That was as far as she had gone. Then the younger ones were turned over to my oldest brother, Bob, and Mama sat and saw to it that we paid attention. (20)

Their mother ensured that they all stayed focused on their studies and encouraged them to aim high. Their father on the other hand was worried about Black people being too spirited. He had apprehensions that there would be a backlash from the White people. In fact, he warned Hurston that she was "going to be hung" before she had grown up. Also,

> Posses with ropes and guns were going to drag me out sooner or later on account of that stiff neck I toted. I was going to tote a hungry belly by reason of my forward ways. (ibid)

Her comments on her father's warnings point to the hostility of some of the White people in the background. Whether in Alabama or in Florida, Black people could not afford to deny the racial discrimination controlling most of their lives.

The text's subtle, sly references call attention to a shrewd mind trying to make her way through oppressive structures and challenging readers to find the real Hurston in the complex web that she weaves. She plays with the autobiographical demands of authenticity and accuracy when she mocks with the details of her birth:

> This is all hear-say. Maybe, some of the details of my birth as told me might be a little inaccurate, but it is pretty well established that I really did get born. (24)

Such light-hearted, witty remarks regarding perhaps the most basic information in a person's life subtly challenge the 'sacred' conventions of autobiography. Indeed, Hurston, at times, directly affronts readers with the notion of story-telling. Rather than narrating the 'truth' of her lived life, she is weaving a story and it is up to her audience to decide which part of that story to believe and which to disregard, "When I began to make up stories I cannot say. Just from one fancy to another, adding more and more detail until they seemed real" (50). In Hurston's text, then, the narrator is not the conventional autobiographical subject but one who presents herself in the role of a story-teller

The writing of autobiography forms a part of the task of "build(ing) a statue" (28) of the self as Hurston would like to see it. She is conscious of the fact that identities are imposed on people by the dominant segment of society, in this case mainstream White American society. She observes that people tend to project themselves as expected by others:

> I did not know then, as I know now, that people are prone to build a statue of the kind of person that it pleases them to be. And few people want to be forced to ask themselves, "What if there is no me like my statue?" (28)

She is conscious of the dangers of falling into the trap of public expectations, often pushed through by the publisher demanding a particular kind of narrative. As much as that statue is self-deceiving, it is also a mask meant to thwart off over-enthusiastic scrutinizers. Only a careful reading of the text would allow readers to see beyond the author's projected image, her statue. Her answer to the problem was to get rid of fear and get on with her work, allowing scope for imaginative flights while not losing connection with reality.

The accusations of harming racial pride in the process of an overt loyalty to Whites come mainly from Hurston's numerous depictions of sympathetic White people who extend helping hands throughout her journey. The first such portrayal is that of the author's

Godfather, a White man who not just assisted with her birth but continued being an influential mentor while she was growing up. The child Hurston's conversations with this man exemplify the kind of self-hatred that young Black children are fed:

> I had one person who pleased me always. That was the robust, grey-haired, white man who had helped me get into the world... He called me Snidlits, explaining that Zora was a hell of a name to give a child.
>
> "Snidlits, don't be a nigger," he would say to me over and over.* "Niggers lie and lie! (32)

The White man does everything—from belittling her name to depraving her racial group identity—that might infuse the young child with self-loathing. Despite such obvious derogatory remarks on her race, however, the adult author defends her supposed Godfather with a footnote that the word "nigger" was not referred to in a racial sense. She is aware of the fact that the person was also giving her kindly advice to do better than the common people. Like her, he must have been aware of her coloured looks so his words were figurative and not necessarily racial. Seen from this angle, Hurston's refusal to consider his words insulting, appear to be acceptable. Hurston, in fact, continues defending the man by purposely maintaining an apparently ignorant stance regarding the racial implications of his words,

> I knew without being told that he was not talking about my race when he advised me not to be a nigger. He was talking about class rather than race. He frequently gave money to Negro schools. (33)

It is unlikely that she would be unaware of the ways race and class were entangled or of the fact that they could not be thought of as separate entities. Yet Hurston chooses to ignore such connections. This obsequiousness is also found in several other descriptions of benevolent Whites. The child author's next memorable encounter with Whites is her coming across the two White women who visit her school and then take an interest in her. These women provide her with what seem to her exotic things like "stuffed dates and preserved ginger," and "one hundred goldy new pennies" (38)—the beauty of which fill her with unforgettable joy—but most importantly, they send her boxes full of books. Such recognition of the benevolence and magnanimity shown her continues even later in life

when she speaks with fervour regarding the generosity of people like J. W. Lippincott, her Godmother Mrs. Mason, or her mentor Franz Boas.

The exhibition of an overt loyalty and gratitude have, however, made readers and critics alike to ignore some of Hurston's keen observations at times. While speaking of the ladies who load her with many gifts, the author does not fail to notice how, she as a Black girl, is made an object of gaze of the White women. To those women, no matter their kind intentions, a Black child who can read really well is a 'weird,' surprising encounter and someone who would obviously be in need of their condescension:

> The whites who came down from the North were often brought by their friends to visit the village school. A Negro school was something strange to them, and while they were always sympathetic and kind, curiosity must have been present, also. (35)

Again, tacitly Hurston mentions how she was put on exhibition in order to amuse the ladies in question:

> I was led out on the grounds and they took my picture under a palm tree. They handed me what was to me then, a heavy cylinder done up in fancy paper, tied with a ribbon, and they told me goodbye, asking me not to open it until I got home. (38)

Hurston, then, like an apt trickster, manages to appease those in power with her ardent display of gratitude and yet subtly puts forth the double standards in covering up curiosity mixed with condescension as generous goodwill. This same comprehension of the general attitude towards Blacks is also evident in the way she casually writes about an otherwise very humiliating episode with renowned anthropologist and her mentor, Franz Boas. As Hurston recounts, it was common practice amongst the young researchers under Boas' guidance and mentorship to refer to him as "Papa". Owing to this, when she goes to meet him once, she casually mentions him by that intimate yet respectful term in front of his secretary who warns her to be careful not to use it in front of Boas himself. Notwithstanding the warning, however, Hurston brings up the matter at a social gathering organised by the Department of Anthropology. The response from Boas on hearing his Black student address him as "Papa" is indicative of his racist mindset:

> "Of course, Zora is my daughter. Certainly!" he said with a smile. "Just one of my missteps, that's all." The sabre cut on his cheek, which it is said he got in a duel at Heidelberg, lifted in a smile. (121)

Hurston exposes the inability and unwillingness of the White society to really accept her as one amongst them without delving directly or too much into it. While Boas was referred to by all as "Papa," the use of that term by a Black student was an unacceptable misnomer—something which the White anthropologist had to correct by mocking her as one of his mistakes. Despite all his supposedly racial tolerance and acceptance, Boas has to show Hurston her place, even if in an apparently humorous manner. Dust Tracks, thus, makes clear Hurston's modus operandi throughout the text from the very beginning: the juxtaposition of an apparently deferential attitude to power structures with tacit critiques of how that power operates.

As already discussed, then, the author maintains her calm and composure even in cases where her dignity as a human being and a free citizen is questioned and insulted, and deliberately avoids indulging in any reactionary behaviour. While this tends to be interpreted as disloyalty to her racial group, we argue that through such gentle, ladylike demeanour, Hurston actually is upholding the pride of her race. The stance that she maintains throughout *Dust Tracks* allows her, at many points, to debunk the assumptions of White society by sharing knowledge of its inherent hypocrisies without ever putting on a direct frontal attack. In his "Afterword" to the autobiography, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. writes:

> Part of Hurston's received heritage...was the idea that racism had reduced black people to mere ciphers, to beings who only react to an omnipresent racial oppression, whose culture is "deprived" where different, and whose psyches are in the main "pathological." (242)

Gates points out how the Black existence is reduced to a "pathological" preoccupation or obsession with race and racism. Speaking of Hurston's response to such views of the Black identity, he further writes:

> Hurston thought this idea degrading, its propagation a trap, and railed against it. It was, she said, upheld by "the sobbing school of Negrohood who hold that nature

somehow has given them a dirty deal"...Hurston chose deliberately to ignore this "false picture that distorted..." (ibid)

Read in this manner, *Dust Tracks* becomes the attempt of a Black individual to portray a self that is independent of any racial baggage. Despite consistent assaults to her psychological integrity, Hurston remains undeterred—tenacious and resolute to stand her ground even amidst all injustices. In this regard, Francoise Lionnet in "Autoethnography: The An-Archic Style of *Dust Tracks on a Road*" has linked her philosophy of racial pride to some of Fanon's ideas developed in *The Wretched of the Earth* and in *Black Skin, White Masks*. Lionnet argues:

> Since Fanon, too, denounced revenge and fixation on the past…perhaps he can provide some answer to the questions we ask of Hurston…Fanon states that the quest for disalienation must be mediated by the refusal to accept the "Tower of the Past"…and the problems of the present as definitive, in other words by the belief that only…the future can move and inspire human beings to action and to revolution. (122-123)

Hurston and Fanon, according to Lionnet, go their separate ways only in that the former does not share the revolutionary zeal so typical of both *Wretched* and *BSWM*. *Dust Tracks* is its author's personal plea against not remaining preoccupied with the past and manoeuvring her actions towards creating a secured future. To her, as exemplified in her autobiography, the best answer to the legacy of slavery and racism is in upgrading one's own self and culture to the maximum heights possible. This explains her approach towards things in the universities she attends where she decides to focus on her own growth rather than remaining transfixed with the other rich students, both Black and White. While at Bernard, for instance, Hurston writes that she has no "lurid tales" of being discriminated against to hold onto; rather what the institute does is to instil her with a sense of pride and privilege in her own capacity. And this pride, the writer specifically mentions, in no way, issues from comparing herself to White standards or from proving her ability in front of a White audience. It is to be taken "for granted" (121) that her talents and intellectual ability are known to all by dint of the very fact that she was at the university, "Else, why was I at Barnard? Not everyone who cries, "Lord! Lord!" can enter those sacred iron gates" (ibid).

In line with Fanon's thinking, then, Hurston was adamant in proving that the Black psyche could rise far above being a mere victimised, degraded, and traumatised by-product

of slavery or racism. Despite being exposed to a bitter history of racism in everyday life, Black people have managed to hold their intellectual well-being. It is here that LaCapra's concept of working through trauma in order to attain some sort of meaning comes in. Hurston maintains a balanced approach willing to examine and question the socio-historical forces behind the emergence and prevalence of slavery and racism instead of adopting a vainglorious stance of Black nobility and innocence. Hurston's exposure of intra-racial flaws—of internal loopholes within the Black community—rather than being a betrayal of her kinsfolk, then, is an attempt at placing history in perspective. Instead of indulging in a blame game wherein the opposite party becomes the sole perpetrator of evil, she tries to understand the minute nuances of a very complex history in which, she realises, at many points her own people were as much at fault as the Whites.

This recognition of the need for self-scrutiny becomes especially evident in the author's encounter with Cudjo Lewis as part of her research for the Journal of Negro History and Columbia University. Lewis, who had been known as Kossola-O-Lo-Loo-Ay back in his African subcontinent, was the only living "Negro" who had been forced into America on a slave ship. Hurston's conversation with him gives her a firsthand experience of the conditions in Africa which facilitated the slave trade. Lewis re-emphasises her belief that it is only useless to diminish a complicated history with multiple forces behind it into a one-sided story of victims and perpetrators. In a long paragraph which is worth quoting here, Hurston reflects:

> The white people had held my people in slavery here in America. They had bought us, it is true and exploited us. But the inescapable fact…was: my people had *sold* me and the white people had bought me. That did away with the folklore I had been brought up on—that the white people had gone to Africa...lured them aboard ship and sailed away. (142)

The writer here introspects on the different factors and agents involved in the African slave trade and observes that Africans themselves were possibly, to some extent, responsible for its success. Continuing her contemplations, she further writes:

> It impressed upon me the universal nature of greed and glory. Lack of power and opportunity passes off too often for virtue. (ibid)

This ability to uninhibitedly question one's own implications in a gruesome history and to lay bare one's moral or ethical groundings is, as LaCapra believes, a fundamental step towards working through a traumatic legacy. The "soul-searching" (1852)—to use Moses Hrushovski's term, that Kate Schick cites in "Acting Out and Working Through: Trauma and Insecurity," for a disenchanted critical analysis of the actual circumstances leading to shameful, horrific episodes of history—on Hurston's part makes her aware of the otherwise ignored 'bitter' facts concerning her own racial group and compels her to reflect on the human propensity towards harming others for self-gain. Self-questioning, which also means placing oneself in the others' shoes, allows her insights that ultimately leads the author to a more conscientious, responsible stand. While Hurston has been criticised for her supposedly 'pro-Whites' stand, it is her ability for critical reflection that stops her from an easy recourse to reciprocal cycles of vengeance and violence. Urging people to consciously refrain from mere revenge-seeking and concomitantly from the urge for self-justification, Butler writes:

> What role will we assume in the historical relay of violence, who will we become in the response, and will we be furthering or impeding violence by virtue of the response that we make? To respond to violence with violence may well be 'justified', but is it finally a responsible solution? (Butler, *Precarious Life* 17; qtd. in Schick 1852)

Butler, thus, questions the ethical justification of holding on to past injustices and a bitter history. An obsession with revenge or retaliation may only end up perpetuating further violence. As she continues to argue:

> [M]oralistic denunciation provides immediate gratification, and even has the effect of temporarily cleansing the speaker of all proximity to guilt through the act of self-righteous denunciation itself. But is this the same as responsibility, understood as taking stock of our world, and participating in its social transformation in such a way that non-violent, cooperative, egalitarian international relations remain the guiding ideal? (ibid)

Hurston's realisation of the futility of holding on to a past—the agents of which have long died, is made evident in her imagined encounter with the progeny of an erstwhile slave-owner. In their conversation with each other, the author imagines the White grandson accusing her of falsely implicating him and holding him responsible for events which

occurred when he wasn't even born, "'Why fix your eyes on me? I respectfully refer you to my ancestors, and bid you a good day'" (195).

While Hurston shares Fanon's zeal in proposing a well-rounded individual free from the shackles of colonialism or racism, then, she is much distanced from his ideas when it comes to violence. "Redemptive violence," she seems to be implying, might be easy but ultimately leads nowhere. An insistence on being preoccupied with the traumatic lineages of the past and holding on to the grievances of a bitter history merely fuels hatred and vengeance. Hurston, instead, believes in working towards creating a better future free from any systemic oppression or injustice. To this end, she promotes Black racial pride by struggling to reclaim their lost cultural heritage and trying to popularise Black culture across all racial and class divides.

In "Acting Out and Working through: Trauma and (In)security", Kate Schick mentions the Harvard Program on Refugee Trauma designed with the intention of emphasising the role of art in trauma healing:

> [O]ne aspect of the violence perpetrated against refugees has been the destruction of beauty and culture and that part of the process of recovery is reconnecting with that which was lost. Trauma survivors can access and express their experiences by rediscovering the artistic expressions of their culture: expressing pain through drawing and painting, and telling stories through drama and puppets. (1849)

While the Harvard programme is especially focused on refugee trauma, the argument regarding the disparaged cultural roots of trauma victims and the regenerative power of gaining back access to these cultural elements holds true across variegated episodes of trauma.

Realizing the importance and necessity of preserving art and culture, Hurston records in *Dust Tracks* her efforts to popularise "Negro" songs and music amidst an urban audience comprising mainly of Whites and the Black bourgeoisie. After going to the Bahamas and getting introduced to authentic Bahaman music, she starts feeling that the "music of the Bahaman Negroes was more original, dynamic and African, than American Negro songs" (135). Back in New York, she struggles to present this original, and what she feels as genuine "Negro" music to a larger audience. Failing to gain anyone else's interest and attention, she herself takes on the responsibility and manages to stage

Bahaman songs and dances at the John Golden Theatre in New York. Hurston—aimed with the intention of presenting the "beauty and appeal there was in genuine Negro material, as against the Broadway concept"—succeeds to generate interest amongst a vast audience and creates a "sharp trend towards genuine Negro material" (136).

The author, then, believes and takes pride in her cultural roots and tries to transform views about Black backwardness by pinpointing the specificity and superior quality of what she says to be authentic African music. This same zeal is also apparent in the way she writes about Polk County, Florida and the musicality of its everyday life. Hurston seems to have imbibed its music in the way her descriptions about the place take on a poetic stance and the language becomes rhythmic:

> These poets of the swinging blade! The brief, but infinitely graceful, dance of body and axe-head as it lifts over the head in a fluid arc, dances in air and rushes down to bite into the tree, all in beauty…A growling grumble. Then contact! Yeelld-u-u-ow! And a board is laid shining and new on a pile. (126)

The physical toil of the people acquires a poetic grace in the hands of Hurston. In passages such as these, her identification and empathising with the place and its inhabitants become obvious. With the same rhythmic language, the author eulogises the unsung contributions of the Black population to the progress of civilisation:

> Polk County. Black men laughing and singing. They go down in the phosphate mines and bring up the wet dust of the bones of pre-historic monsters, to make rich land in far places, so that people can eat…Polk County. The clang of nine-pound hammers on railroad steel. The world must ride. (ibid)

Hurston's critique of the exploitation of Black men as cheap labour is evident. Her awareness of the ways this labour force is maintained by keeping them trapped in vicious cycles of lawlessness is also made clear: if "[t]he wheels of industry must move" (125), the law must be forbidden from entering the premises of the labourers.

Having gone to Polk County, New Orleans, and then the Bahamas as part of her anthropological research under Boas, she cannot merely remain a collector of data and starts identifying with her roots. As an anthropologist studying a particular culture, Hurston was expected to maintain a detached stance from her object of analysis. But the author as someone studying her own ancestral roots cannot but help become involved in

it. The pages of her autobiography that detail her stay in these places show a person recognizing the beauty of the culture as well as the way the people have been exploited. Instead of remaining the superior observer tasked with 'saving' her studied culture from historical erasure, she exposes the double standards in deeming one culture to be inferior to another. As Lionnet has observed, Hurston's "position of fundamental liminality," of being as much an internal as an external to Black culture, "reinforce(s) her scepticism about the anthropological project" (115). Born and brought up in the exclusively Black community of Eantonville, she cannot effectively assume the role of the anthropological saviour of 'other' cultures which she was supposed to be during the reign of Boasian anthropology.

Hurston similarly relates her first-hand experiences of Voodoo ceremonies when she was in Haiti. Rather than treating it as something illogical and baseless, she equates voodoo with religious beliefs or practices which, according to her, equally defy reason. In fact, she believes that if extensive research is carried out it would be found that "some important medical secrets, still unknown to medical science, give it its power, rather than the gestures of ceremony" (145). Hurston emphasises the need for proper studies and documentation which will reveal the logic and science behind Black cultural practices.

Another significant way in which Hurston tries to preserve the authenticity of the Black cultural idiom is by sticking to rural Black diction whenever presenting the members of her family or community. The autobiography offers us two very different communicative models used by the author: the language that Hurston—the educated Black woman—uses is refined, polished and in keeping with the proper rules of grammar while the one she uses when trying to speak for her racial folks is genuine Black dialect. As scholars like Reynaud have noted, Hurston's refined language might have been the result of editorial intervention rather than her own choice:

> The excision of Hurston's misspellings—"sumptious" instead of "sumptuous"—and her grammatical "errors"…show how language is emptied of voice…Hurston's "errors" foreground her double and conflicting identity as both Bernard scholar and Eatonville girl; her characters might have been allowed to speak like that, but she no longer was. (Reynaud 39)

Reynaud, here, is referring to the discrepancies between the manuscript and the first published version which had been significantly edited. The original publication shows how

Hurston had to acquiesce to editorial demands resulting in her letting go of many of her thoughts and at times even her style. Within the limitations set forth for the writer of colour, she does the best she can do: Hurston, the "Bernard scholar" retains the language of the "Eatonville girl" through her characters. As the system of patronage which governed the publishing industry put several constraints on the author and her use of language, she maintains and celebrates the originality of Black everyday language through the Black characters who figure in her text. Scholars critical of Hurston's conformity to editorial demands fail to appreciate what she does manage to achieve within her highly confined spaces.

Dust Tracks, as discussed earlier, shows the author's complex "working through" of traumatic legacies, whereby she is willing to open up to internal loopholes within her community that helped induce the trauma as much as she presents willingness to uphold and promote those aspects of her culture that would boost racial pride. Far from presenting a notion of her psyche as being distorted or rendered "pathological" by a consistent exposure to trauma, she offers a picture of intellectual well-being, a balanced approach which is ready to accept human nature in all its complex bearings. Hurston's deliberations on the issue of "racial pride", for instance, again show her comprehension of the politicisation of the whole thing, "People made whole careers of being "Race" men and women" (152). Yet this is not a hastily arrived at conclusion.

The chapter, "My People, My People" deals with the author's constant questionings since childhood of what concepts like ""Race Pride"—"Race Prejudice"—"Race Man"—"Race Solidarity"—"Race Consciousness"—"Race"" (ibid) actually denote. She could see the dichotomy when her own people who shouted praises of their race and seemed to exude a sense of pride in their identity on public platforms resorted to cracking "Monkey" jokes later on in close circles. As she questions: "Were Negroes the great heroes I heard about from the platform, or were they the ridiculous monkeys of every-day talk"? (157)

Instead of an easy acceptance of passed down notions, then, Hurston tries to reach at her own conclusion regarding her stand on race and racial pride. And the understanding she finally arrives at is one which refuses to see human beings only in terms of black and white. Blacks, as all human beings, are complex individuals who cannot be typecast into a single idea of Blackness as the overarching or sole driving force. While Hurston shares

a strong solidarity with her race, as her efforts to uplift it exemplifies, she is equally against enforcing stereotypes and demanding conformity in the name of group unity:

> Light came to me when I realized that I did not have to consider any racial group as a whole…I learned that skins were no measure of what was inside people. So none of the Race clichés meant anything anymore. I began to laugh at both white and black who claimed special blessings on the basis of race. (162)

Through an unfiltered acceptance of her family roots with no sense of any need to claim special or privileged lineages, Hurston rises above notions of hierarchical identities and puts forth a case for individual merit. This equal emphasis on or prioritising of the individual has in turn again led to several accusations against her of being a race traitor.

In the chapter, "School Again", the author relates an incident which puts into question her affinity towards members of her own race. While at Howard in order to earn her tuition Hurston had been working as a manicurist in Mr. George Robinson's G Street shop. Although Mr. Robinson was a Black, his shop catered to an exclusively White clientele and was, in fact, frequented by the city's elites. The incident which triggers Hurston to question her own race ethics takes place when a Black person once enters the barber shop and demands to be served. The Black employees, however, refuse him service and ask him to rather go to a shop which served Blacks. The man, unrelenting as he was, had to be finally thrown out of Mr. Robinson's shop. Hurston writes that while she did not directly participate in the quarrel that ensued between that man insisting for service and her fellow black employees, she reciprocated their feelings in that she too wanted the man to be out of the shop.

This particular incident that the author narrates in her autobiography, of course, apparently puts her in the wrong, as she herself admits. Hurston's deliberations on the issue, however, if keenly read compels us to see a different take on the entire episode. While it most definitely hurt the sentiments and self-respect of a Black man and by implication all Blacks to be denied service by some of his own fellow men, the incident was a complicated one which involved the livelihoods of many. As the author opines, boosting the pride of one Black would have negatively affected the lives of the other Black employees.

As has been discussed above and as is repeatedly sought to be asserted throughout *Dust Tracks*, Hurston was completely of the belief that there was a need for a shift in narrative so far as Black victimisation was concerned. In order for the discourse on Blacks as psychopathological to change, it was necessary to behave with dignity and grace. While the Black man coming to the barber shop was not wrong in insisting to be served, it was nevertheless, Hurston suggests, illogical. He should have known the consequences and acted more judiciously, thereby, preventing his own as well as the other Black employees' humiliation in front of a White public. The endangering of the livelihoods of so many Blacks—the employees as well as the owner Mr Robinson, who as the author says, always helped Black students in need of financial aid—would have only dragged them a little bit more down the social line. And that ultimately would have affected all previous achievements of the various movements and struggles for a more egalitarian society—achievements which made it possible for a Black like Mr. Robinson to be able to open a shop in a posh area of Washington.

Hurston's philosophy of racial uplift suggests working hard with dignity and planning towards set objectives as the way to be at par with the Whites. The adult author, whose upbringing had been in a Black town but had constant exposure to "benevolent" White figures, seems to have imbibed the teachings of her White Godfather:

> "Do the best you can, if you have to. But learn right now, not to let your head start more than your behind can stand. Measure out the amount of fighting you can do, and then do it. When you take on too much and get licked, folks will pity you first and scorn you after awhile, and that's bad. Use your head!" (33)

A pragmatic approach that leaves aside bitterness and the urge to retaliate for one that logically calculates the pros and cons of one's action is, then, Hurston's operational strategy. Just like victims of trauma and injustice need a "safe space" in order to communicate their accounts of sufferings, action—whether physical or strategic—in the aftermath of painful events also necessitates the "safety" of its agents. When racial violence, trauma, or inequity are thought of only in collective terms, in terms of how they affect an entire race, individual micro-histories of pain and suffering tend to be ignored. The Black man demanding attention in Mr. Robinson's shop might seem to be doing a heroic deed: had he been supported by Hurston and the other Black workers, it would have been a small landmark in the history of race struggles. However, as the author suggests, it

would have been individually devastating for many of them. Mr. Robinson's business would have most definitely suffered a setback with the plausibility of the shop being forced to shut down. Some of the other Black employees might have been pushed further down the poverty line and their very sustenance threatened. For Hurston, her means of earning her tuition and getting her degree which would facilitate a better social standing would have gone. The achievement of the intended collective goal for the Black race as a whole—the right to be served at par with Whites—would have induced a series of bitter consequences for the concerned individuals.

As discussed, when the benchmark for achieving race ideals is in terms of a huge mass of faceless bodies, it can never be effectively achieved. Unless and until individual narratives are heard and attended to, it is impossible to achieve the collective ideal. Because then stories of pain would only keep perpetuating. When race as a faceless mass is sought to be protected, it instigates retaliatory action often involving violent means in order to uphold the prestige of the group. In the process, necessary steps of working through such as "soul-searching", to use Hrushovski's term again, are left out. Proper questioning of one's actions can reveal how "redemptive" action can at times harm one's own kinfolks as opposed to just members of the opposite group.

Hurston's racial philosophy, then, reifies an approach that gives attention to individual growth as something paramount to achieving race ideals. *Dust Tracks* upholds the fact that every Black has to strive for excellence and dignity if the Black race has to stand at par with Whites. In "My People, My People" the author discusses how the Black struggle often "lacked reason because they were attempting to stand equal with the best in America without having the tools to work with" (161). The "tools" she is referring to are primarily those of education and financial foothold, the acquirement of which demand some amount of strategic planning.

It is understandable, then, why the Hurston who retaliates with such ferociousness against her stepmother—"If I died, let me die with my hands soaked in her blood. I wanted her blood" (68)—and who holds on to a quest for vengeance even after knowing of her deteriorating health—"All I could do was to wish that she had a lot more neck to rot" (70)—becomes exceedingly understanding and conciliatory in her encounters with Whites. However, as has been emphasized repeatedly in this chapter, we do get glimpses

of that ruthless, unforgiving version of the author in strategically planned manner and positions throughout the autobiography.

Hurston's allegorizing and use of satirical humour and mockery, while speaking of serious issues like religion, colonisation or imperialism, is another instance, for example, when she tries to make light of her otherwise scathing critiques of these things. Delineating on how apparently 'sacred' things like religious faith spread with the aid of physical might, Hurston writes:

> We see the Emperor Constantine…start out on his missionary journey with his sword. He could not sing like Peter, and he could not preach like Paul. He probably did not even have a good straining voice like my father to win converts and influence people. But he had his good points—one of them being a sword—and a seasoned army. (188-189)

In the same satirical note, Hurston turns American politics into an allegory of the cult of Father Divine. Somebody holding as distinguished a position as President Roosevelt is hypothesised as a 'peace' caricature of the self-proclaimed Black God man. By turning the First Citizen of America into a devotee of the Black Father Divine, she makes a mockery of racial structures for sure. But she also implies how the lust for power has the capacity to transform otherwise rigid social hierarchies including race dynamics. Continuing her association of religion and spirituality with power politics, Hurston writes her fictional account of Roosevelt becoming a disciple of Father Divine:

> Maybe Franklin Delano Roosevelt will fall on his head tomorrow and arise with a vision of Father Divine in the sky and the motto, "Peace! It's wonderful!" glowing like a rainbow above it.
>
> Maybe our President would not even have to fall off of a horse, or a battleship, as the case might be. If Father Divine should come to control thirty million votes, the President could just skip the fall; that is, off of the horse.
>
> Then, we might hear the former Franklin D. Roosevelt addressed as Sincere Determination. Eleanor would be Divine Eternal Commutation. Celestial Bountiful Tribulations would be Sister Frances Perkins. Harry Hopkins, Angelic Saintly Shadow. His Vocal Honor, La Guardia, would be known as Always Sounding

> Trumpet, and on his evident good works in his nursery, Harold Ickes would be bound to win the title of Fruitful Love Abounding. (189-90)

This satirical presentation of the American senate as a spiritual organisation headed by the Black leader, in a way, again brings to us Hurston's philosophy of racial uplift: if Father Divine's influence over people could confirm Roosevelt's victory, he would most happily overcome any racial prejudice and form his parliament in line with the former's teachings. The author's knowledge of Father Divine's rich White disciples was like a case point proving her belief that power supersedes any racial ideology.

Claudine Raynaud has pointed out how the satire is also a covert critique of America's political stand before Japan's attack on Pearl Harbour took place. The imagining of Roosevelt as an ardent follower of Father Divine's "Peace" movement is a mocking assault on the President's refusal to directly enter the scenario of the Second World War before the December 1941 Pearl Harbour incident. Hurston, writing her autobiography before Pearl Harbour, makes a "wry attack on Roosevelt's politics at the time of World War II". Her political and religious satires bring back to readers of her autobiography "the caricatures the younger Hurston used to draw when she was a wardrobe attendant (DT, 138-39)" (Reynaud 49). Lying beneath the overtly obsequious and grateful woman is that version of her who dares to mock even the highest authoritarian figures with her satirical portraitures.

Hurston's understanding and critique of contemporary world politics as put forth in her autobiography is also commendable. She could see the way American or for that matter European imperialism were mere euphemisms for the brutal institution of slavery. While slavery had been abolished long back, its repercussions in the form of profit-driven colonizing missions continued. In the hypothetical encounter with the White slave-owners grandchild and the ensuing conversation, the author puts forth these thoughts:

> What is the principle of slavery? Only the literal buying and selling of human flesh on the block? That was only an outside symbol. Real slavery is couched in the desire and the efforts of any man or community to live and advance their interests at the expense of the lives and interests of others. All of the outward signs come out of that. Do you not realize that the power, prestige and prosperity of the greatest nations on earth rests on colonies and sources of raw materials? Why else are great wars waged? (195)

Passages such as these show Hurston's astute observations on the general human propensity for profit-making at the expense of others. The apparently loyal author displays her ability of critically judging political decisions and actions that are sought to be passed off as 'benevolent' missions in the name of civilization.

Finally, Hurston's philosophy of racial uplift cannot be spoken of in isolation of her views regarding Black womanhood. In the very first few chapters of her autobiography, the author sets about presenting men-women equations in the Black society to which she belongs. In her portrayal of the relationship between her parents, between her Aunt Caroline and Uncle Jim, and in her depiction of the story-telling sessions that took place at Joe Clarke's porch, the writer exposes Black male sexism. The conflict between her parents—with the father threatening physical assault although ultimately verbally outwitted by the mother—offers us glimpses of how the men wanted to assert their masculinity by physically overpowering their female counterparts. Similarly, discussions filled with sexual innuendoes at Joe Clarke's porch, which according to Hurston was the heart of Black Eatonville, expose the way Black women's bodies could be objectified by members of their own race. Moreover, the fact that the story-telling sessions were mostly by men reveal how women were excluded from public spaces of discussions. In this regard, Nellie Y. McKay writes:

> Dust Tracks liberated her identity from the straitjacket of racial struggle and replaced it with black womanhood in negative and positive inter- and intraracial and sexual group relationships and encounters. Although most of her peers saw her strategy as a betrayal of the community's political agenda for black writing, Hurston's text boldly inscribed a revolutionary alternative for women's narrative into the black tradition. As autobiography, it expanded the boundaries of the slave narrative tradition and examined previously unexplored gender conflicts and tensions between black women and men. (101)

Hurston's "working through" of history helps her see the futility of merely pointing fingers and also equips her with the knowledge of how racial ideologies take a backseat when sexual politics within the race are involved. Gender discriminations within the Black community hamper the growth of the womenfolk and that eventually stalls the progress of the group as a whole. By exposing the internal follies in her own family and immediate

society Hurston, as McKay observes, makes a case for the emancipation of Black women from the strangles of both racial and sexual domination.

A significant episode in Dust Tracks is the one surrounding the death of Hurston's mother. The death scene has been described in a way and language that evokes the child author's sense of deep loss and a shattered world. Indeed, it is the mother's death that serves as one of the first real experiences of pain in a series of traumatic incidents that ensues for the young Hurston. In one of the most poignant passages in the autobiography, she writes:

> But life picked me up from the foot of Mama's bed, grief, self-despisement and all, and set my feet in strange ways. That moment was the end of a phase in my life. I was old before my time with grief of loss, of failure, of remorse of failure. No matter what the others did, my mother had put her trust in me. She had felt that I could and would carry out her wishes, and I had not. And then in that sunset time, I failed her. (61)

The author's pain is not just that of the daughter having lost her mother: more than the death, it is the inability to speak for her, the failure to fulfil the dying mother's last wishes that devastate the child emotionally. Hurston—the daughter wants to be the voice of her mother, speaking out the latter's desire to avoid deathbed rituals such as removing the pillow from underneath her head, and veiling of the mirror and clock. The failure to see to the fulfilment of these wishes in the face of societal norms which paid no heed to the dying woman's (or rather her daughter's) pleas fill the child with a sense of helplessness and deep anguish. The loss of the mother and the concomitant void to which she feels herself being thrown continues to be a source of primeval trauma for Hurston even long after the incident.

Henry Louis Gates Jr., in his "Afterword" to the autobiography, has discussed how the death scene serves to show Hurston's "rhetorical distance" from her contemporaries like Richard Wright. Contrasting the scene of the mother's death in Wright's *Black Boy* with that in *Dust Tracks*, Gates points out that while male authors like Wright associated death with silence and a stultifying effect, Hurston remembers the death scene "in terms of a search for voice" (DT 290). Her grief at not being able to represent the mother's voice is then, as Lionnet says, by extension and implication the pain of the woman writer/artist who cannot trace herself in a genealogy of other females. He explains how the customary

veiling of the mirror is a symbolic gesture at covering up the mother's face and thus, pushing into the margins her memory. The patriarchal norms enforcing such veiling sever the daughter's ties from not just her biological mother but from the maternal lineage—from all mother figures of the past whose faces had been veiled into oblivion. The author's futile desire to carry out the last wish of letting the mirror remain unveiled is "to be understood as an allegorical attempt to look into the mirror of the mother's soul, to retain severed connections...and to become the voice that bridges generations" (130).

Hurston, then, through her critique of the flawed gender dynamics within Black society presents a case for the emancipation of Black women from not just racial denigration but sexual domination as well. Far from betraying her people with the portrayal of intersexual relations, she voices the feelings of generations of Black women subjected to abuse and violence by their own men folks. In this regard, as discussed above she tries to free Black women from the clutches of oblivion and creates a history of Black womanhood.

In conclusion, *Dust Tracks* is a moving text that presents a Black woman trying to make the most out of an unjust world by not letting bitterness get the better of her. As discussed, Hurston exemplifies the careful "working through" of trauma whereby she is able to come at an unbiased understanding of the socio-historical factors contributing to that legacy of trauma. Such an approach towards history equips her with the foresight that a one-sided view of events—rendering one's own party entirely free of guilt while putting all responsibilities on the other—only serves to perpetuate trauma. Moreover, such blame-gaming ultimately would present a picture of Blacks as psychologically damaged creatures obsessed with their White counterparts. To this end, she promotes a philosophy which urges for the right to work towards individual achievement as a way of fostering the growth of the Black race as a whole. Determined to project a picture of Black intellectual sanity as opposed to a predisposition towards a pathological bantering of angst, she strategically sails through the straitjacket of White patronage that she finds herself entrapped within. Her obsequiousness, as the chapter argues, is not just the unfortunate outcome of the complex web that engulfs her: it is a strategically calculated approach designed to put forth her views, some of which are scathing critiques as already discussed, amidst the intellectual censorship of her White editors and publishers.

My Lord, What a Morning

Marian Anderson's *My Lord, What a Morning* documents her journey from being a poor, Black girl from Philadelphia to receiving international fame as one of America's leading Black contraltos. From her birth in 1897 to the publication of her autobiography in 1956, Anderson, like Hurston, lived through a period of history that was marked by extreme racial prejudices, segregation, lynchings and also other momentous international events such as the world wars. Yet, in her autobiographical account, such dark historical episodes either do not find any mention at all or only passing references. Instead, what Anderson's retelling of her journey focuses upon is the love, warmth, and support that she received from various corners of life—from the Black community around her for sure but also from Whites who, recognizing her talent, extended their support. Just as has been the case with Hurston, such elisions of racial animosities and tensions from the account render it susceptible to attacks and critiques for complacence or complicity in the power struggle. However, similar to *Dust Tracks*, *My Lord* also holds within it subtle but persistent forms of resistance to the White regime. Rather than presenting the Black racial self as psychologically so affected as to be constantly preoccupied with hatred and anger, Anderson, in her autobiography, creates a self that consciously maintains dignity and grace even amidst tremendous racial prejudices and persecution. Such maintenance and exhibition of a dignified stance rejects any notion of Black existence as a mere foil to White presence.

As has been stated, Anderson's account refrains from adopting any 'combative' stance of resistance. In fact, even while narrating the incident when she was not allowed by the Daughters of the American Revolution (D.A.R). members to perform in the Constitution Hall in Washington, D.C., she abstains from any retaliatory rhetoric or blame-gaming. Rather, she maintains diplomacy by pushing the entire handling of the matter to her management team. In 1939, Mr. Hurok, who was handling and managing Anderson's musical career then, decided that she had achieved enough acclaim and fame to be performing in the places where the nation's best artists performed. One such place of repute was the Constitution Hall in the country's capital. The Hall, however, could not be booked for her because the D.A.R. who owned it did not allow its use by 'coloured' people.

The denial by the D.A.R .received huge media attention, and many prominent members like then First Lady, Eleanor Roosevelt resigned from the association. Yet,

Anderson does not show any emotional excitement or upheaval while retelling the event in her autobiography, just as she had maintained her calm and composure when the actual event had transpired. To quote from her autobiography:

> [N]ewspaper people made efforts to obtain some comment from me, but I had nothing to say. I really did not know precisely what the Hurok office was doing about the situation and, since I had no useful opinions to offer, did not discuss it. I trusted the management. (185)

The author, thus, consciously avoids expressing her real feelings on the matter. No matter the injustice of the entire situation, she does not indulge in any exhibition of outright hatred or anger, instead choosing to hide her actual emotions beneath claims of ignorance. While one might criticise Anderson's stance, a careful reading shows how she intersperses statements in between that reveal her dilemma and help us understand her refusal in terms of strategic survival rather than complacence. After the assertion that she had no knowledge regarding how her management office was handling everything, she, for instance, again writes:

> There were occasions, of course, when I knew more than I said. I did not want to talk, and I particularly did not want to say anything about the D.A.R…I did not feel that I was designed for hand-to-hand combat, and I did not wish to make statements that I would later regret. (188-189)

Passages such as these reveal how precarious Anderson's position was: if she had to 'survive' as a singer, she had to be 'strategic' in her use of words and could not let words betray her actual thoughts. Her attitude can be better understood from her mother's viewing of the entire situation. As recounted in her autobiography, when she asks the opinion of her mother as regards the entire situation, she replies in the following terms:

> "It is an important decision to make. You are in this work. You intend to stay in it. You know what your aspirations are. I think you should make your own decision." (189)

The mother's statements highlight how Anderson's continued presence and acceptance in the music industry depended on many factors apart from her singing talents. As a Black woman making her mark in White America, she could not afford to 'hurt' White sentiments with a direct, unapologetic statement of her opinions.

However, she does utilise the scope presented by the writing of her autobiography to subtly put forth her views on segregation and the employment of race as a prism through which to view the world. Anderson devotes considerable space to how the open concert held at Lincoln Memorial on Easter Sunday, as an alternative for the cancelled programme at Constitution Hall, was hugely successful, with support coming in from all corners. To quote from the text:

> There seemed to be people as far as the eye could see. The crowd stretched in a great semicircle from the Lincoln Memorial around the reflecting pool on to the shaft of the Washington Monument. I had a feeling that a great wave of good will poured out from these people, almost engulfing me. (191)

In writing about the overwhelming response from the crowd, the author shows how the segregationist policies of the D.A.R. ultimately proved futile. While they managed to keep her out of Constitution Hall, the injustice meted out by them opened the doors to the hearts of thousands of Americans who came in her support. *My Lord, What a Morning* implicitly endorses the view that Anderson's staunch maintenance of her dignity in the face of the racial backlash she faced ultimately earned her a spiritual victory over her detractors.

Anderson's autobiography finds her maintaining the same composed outlook regarding the policy changes at Constitution Hall that finally opened its premises to people of all colours. As she writes:

> May I say that when I finally walked into Constitution Hall and sang from its stage I had no feeling different from what I have in other halls. There was no sense of triumph. I felt that it was a beautiful concert hall, and I was happy to sing in it. (193)

In rendering the 'hyped' Constitution Hall similar to any other hall, the author deflates its value and by so doing, shows how the D.A.R.'s sense of superiority implicit in its racist policies had always been based on false presumptions. Anderson's insistence that she could feel "no sense of triumph" again is a tacit way of suggesting that she had never bothered herself with any notions of defeat or victory. Constitution Hall, to her, suggested not some idealised, aspired-for venue, but one where she believed she should have the "right" to sing "as an artist" (ibid). To quote from her again:

> It may be said that my concerts at Constitution Hall are usually sold out. I hope that people come because they expect to hear a fine program in a first-class performance. If they came for any other reason I would be disappointed. (ibid)

Anderson, here, stresses the desire to be recognised solely based on her merits: if at all people come to Constitution Hall to see her perform, it should be the quality of her performance that draws them and nothing else. Such insistence rejects any notion of a victimised Black identity. Instead, she projects a self that has remained 'intact' and 'capable' despite severe criticisms, restrictions and limitations owing to her race. If the D.A. R. had prioritised her race above everything else, she, by emphasising her merit, makes a case for looking beyond mere external surface in judging people. Anderson's subtle mode of resistance, as can be deciphered in her autobiography, makes it possible to critique the racist policies of the D.A.R. without entering into any frontal attack upon them.

There are many other instances in the text which call to question her racial ideologies or the credibility of the views expressed. Anderson's career in music finds her travelling across different places of the world, including many countries of the European sub-continent. While in Norway, the newspaper reviews depict the author in highly racist terms:

> These audiences were not accustomed to Negroes. One of the newspaper reports described the singer as being "dressed in electric-blue satin and looking very much like a chocolate bar." Another paper made the comparison with *café au lait*. And so it went. (141)

Despite the racial prejudices inherent in such comparisons, Anderson insists that there was no malice or colour bias in them. Rather, speaking of the newspaper comments, she writes:

> The comments had nothing to do with any prejudice; they expressed a kind of wonder. (142)

Here too, the author without directly accusing the newspaper people of racism, manages to show how as a Black woman she was always treated as an outsider and hence , an object of "wonder."

Anderson, similarly, puts into her autobiography tacit critiques of the racist mindsets that informed many in the music industry. She especially notes the patronizing

attitudes of Mr. Judson and his management team from whom she could not receive any substantial help so far as her career graph was concerned. Anderson, for instance, mentions how on being first noticed by the Judson office she had envisioned it as a kind of "step up" (108) in her career. Coming under the management of one of the best managerial teams in the country, she had "imagin(ed) a future of unlimited rosiness" (ibid). As she recounts in her autobiography, however, she was only rudely made aware of the 'additional' difficulties and obstacles that come in her way as a Black woman singer. To quote from her:

> The change in my itinerary under the Judson direction was not especially marked….When we went South we still got Berth 13…Progress seemed to have stopped; I had substantially the same circuit of concerts but little more. I was beginning to feel that I was at a standstill. (111)

Without directly mentioning race and the problems she had to face because of her identity as a Black woman, Anderson hints at the specific obstacles she had to face owing to her racial identity. In her case, being under the Judson office, which otherwise indicated a level of professional achievement, did little to boost her career. Anderson's mentioning of the fact that she still had to travel in birth 13 shows her dismay at being subjected to the humiliation of racial segregation despite her talents and establishment as an emerging singer.

Moreover, as already stated, the author also tacitly expresses her dissatisfaction with the condescending attitude of Mr. Judson when it came to her singing abilities and range. She especially shows her indignation at the fact that Mr. Judson suggests she is a soprano instead of a contralto. As she writes:

> I confess I was upset. My manager's uncertainty about whether I was on the right track on so fundamental a thing as the nature and range of the voice could have no other effect on me. It added to the underlying feeling that things were not going too well. (112)

Although she does not directly state it, the awareness that her Black identity is sufficient to make her White manager assume intellectual superiority over her disheartens her. That Mr Judson believes she should change from being a contralto to a soprano based on the

opinion of a certain "woman who knew a great deal about singing" (ibid) suggests how he doubts Anderson's most basic knowledge regarding her singing.

The author, thus, incorporates into her text implicit critiques of the way American racism affected her career. Apart from one chapter of her autobiography, "Shock," where she speaks directly and primarily of race, she does not allot much space to such discussions. As recounted in that particular chapter, her first real encounter with racist prejudice comes when she is refused admission to a music school because of her colour. Recalling her hurt emotions, she writes: "It was as if a cold, horrifying hand had been laid on me" (38). Similarly, Anderson talks about the Jim Crow laws which forced Black people to travel in segregated coaches of trains. However, even in these deliberations, though she mentions her hurt feelings, she refrains from showing any outright hatred or anger. In fact, she rounds off her discussions on racism with an insistence on how it reflected the mindset or attitudes of only a section of the people and how Americans were capable of rising above all such differences in times of crises. She ends the chapter by narrating an incident when a storm had partially eroded the "roadbed below Washington" (45) leading to the delay of all trains. When after waiting for the entire night, provisions were finally arranged for a train in the morning, people crowded the train with no space left for application of Jim Crow laws. To quote from the text:

> This was an emergency situation…I saw a white woman take a Negro child and hold it on her lap to give the mother a few minutes of rest. I saw other expressions of brotherhood. Negroes and whites talked to one another; they shared their newspapers and even their food. The world did not crumble. (45)

Similar to Hurston, then, Anderson keeps on reiterating throughout her autobiography examples of people, especially Whites who irrespective of any colour divide, were capable of showing genuine kindness and extending real support. As already stated, such desperate need, embodied in her autobiography, to pacify Whites in power represents the extremely narrow avenues for success left open to Blacks. Anderson, no matter her real feelings, could not afford to displease Whites who in a way held the control over her fate. However, as discussed, she does manage to intersperse tacit critiques in between that highlights her subtle manipulation of silence as a means of resistance.

Both writers reach out in their way to a cross-section of readers including White people. Despite the background of racial segregation in which they grew up, their

narratives address parts of the mainstream American society they think would be able to connect with in an empathetic manner. They express themselves in fictive terms, like the ‘statue’ Hurston mentions at the beginning of her narrative which fulfils expectations but is not an exact representation. Without directly addressing the injustices of racially divided society, both writers offer oblique critiques of the discrimination around them. They also refuse to accept the whole of White American society as narrow and self-serving and present White people who were kind and genuinely supportive of Black people. That being said, both Hurston and Anderson emerge as proud representatives of the African American community through their writing.

CHAPTER THREE

NARRATING RESISTANCE

> I believe in living.
> I believe in birth.
> I believe in the sweat of love
> and in the fire of truth.
> And I believe that a lost ship,
> steered by tired, seasick sailors,
> can still be guided home
> to port. (Assata Shakur, *Assata: An Autobiography* 1)

> There was the possibility that, having read [the autobiography], more people would understand why so many of us have no alternative but to offer our lives—our bodies, our knowledge, our will—to the cause of our oppressed people. (Angela Davis, *An Autobiography* xvi)

> My eight friends and I paid for the integration of Central High with our innocence…The physical and psychological punishment we endured profoundly affected all our lives. It transformed us into warriors who dared not cry even when we suffered intolerable pain…I became an instant adult, forced to take stock of what I believed and what I was willing to sacrifice to back up my beliefs. (Melba Pattillo Beals, *Warriors Don't Cry* 13)

This chapter aims to examine four autobiographical texts written by Black American women who were actively engaged in resistance politics, especially the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements of the 1950s and 1960s. The chosen texts are Melba Pattillo Beals's *Warriors Don't Cry* (1994), Angela Davis' An Autobiography (1974), Assata Shakur's *Assata: An Autobiography* (1987), and Elaine Brown's *A Taste of Power* (1992). The chapter examines how these texts not only provide thorough documentation of the participation of the writers in resistance politics but also re-examines the process through which their lives are transformed from private selves to public figures. In other words, these texts work with resistance at two levels. On the one hand, there is resistance to discrimination, injustice and White racism. On the other hand, there is a more subtle resistance to the presentation of public memories regarding their transformation into useful figures of public heroism or community heroism.

All these texts offer examinations of the lives of the writers. Significantly, they also offer explicit and implicit re-examination of how the public perceives them. The

authors via their autobiographies question the multiple passages to their public perception. Further, the chapter shows how these autobiographical texts theorise life and life-writing: one, by allowing real life events and their presentation in life writing as distinct and distinguishable tropes and two, by allowing these tropes to feed off each other. As life turns to life writing, we find a triadic frame where an event in life is presented as a transformed event in life writing by way of explanation, supplement, and substitution. In other words, life and writing are presented as not only mutually interwoven but also as interpenetrating. In all the texts under scrutiny, life and life writing enrich each other. To put it differently, these autobiographical texts help reinvent lives that are already reinvented through politics. This chapter, thus, examines the relationship of persons to politics, the transformation of life through politics and the 're-transformation' of that journey through writing.

The objectives of this chapter are:

- To analyse Black American women's autobiography in the light of social, psychological and sexual trauma
- To examine how resistance is used as a way out of trauma and how it invites further entanglements
- To show how Black American women's autobiography deals with resistance to trauma and offers a passage to healing

The chapter works with the following hypotheses:

- that social action can be a response to trauma
- that resistance to injustice gives one a sense of dignity
- that activism leads to further trauma

Barbara Harlow, in *Resistance Literature*, tries to establish the context(s) for the emergence of an arena of writings devoted chiefly to countering hegemonies of oppression and reverting balance(s) of power. She traces the first use of the term to 1966 when Ghassan Kanafani's *Literature of Resistance in Occupied Palestine: 1948-1966* came out. Kanafani's work, where he explores how the seemingly innocuous field of literature can be a site of struggle and battle, was, of course, limited to his geopolitical region and sociocultural milieu. However, much as literatures of resistance emerge out of their specific contexts, they share certain commonalities of thought and expression. Harlow

cites critics from different geographical locations so as to establish this common ground even as she remains cautious against universalist appropriations. Resistance literature, for instance, according to critics like Kanafani and Manuel Maldonado Denis whom she mentions, emerge out of immediate conditions of struggles and armed opposition, and hence, an objective, dispassionate stance cannot be expected as such. Aimed with revising literary studies and reformulating the grounds on which literature is analysed and investigated, these writings in the words of Eric Woolf—another scholar whom Harlow cites, are inclusive of "people without history" (4). They are an attempt, as desperate and essential as armed resistance itself, to gain a foothold over history and the literary/academic enterprise of knowledge production and dissemination that controls such historical record-keeping. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, distinguishing between the contradictory aesthetics of oppression and resistance to oppression found in literature, talks about the need for "a different organization of literary categories, one which is "participatory" in the historical processes of hegemony and resistance to domination, rather than formal or analytic" (9). Literatures of resistance tend to be obsessed with the specificity of their material conditions and time and are written primarily as a way of getting control over sociocultural, historical, and political productions (2-18).

Margo V. Perkins, in *Autobiography as Activism*, talks about how the autobiographical texts of women involved actively in resistance movements can and should be read as an extension of their activist propaganda. Such texts serve as a means of extending the political ideologies of the writers to the maximum people. The writing of autobiographies, according to Perkins, offer the chance of juxtaposing their troubled personal lives with their public battles in order to inspire "transformative action," and of "constructing an alternative history that challenges hegemonic ways of knowing" (xii). Talking about the political motivations behind engaging in the autobiographical endeavour, Perkins writes:

> [A]ctivists use life-writing as an important tool for advancing political struggle...[T]hese activists use autobiography to connect their own circumstances with those of other activists across historical periods…Activists use life-writing to recreate themselves as well as the era they recount. (xiii)

Continuing with her arguments, she further writes:

> Many things are at stake for them in the process. These things include control of the historical record, control over their own public images, and control over how the resistance movement in which they are involved is defined and portrayed. In the case of those narratives that are directly tied to impending struggle, activists may even be writing to save their own lives. (ibid)

The writing, thus, becomes fraught with the tension of justifying one's political standpoints. The autobiographical project might call for the overlapping of the personal and the public spheres, but the private struggles hold meaning only in so far as they validate the writers' political choices. Perkins goes on to list the "expectations" put upon "political autobiography" —the term she uses for activist narratives after Angela Davis's coinage of the term— in particular and resistance literature in general:

> (1) that the autobiographer will emphasize the story of the struggle over her own personal ordeals; (2) that she will use her own story both to document a history of the struggle and to further its political agenda; (3) that she will provide a voice for the voiceless; (4) that she will honour the strategic silences in order to protect the integrity of the struggle as well as the welfare of other activists; (5) that she will expose oppressive conditions and the repressive tactics of the state; and (6) that she will use the autobiography as a form of political intervention, to educate as broad an audience as possible to the situation and issues at stake. (7)

Such specific focus on the challenges put forth by political autobiography to authoritarian regimes, thus, leads to the textual erasure of the personal dimensions to activists' lives and sufferings. The deep private traumas and setbacks experienced in the course of public battles get marginalized when resistance is seen and understood only in terms of a "language of empowerment," (xii) an expression Perkins borrows from Henry Giroux.

In this sense, the fact that the writers examined here participated in the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements, is crucial to the form of their autobiographies. Melba Patillo Beals (b.-1941) was one of the Little Rock Nine, who as a teenager, took the extremely bold and personally devastating decision to be one of the first nine students to integrate Little Rock's Central High School, an all-white premiere institute of the time. The integration of the school made possible by the 1954 Brown v/s Board of Education ruling has been a landmark achievement of the Civil Rights Movement. The Supreme Court legislation, however, did little to prevent the violence that accompanied the process of

desegregation. To young Beals, Central High turned into a battle ground where she as a schoolchild was forced to take on the garb of a revolutionary. Angela Davis, Assata Shakur and Elaine Brown were active members of the Black Power Movement, with Brown even reaching the top echelons of power in the Black Panther Party. The Black Power Movement—the more radical and violent offshoot of the Civil Rights Movement—has been one of the most prominent chapters of the Black struggle in America, the impact of which is felt even today. The autobiographies of different Black Power activists serve as important reference documents for understanding the movement.

While we realise the importance of recognizing activist narratives as a tool for political propaganda, the present chapter, as already stated, intends to study the autobiographies of the chosen authors not simply in terms of their association with active resistance but also for their showcasing of the interrelation between historical, socio-political trauma and activism. The texts document the politicised self's journey through her struggles with the state machinery, state sponsored bodily and psychological tortures, detainment and further exposure to violence from the prison authorities as seen in the case of Davis and Shakur. At the same time, they also bring to light the often-unwanted experiences from life—poverty, struggles ensuing from racist, sexist, and class denigrations, consequent self-doubts etc.—that instigate the process of coming into political consciousness. They expose how the political demography gets expanded and restructured with the politicisation of the repressed sections. More importantly, the texts exemplify how this politicisation is a direct response to the actual, lived material conditions of the authors' lives and not merely a fascinated indulgence in the rhetoric of feminism, nationalism, postcolonialism or such. Similarly, as stated earlier, the immediate goal of the autobiographical project is also not to gain popular attention but is politically motivated. Harlow, in her essay, "From the Women's Prison," cites H. Bruce Franklin's notion of writers writing exclusively from an experience of being incarcerated:

> People who have become literary artists because of their imprisonments tend to write in an autobiographical mode. The reason is obvious: it is their own personal experience that has given them both their main message and the motive to communicate it. (455)

The very act of writing is, thus, motivated from a desire to publicize the otherwise personally felt experiences of oppression and injustice and, thereby, to possibly change the

social structure that allows such repression of a particular community. Since their writings condemn the oppressive authoritarian structures, the very act of writing connects the writer with the general masses in their struggle against power.

Harlow shows how the conventions of literature themselves get transformed in the process of using the medium of the written word as a political weapon. To quote from her again:

> In the same way that institutions of power…are subverted by the demand on the part of dispossessed groups for an access to history, power, and resources, so too are the narrative paradigms and their textual authority being transformed by the historical and literary articulation of those demands. (ibid)

The critic, here, is of course referring to the manipulation of literary forms by authors from 'dispossessed' sections and the way such interventions write their way into history. However, a sole focus or emphasis on empowerment—attained via participation in political resistance and/or through the process of writing—might paradoxically fail to take note of the actual socio-historical/political conditions that deprive people of their agency and thereby, necessitate such actual/textual struggles. In other words, the relation between social inequities/injustices and resistant action might tend to get underrepresented. This chapter, therefore, contends that we need to pay some critical attention to the trauma-activism equation.

The co-relation between race-induced psychic sufferings and emergent resistant action is especially relevant in studies that focus on Black resistance movements and activism. When trauma is generated from repeated exposures to social abuse and exploitation, as is the case with racial trauma, it loses its capacity to shock and overwhelm. And because such trauma no longer remains a single catastrophic encounter and becomes an everyday familiar thing, healing can occur only when that everyday reality is altered. In the case of victims of continuous trauma, therefore, one mechanism of recovery is meaningful social action. Radical activist action offers the hope for a positive alteration in one's social reality. It offers victims of the continuous trauma of abuse and injustice the possibility of overcoming their shattered sense of self and dignity and thereby, endows them with a sense of agency over their perceived destiny. Activism, thus, proffers a new meaning and purpose to one's otherwise battered existence.

Vivienne Matthies-Boon in her deliberation on activist trauma in post-revolutionary Egypt comments:

> Reinterpreting a traumatic experience in light of positive outcomes means one can say that 'it has been worth it', which makes the world appear less random and hostile. Reinterpretation does not occur in isolation but in an intersubjective relation to others, and takes two forms: the personal lessons learnt and the structural benefits for self and others. (626)

Speaking of the second form in which reinterpretation occurs, she further writes:

> The latter, which is more likely to occur than the former after human-inflicted trauma entails the reinterpretation of traumatic experiences as having served a purpose such as better labour conditions or greater political freedoms…Through such perceived positive outcomes, 'trauma survivors are able to establish some meaning and benevolence even in the midst of meaninglessness and malevolence.' (ibid)

Trauma and activism can be seen as mutually overlapping, with traumatic experiences inviting action and activism leading to further exposure to state sponsored violence. Activists have to always deal with the fear of possible re-traumatization in the form of physical and psychological torture. In this regard, this chapter, as already stated in the beginning, seeks to understand what drives the selected autobiographers to activism in the face of devastating trauma. It seeks to comprehend the socio-psychological mechanisms at work in the case of people committed to social action. It, thus, proposes to fill the gap in the existing literature so far as increased empathy and commitment to social action as an aftermath of trauma is concerned.

Warriors Don't Cry

As has already been mentioned, Melba Beals' *Warriors Don't Cry* is a moving narrative of the author's experiences of having been one of the nine children to integrate Little Rock, Arkansas's Central High School. Although the memoir was published only in 1994, it deals with events that unfolded after the 1954 Brown v/s Board of Education ruling. From the very first pages of the text, readers are made aware of the trauma the child Beals had to endure throughout and even before the process of integration actually starts. Indeed, the "Author's Note" prefixed to the autobiography hints at elements of posttraumatic stress

disorder (PTSD) in her behaviour when she mentions how flashbacks of the traumatic instances keep recurring at the slightest pretexts:

> Memories leap out in a heartbeat, summoned by the sound of a helicopter, the wrath in a shouting voice, or the expression on a scowling face. (*Warriors* 11)

Similarly, speaking of the psychic sufferings which had made the task of writing her autobiography impossible, even though the first draft had been started at the age of eighteen itself, she writes:

> [B]ut in the ensuing years, I could not face the ghosts that its pages called up. During intervals of renewed strength and commitment, I would find myself compelled to return to the manuscript, only to have the pain of reliving my past undo my good intentions. (ibid)

Beals, however, is cautious to establish her credibility as the authentic, reliable narrator of *Warriors*. The adult author recounting her experiences in her autobiography, thus, asserts that although she has not been able to come out of her memories—she "remember(s) being inside Central High School as though it were yesterday" (ibid)—the temporal distance of more than three decades separating her from the events she narrates has helped her rediscover a sense of agency:

> Now enough time has elapsed to allow healing to take place, enabling me to tell my story without bitterness. (ibid)

Here, she specifically points out how with the passage of time the ability of her memories—which remain fresh "as though it were yesterday"—to induce pain or psychic handicap has passed away. She has recovered from her traumas enough to be able to deliver an authoritative account of her experience of the integration.

If Beals reiterates the sense of having been traumatised as a child, it is to bring forth the often-unrecognised causal relation between trauma and self-sacrificial political or activist action. When political action is intended against oppressive regimes and as such brings one face to face with the structures of power, the agent of such actions becomes a sacrificial hero(ine) willing to lay down his/her life for the betterment of society. In *Warriors Don't Cry*, we see the child Beals being transformed too early in life into a "warrior" burdened with the task of bringing about a supposedly collective good for her

people, that of desegregation. And she becomes a warrior in an almost literal sense as such as Central High School changes into a battlefield with angry white segregationist mobs ready to even kill the Little Rock Nine.

As she is thrown in at the deep end, Beals is warned by her bodyguard, Danny from the 101st Airborne division:

> It takes a warrior to fight a battle and survive. This here is a battle if I've ever seen one. (144)

The statement comes in the context of a pep rally that Beals had to attend on the second day of school under the protection of the armed guards of the 101st Airborne division. Already used to the safety symbolised by the presence of Danny, she is mortified on realising that her protector would not be allowed into the rally:

> Nothing had frightened me more than suddenly being folded into the flow of that crowd of white students as they moved toward the auditorium…I was crammed into that dimly lit room among my enemies, and I knew I had to keep watch every moment…I worked myself into a frenzy anticipating what might happen. My stomach was in knots and my shoulder muscles like concrete. (143)

Beals's hyperactive vigilance along with her physical reactions are indicative of the extent of her emotional turmoil. Here, the author, once again, consciously renders her experiences in terms of PTSD. In "Post-traumatic Stress Disorder: The History of a Recent Concept" (1992), Gersons and Carlier talk about how hypersensitivity or heightened emotions can result from an excessive exposure to traumatic stimuli. The hypervigilance is a sort of paranoid defence mechanism adopted to avoid any future traumatic stressor. Situations such as these show how the basic modes of relating to the external world can be affected in the case of activists.

Beals's worst fears, however, come true when on her way out of the auditorium after the rally, she is assaulted by a White student who pins her against the wall, strangles her, and warns her about making her life "hell" (ibid). The child author's realisation of the magnitude of the battle she had driven herself into gets reflected in her diary entry that night:

> After three full days inside Central, I know that integration is a much bigger word than I thought. (144)

Beals' initial naivete regarding the extent of the physical and emotional sacrifices expected from her and her gradual recognition of the magnitude of the problem brings to the fore how hapless children are forcefully politicised by circumstances and events not within their control.

Indeed, one of the greatest sacrifices demanded of activists like Beals, as the title of the autobiography suggests, is the expectation that they refrain from showing any sense of vulnerability. This forced pressure to not give vent to one's emotions brings about an emotional numbness which further increases the chances of being traumatised. The freedom to cry, to give vent to one's frustrations and sufferings is a basic human defence against being overwhelmed by emotions. When this fundamental and spontaneous mode of expression is taken away, healing in the aftermath of trauma becomes difficult if not impossible. And it is especially so in such cases as that of Beals where the agents are not any well-trained members of political groups or organisations, but rather ordinary people suddenly swung into the forefront of political battles. What makes Beals' trauma more heart-rendering is the fact that in her case it is a mere child whom circumstances forcefully politicise and turn into "a warrior who doesn't cry." As the epigraph from Beals' autobiography indicates, the text reveals the author's agonizing over the lost innocence of childhood. Her narrative journey, thus, takes readers into a process of gradual politicisation and is reflective of how innocent children transform into politicized people.

Angela A. Ards, in *Words of Witness: Black Women's Autobiography in the Post-Brown Era*, says that Beals capitalises on her trauma to show the tensions inherent in any project that forces children into the midst of political battles. She brings in the Hannah Arendt-Ralph Ellison debate on the appropriateness of using children as political weapons to illustrate how memoirs like Beals's *Warriors* "traffic in tropes of violated children to explore cultural anxieties" (*Words of Witness* 36). While the 1954 Supreme Court ruling to initiate the integration of all educational institutions by degrees had been generally received with a celebratory discourse, the sufferings endured by Beals and the other eight children who took on the arduous task of integrating Central High School as enumerated in the text expose the limits of such positive, enthusiastic views.

The Arendt-Ellison dichotomy issued from the former's hugely critical stand on the Little Rock campaign's use of schoolchildren as opposed to the latter's foregrounding of the same in a discourse of ethics and sacrifice. As cited by Ards, Arendt in her essay, "Reflections on Little Rock," "took the NAACP to task for putting schoolchildren on the front line of a political campaign" (39). Ellison, on the other hand, understood the same in terms of a "longstanding ethic of Christian sacrifice that underwrote political action within traditional black political thought" (ibid). Ards suggests how Beals' narrative plays out the tension between these two opposing viewpoints by its implicit critique of Ellison's ideas under an apparent glorification of the Christian ideals of sacrifice. Early on in her life, the child author is indoctrinated by her grandmother, India regarding her obligations towards fulfilling God's duties. Beals's being born on Pearl Harbour Day and surviving a near fatal scalp infection right after birth seem only to accentuate this entrustment of a messianic role upon her, "the nightmare that had surrounded my birth was proof positive that destiny had assigned me a special task" (*Warriors* 14). She was expected to live out her preordained life.

When she is selected as one of the nine children to integrate Central High School, her grandmother, therefore, sees this as an unfolding of the grand task that she had been destined for:

> "Now you see, that's the reason God spared your life. You're supposed to carry this banner for our people." (16)

The child Beals is, thus, made to realise her 'divinely' entrusted role as a harbinger of hopes for her people too early in life. Similarly, any injustice or setback is sought to be understood in terms of an indecipherable divine plan—with success and happiness surely coming to those who do not question God's objectives. For instance, faced with their sense of handicap against White misappropriation of power, Grandmother India regains her composure only by recalling what the Bible says:

> "And Ethiopia shall stretch forth her wings." With a smile on her face and fire in her eyes she said, "Be patient, our people's turn will come. You'll see. Your lifetime will be different from mine. I might not live to see the changes, but you will. . . . Oh, yes, my child, you will." (26-27)

Surrounded by a family atmosphere dominated by the scriptures, Beals is expected to learn the importance of patience and sacrifice even as a child. She is God's child, as suggested by her family, entrusted with the task of relieving her people from the shackles of segregation and as such has to be ready to make any sacrifice demanded of her. When Beals feels too burdened with the whole exercise of integration and wants to back away, her grandmother reminds her of the sacrifices demanded on the part of God's warriors by humming a hymn from the Bible, "I'm on the Battlefield for My Lord" (217). She presents it as an obligation to fulfil God's commands for the benefit of others.

Warriors Don't Cry, then, seems to endorse Ellison's views that sacrifice has been a trope in African American resistance politics since the very beginning. However, Beals's constant reminder of the trauma she had had to endure in the name of integration betrays her ambiguity towards the whole enterprise. In line with Arendt's critique of the violation of children's rights in the name of politicising them, Beals exposes the inherent problems in any discourse that links sacrifice with freedom (Ards). At one point, overwhelmed by the verbal as well as physical violence from her segregationist friends and their parents, she writes in her diary:

> It's hard being with Little Rock white people. I don't know if I can do this integration thing forever…I want to run away now. I want a happy day. (140)

In another instance, the child Beals's frustration over having to sacrifice basic pleasures of life like hanging out with friends or enjoying 'wrestling matches' gets reflected in her diary entry:

> Freedom is not integration…Freedom is being able to go with Grandma to the wrestling matches. (83)

This naïve association of "freedom" with getting to go to the "wrestling matches" points to her childhood innocence and the inability to comprehend the gravity of affairs. The adult author's citation of these diary entries in her autobiography, however, serves to show her disillusionment with political battles in which ordinary people—in her case ordinary children—end up losing much more than what they had bargained for.

This understanding of "freedom" as not some lofty ideal but an everyday uninhibited ability to act according to choice exposes how things that are projected as set collective goals often do not represent a unanimous collective voice. *Warriors* implicitly

hints at the less acknowledged fact that in achieving a common good, a section of the people ends up sacrificing a lot more than the rest, thereby making their trauma more prominently felt. In this regard, Ards mentions political theorist Danielle Allen's views on the importance of 'shared sacrifice,'

> [S]acrifice must be shared and recognized for the democratic social contract to work. Allen explains that decisions for "the common good" always have those who benefit less or who are actually harmed. In democracies, the practices and habits by which citizens accept communal decisions with which they disagree, or that disadvantage them, must rest on a highly developed notion of reciprocity, of mutual sacrifice. (*Words of Witness* 49)

Such sense of mutual sacrifice is what Beals finds lacking. Her feelings of loss and alienation are multiplied greatly by the absence of any empathy towards her in her own community. Beals' decision to be one of the nine students to integrate Central High School, thereby incurring the wrath of the majority white population, is seen by them as a betrayal of the community's safety and therefore, a reason to isolate her.

On her first day of going to Central High School, for instance, Beals had to deal with the unfriendly gestures of otherwise "friendly" neighbours and friends:

> Our neighbours…peered at us without their usual smiles. Then I saw Kathy and Ronda, two of my schoolfriends, standing with their mothers. Anxious to catch their attention, I waved out the window with a loud "Hi." Their disapproving glances matched those of the adults. (*Warriors* 52-53)

Indeed, one of the most devastating consequences of being involved in the integration for the author is her rejection by her immediate circle of friends. The sense of alienation is most shockingly realised when Beals has to spend her sixteenth birthday—an occasion for which she had been eagerly waiting for many months—all alone as none of her invited group of friends arrive. When she confronts her friend, Marsha regarding this, the latter explains to her, ""Melba, the truth is we're all afraid to come to your house"" (197). Her diary entry for that night shows the young Beals' frustration and helplessness over the cost she was having to pay for the sake of integration:

> *Please, God, let me learn how to stop being a warrior. Sometimes I just need to be a girl.* (199)

This desire for normalcy on the part of the child author shows how her trauma shatters the basic modes of relating to the world. In cases of continuous exposure to trauma, one way through which victims try to maintain their sanity and intellectual well-being is by sharing their stories of pain in the presence of empathetic others.

Vivienne Matthies Boon, for instance, speaking in the context of activist trauma in post-revolutionary Egypt and drawing on the works of scholars like Plett and Stolorow comments on the importance of a "social holding space":

> To 'hold space' means to walk alongside another person 'without judging them, making them feel inadequate, trying to fix them, or trying to impact the outcome. When we hold space for other people, we open our hearts, offer unconditional support, and let go of judgement and control.' (625)

Stressing on the necessity of such a space, she further continues:

> The availability of a social holding space is crucial for the potential rearticulation of broken assumptive worlds, since it recognises the (often inexpressible) reality of anxiety and loneliness in which the victim now lives. (625-626)

Boon's "holding space" is one where empathic listeners validate the trauma victim's account of having suffered and thereby facilitate the healing process. The breakdown of the "assumptive worlds" means the taking away of the basic foundational beliefs regarding good and evil, action and consequence which give a sense of order and meaning to life and serve as some kinds of anchor. Beals tries to maintain a sense of meaning by placing her sufferings in terms of Christian sacrifice. However, there is a breakdown of order when she faces the unjust wrath of White segregationists and her 'good' deeds and sacrifice are met with contempt by her own community.

Beals' narrative endorses the importance of non-judgemental support groups. Her text shows how trauma ensuing from political action magnifies in the absence of communal support. To quote Matthies Boon again:

> [S]upportive relational contexts provide the possibility for devastating emotional pain to be held and rendered more tolerable, whilst recognising the victim's world has been fundamentally altered. (626)

The community, whose common interest activists fight for, is expected to provide support and protection to the latter. When the protective kinship which makes trauma "more tolerable" is missing, there is an existential crisis. Now the activist victim can no longer associate any meaningful social change or uplift with her actions. This lack of empathy might go on to heighten the sense of futility of one's actions as is seen in Beals' repeated questioning of the cost she had to pay in the name of integration.

Such questioning is also seen in the way Beals presents the day of the Supreme Court ruling. While media houses across the world flashed the announcement as a landmark decision marking the victory of the Civil Rights Movement, Beals's autobiography presents no such celebratory account. In fact, she remembers the day in terms of the oddly anxious behaviour displayed by the teachers and a most traumatic incident that took place that very day: the attempt by a White man to rape her. While the teacher asserted that the court judgement in favour of integration was "something to celebrate" (31), her face showed no sign of happiness. Instead of celebrating the historic court decision, students were rushed home with warnings to be extra cautious on the way. The thing that remains etched in the author's memory and continues to haunt her long after is, however, her molestation and attempted rape. On her way back home, Beals takes a familiar shortcut and is lost in her daydreams when suddenly she is affronted by a white male. This man tries to rape the child as a sort of retaliation for the Supreme Court decision. As Beals recalls:

> [H]e started talking about "niggers" wanting to go to school with his children and how he wasn't going to stand for it. (33)

What makes the encounter all the more terrible for Beals is the fact that at the time she had never heard about rape and hence couldn't understand what the man was trying to do her. The only thing she could make out was that something really "awful and dirty" (35) was being sought to be done to her. It is the coming of her otherwise considered "retarded" friend, Marissa who bangs the white man's "head with her leather book bag" (34) and manages to save her from her ordeal. Later, on reaching home, her grandmother's decision that having a bath and burning her clothes would "take away all that white man's evil" (35) seems only to magnify Beals' sense of shame.

The child author's traumatised response to the event is evident in the way it makes her associate the Supreme Court ruling not with hopes of ground-breaking changes but as the reason behind her attempted rape. Once again, her diary entry is indicative:

> It's important for me to read the newspaper, every single day God sends, even if I have to spend my own nickel to buy it. I have to keep up with what the men on the Supreme Court are doing. That way I can stay home on the day the justices vote decisions that make white men want to rape me. (35-36)

Beals' attempts to link her safety to the Supreme Court ruling seems to show a young child's misguided understanding of the situation. Allison Berg, in "Trauma and Testimony in Black Women's Civil Rights Memoirs," has pointed out how the child author "seems to misconstrue the relationship between literacy, sexuality and the law, naively assuming that a vigilant attitude towards knowledge will enable her to "read" the law in ways that allow her to evade its racialized and gendered effects" (94). While the diary entry is suggestive of the child's innocence and inability to comprehend the situation, the adult author's mention of it exposes the irony of the entire situation. It shows that the best efforts of the court and sensitive people are not enough to protect vulnerable people from the racists. While the child thinks in terms of her personal security as she has to face frequent physical attacks, what is alluded to in the adult narrator's words is that there is a section in America which refuses to see reason or accept change. Talking about "how intensely sexual white Americans' relations have been to African American people," Berg hints at how the "circuits of erotic and political dominance" are interconnected (ibid). Since the Black woman's body has been a site of asserting power and control, bringing to the fore stories and accounts of such violations plays an important role in any act of resistance.

Although the White man's attempt to rape her is thwarted by the advent of Marissa, the author mentions being haunted by the memory even long after. In fact, she presents herself as a victim of PTSD with her recounting of how court proceedings that made reference to the 1954 decision brought back flashbacks of her White would-be rapist:

> The very mention of that decision always made me sad. It brought back the face of the angry white man who had chased me down that day. Panic-filled recollections flooded my mind, blotting out the courtroom proceedings. (*Warriors* 98)

The "blotting out" indicates the power of such flashbacks to numb her mind. Although the mention of the entire episode of the attempted rape and its aftereffects serve to indicate Beals' childhood trauma, it also points out how the author "complicates conventional civil rights chronology when she presents the 1954 Brown v Board of Education decision as responsible, most immediately, for a white man's attempting to rape her, and only secondarily, for enabling her entrance into Little Rock's all-white Central High School" (Berg 86). Beals' childhood experiences also point to the irrationality of White anger: unable to fight the law, grown-up White men look to vent their spleen on children. If the child did not realise that, the adult Beals must have recognized that element of irrationality and penchant for violence that governed racism.

Beals' text, in presenting the author's ambiguous stance towards the whole issue of integration, seems to speak for the psychologically devastating impact of unwanted childhood activism.

Angela Davis: An Autobiography

Angela Davis' "Introduction" to the second edition of her autobiography shows her dilemma regarding the dual function that political autobiographies perform. It traces her initial reluctance to engage in a personal account of the self to her finally realising the intrinsic way in which the 'personal' remains connected to the 'political.' Speaking of the text that she had composed at the age of twenty-eight, Davis writes,

> [I]t is…an important piece of historical description and analysis of the late 1960s and early 1970s. It is also my own personal history up to that time, comprehended and delineated from that vantage point. (*An Autobiography* vii)

Her "Introduction" puts forth the need to understand "the dialectics of the personal and the political" (viii).

Divided into six constitutive parts—"Nets," "Rocks," "Waters," "Flames," "Walls" and "Bridges"—Davis' text starts with her being wanted by the FBI on (what later proves to be false) charges of active involvement in the Marin County Courtroom case, 1970. The opening part of *An Autobiography* finds the author assuming a disguise and going underground to avoid arrest. The constant fear of being arrested and rendered a victim of state sponsored repression on political activism and the sort of psychological anguish this generates is made apparent in Davis' attempts at normalcy in the face of impending arrest,

"I tried to forget that today, perhaps tomorrow, perhaps any of a long string of days to come, might be the day of my capture" (12). When she is finally booked at the Howard Johnson motel in New York, she realises the way the FBI conspires to project its victims as dangerous terrorists or criminals by carefully staging the scene of arrest. The repeated cross-questionings, fingerprinting, handcuffing and the extreme precautions with which she was "shoved" to the "long caravan of unmarked cars" waiting to deport her to "some unknown destination" are all a part in projecting her as "one of the country's ten most wanted criminals: the big bad Black Communist enemy" (16).

Davis' initial detainment at the New York Women's House of Detention exposes to her the ways in which prison houses, more than being correction facilities, were part of the state's repressive mechanisms to control people. Commenting on the gross disparities in racial identities of the prisoners, she writes, "All the women I could see were either Black or Puerto Rican. There were no white prisoners in the group" (19). Similarly, she notes the way systemic oppression, in the form of poverty/lack of education and work opportunities, often contributes to Black people's complicity in the repression of their own fellows.

Speaking of how some of the Black women officers charged with keeping an eye on her were merely compelled by circumstances to do so despite being "sympathetic" to her and her political affiliations, Davis writes:

> [T]hey had been driven by necessity to apply for this kind of job…one of the highest-paying jobs…that did not require a college education. In a way, these officers were prisoners themselves…Like their predecessors, the Black overseers, they were guarding their sisters in exchange for a few bits of bread…[L]ike the overseers…part of the payment for their work was their own oppression. (43)

The author comments on the social structure which instead of fostering solidarity, allows and facilitates such forced divisions amongst Blacks. Continuing with her description of how these Black women officers were themselves victims of oppression, she again notes:

> [O]vertime was compulsory. And beecause of the military discipline to which they were forced to submit, failure to work overtime was punishable as insubordination. (ibid)

Davis' inclusion of such observations in the chronicling of her prison experiences exposes American society's perpetuation of discrimination, injustice, and inequality by deliberately pitching Blacks against Blacks.

The state's fear of organized resistance is also apparent in the way Davis as a political prisoner is sought to be kept away from the other common prisoners. In the New York Women's House of Detention, she is placed in 4b—an isolated wing of the prison where only those women prisoners who were supposedly 'mentally imbalanced' were kept. On questioning this arrangement, the jail authorities inform her that she had been kept there "for [her] own safety" and to prevent any disruption of jail life (32). The absurdity of such claims on the part of the prison authorities is, however, revealed when Davis has to be allowed out of her cell in 4b during a "normal hour" in order to meet her lawyers.

Women prisoners who meet her instantly recognize her and speak to her "in a cordial, sisterly way" or raise their fists "in gestures of solidarity" (33). In her autobiography, Davis writes:

> These were the "dangerous women" who might attack me because they didn't like "Communists," had I not been hidden away in 4b. This and subsequent trips to the main floor were further evidence of what I already knew: that the administration's allegations that the prison population might harm me were nonsense. (33)

The separation of Davis from the other detainees is, thus, a politically motivated administrative decision. That detainees like her may bring about a political awakening and thereby revolutionise the other inmates is a fear which looms large on the prison authorities. In this regard, Harlow comments on the way prisons impose "distinctions" on prisoners within the system:

> Important among these distinctions concerning the classification of prisoners is that, maintained by the state judicial apparatus and manipulated by the prison authorities, between common law inmates and political detainees, between those serving sentences for criminal offences…and those being held on account of their political activities. (136-137)

These distinctions are a necessary part of how the state and state machineries seek to curb the outspreading of revolutionary sentiments. As Davis' text exemplifies, such attempts at

separation fail when the common law prisoners unite with the political ones and put forth a challenge to the authorities by developing a "real togetherness" *(An Autobiography* 63).

In this regard, Davis also notes the way prisoners try to break the hold of psychological torment to which they are routinely subjected. Although prison houses are designed to deprive detainees of any sense of hope or agency, "prisoner culture"—the "rules and standards of behaviour" shielding prisoners "from the open or covert terror designed to break their spirits"—stand as a form of defence against "routines and behaviour prescribed by the governing penal hierarchy" (53).

However, in as much as she exposes the state sponsored oppression and repression of Blacks, the author also shows the way racism/racial prejudice affects the psychological integrity of Whites who internalise them. During her stay at the 4b wing of the New York Women's House of Detention, Davis comes across a White woman who had been so completely held and imprisoned by her racial prejudices that she had lost her sanity and become schizophrenic. While the author initially was enraged by the woman in question, she eventually only comes to sympathise with her, "Her illness had become a convenient vehicle for the expression of the racism which had grown like maggots in her unconscious" (34). Taking the woman as a case in hand, Davis comments on how studies of psychology fail to account for the damages incurred by internalised racism on not just the object of racist attacks but also the subject:

> How could the woman…even begin to be cured if the psychologist treating her was not aware of the way in which racism, like an ancient plague, infects every joint, muscle and tissue of social life in this country? This woman was rotting in a snake pit of racism, flagellating herself daily with her obscene and graphic imagination. (36)

The damages incurred by racism, thus, affect all sections of American society: Blacks and Whites alike.

Although Davis' text starts with her arrest and experience of prison, it is structured in a way that also allows her to recount her experiences prior to her arrest. These experiences suggest the triggers behind her coming to political consciousness. This chapter however, limits its study of the text to the way it highlights how prison apparatuses engage in depriving inmates of their subjectivity and agency. It is with Shakur's autobiography

that we focus on the ways personal experiences incite processes of politicisation and involvement in radical action.

Assata: An Autobiography

Assata Shakur's *Assata: An Autobiography* starts with a song of affirmation. The poem, part of which serves as an epigraph to this chapter, is a motivational one which acknowledges the power of the human mind to transcend all atrocities. It, however, sets the note of bodily as well as mental affliction at the very beginning. With the hopes and assertions of life and living, it juxtaposes images of the misappropriation of power, death and destruction:

> I believe in life.
> And i have seen the death parade
> march through the torso of the earth,
> sculpting mud bodies in its path.
> I have seen the destruction of the daylight,
> and seen bloodthirsty maggots
> prayed to and saluted. (*Assata* 1)

The poem named "Affirmation" by Shakur, thus, can be seen as a framing of the process of coming to political consciousness by a radical Black revolutionary woman. It is the sufferings endured, the witnessing of "death parades" and "bloodthirsty maggots" and the desire to "steer" the "lost ship" of freedom and equality that serve as the inspiration behind her radical activism. Another thing that one notes in the poem and also throughout her autobiography is the strict avoidance of a capitalised 'I.' By consciously avoiding capitalisation of the first-person pronoun while referring to herself, Shakur suggests that her personal story is less important than the representative value of her experiences.

Shakur's entire text is composed as a series of chapters that juxtapose the author's journey from her childhood to the moment of her arrest with her prison experiences. The chapters alternate between her life before incarceration—her growing-up years, the circumstances and events that instigate her gradual politicisation and her ultimate joining of the Black Liberation Army—and life post her arrest and detainment. Shakur's *Assata: An Autobiography*, then, is as much a prison memoir as it is a "coming-to-consciousness" narrative. The text traces the conversion of the author from a state of innocence or naivete

regarding America and its history to a realisation of the same and how that recognition grooms her identity as a Black woman revolutionary. And it is Shakur's experiences as a Black girl in a racist White society and the knowledge garnered from them that serve as triggers behind her political evolution. Her autobiography, then, in that it describes the process of coming to political consciousness of Black children who transform into radical activists, puts a challenge to classic conversion narratives.

While describing her childhood years, Shakur is careful to depict the socialisation processes that fill the Black child with self-hatred and consequently with negative images of the self. Through a portrayal of her formative years, the author shows how Blacks in America are gradually inducted into this dilemma whereby they start hating themselves without comprehending the real reason behind that self-hatred. As the author says about her young self, she had become "a puppet" who "didn't even know who was pulling the strings" (38). *Assata: An Autobiography,* thus, enumerates how self-hatred gets infused into the very psychology of young Black children which then becomes evident in their everyday dealings with each other. Talking about the self-derogatory words that she and her friends often employed, Shakur comments:

> [B]ehind our fights, self-hatred was clearly visible…We would…talk about each other's ugly, big lips and flat noses…call each other pickaninnies and nappy-haired so-and-so's…Black made any insult worse. When you called somebody a "Black bastard," now that was terrible. In fact, when i was growing up, being called "Black," was grounds for fighting. (30)

By highlighting such childhood experiences, Shakur shows how Black children are socialised into accepting White superiority and conversely Black inferiority in everything. This subconscious acceptance ultimately leads to a sense of shame in one's own culture, traditions and even language. She, for instance, mentions how her grandparents who "tried to instil in [her] a sense of personal dignity" and were indeed "really fanatic" about her maintaining it especially in her dealings with White people, were actually infusing her with notions of Black inadequacy.

To her grandparents, "pride and dignity were hooked up to…what white people had" (19-20). The author as a child is, thus, trained into this unconscious blind adherence to white standards even while she was taught about upholding Black pride and dignity:

> I was supposed to be a child version of a goodwill ambassador, out to prove that Black people were not stupid or dirty or smelly or uncultured. I never questioned the things they thought were good…And everything that they wanted, I wanted. (36-37)

The attitude of Shakur's grandparents and the expectations they put upon her child self exemplifies the way dominant white culture penetrates into Black society and creates an identical class based hierarchical structure. In their refusal to allow her to play with "alley rats"—the name given by her grandmother to children belonging often to the poorest Black families—they showcase how better positioned Blacks start feeling ashamed of those lower down the social hierarchy.

As the adult author mentions in her autobiography, to her grandparents, "decency" came to be linked with being socio-economically well-off:

> How did you know what a decent family was? A decent family lived in a decent house. How did you know what a decent house was? A decent house was fixed up nice and had a sidewalk in front of it….These decent little [children] were invariably the offspring of Wilmington's Black doctors, lawyers, preachers, and undertakers. Schoolteachers, barbershop owners, and the editor of the "colored" newspaper were also decent. (21)

In the depiction of the grandparents and in her disapproval of their beliefs, then, Shakur exposes how Black bourgeois culture creates divisions and hampers the growth of the Black race as a whole. She shows the irony whereby Blacks fashion their society/community as a replica of the White society. Continuing with her account of how she was made to doubt the merits of her own Black culture, she mentions:

> I saved my culture, my music, my dancing, the richness of Black speech for the times when i was with my own people…In many ways i was living a double existence. (37)

Shakur's "double existence" like Du Bois's "double consciousness" is psychologically damaging and can negatively affect the Black person's notions of self-worth. The sense of agency, of having the freedom to make choices and decisions is an essential way by which a human being comes to value himself/herself. In the absence of it, he/she may be driven into a sort of existential meaninglessness. Shakur's autobiography, in this regard, narrates

the kind of purposelessness that she is forced to imbibe as a teenager. This lack of purpose and goals is reflected in her decision to leave formal education at barely seventeen years of age.

Looking back, the author comments on the lack of positive opportunities and work environments for Blacks in America and the kind of "meaninglessness" that this helps generate:

> I wasn't doing anything positive. I wasn't making anything, creating anything, or contributing to anything. After a while, i wanted to tell them to take their papers and their job and shove it. (149)

It is her desire to change this social order which turns "Blackness" to "ugliness" that propels Shakur's resistant activities later in life. Never having been taught the phrase "Black is beautiful" as a child, she makes it her mission to consciously celebrate her Blackness later. And as a way of doing that, she adopts an African name along with educating herself and fellow Blacks in African cultural heritage. Changing her name from Joanne Deborah Chesimard—the identity she had assumed post her first marriage, she becomes Assata Olugbala Shakur.

As mentioned in her autobiography, the change of name is a consciously taken decision—one that symbolises her African roots and hence is a major step in her political transformation. The African name—Assata signifying "[s]he who struggles," Olugbala meaning "[l]ove for the people," and Shakur, which she adopted out of respect for Zayd Shakur, meaning "the thankful"—is as much a political statement as it is a reclaiming of ancestral legacy and is representative of her denunciation of American culture and ideology (186). With a conscious change of name, Shakur not only locates herself in African culture but also arms herself for future challenges to the dominant White American society.

It is Shakur's association with the Golden Drums Society which "concentrated its efforts on Black culture and history" (186) in Manhattan City College that shapes her political ideology. Much of that ideology expresses itself in reversing the psychological damages already done to most American Blacks, as is indicated by the change of name from "Chesimard" to "Olugbala Shakur". When she volunteers as a teacher for young Black children as part of the social service activities of the society, also for instance, she

consciously tries to change and rectify the negative images of Blackness that these children had been brainwashed into accepting and believing. She structures her lectures and class activities so as to allow discussions of "the different kinds of beauty that people have" including that of "Black people" and gradually moulds the children into appreciating their own selves irrespective of their colour, physical features or the texture of their skin and hair (188).

Shakur mentions the healing effects of this new found awareness and unashamed acceptance of her Black identity proffered by her radical activities:

> The more active i became the more i liked it. It was like medicine, making me well, making me whole. I was home. For the first time, my life felt like it had some real meaning. (189)

The author, here, quite explicitly brings out the relation between activism and trauma healing. Shakur's activist works as a member of the Golden Drums Society which brings her closer to African heritage ultimately presents her with empowered self-images and thereby, paves the way towards healing her fractured, fragmented psyche. The earlier sense of purposelessness is replaced by a sense and awareness of the positive changes that one can bring about.

Assata: An Autobiography, however, with its parallel depiction of Shakur's life before and after her ultimate arrest exposes the cyclical pattern in which trauma and activism get implicated. While her induction into radical activism and participation in constructive social action supposedly heals the racialised trauma of growing up as a Black in America, such activism also brings her face to face with repressive state machineries such as the police, prison and other law enforcement systems. This ultimately exposes her to more direct, state sponsored trauma like physical as well as psychological torture during incarceration.

Shakur's autobiographical account, in fact, begins with her confrontation with the New Jersey State Police which results in her arrest and subsequent imprisonment. The author's choice of words while describing these circumstances highlights the bodily torture that she is subjected to. The mutilation of her body in the confrontation and the lack of medical care and attention even when she is apparently 'hospitalised' after her arrest shows the complicity of the state health care system in perpetuating acts of injustice. The author

in her documentation of such injustice shows the disregard and lack of empathy with which people and especially Black people booked by the law are treated by so called healthcare professionals. She refers to the utter objectification of her body in her description of the head doctor who "pokes and prods, throwing [her] around like a rag doll" in the name of examining her (4).

Foucault, in this regard, talks about the way these state machineries use the "power of writing" in order to assert their authoritative control over the prisoners. This power is expressed in the way the penal system remains obsessed with a thorough registration and documentation of the prisoners' every detail. As Shakur narrates in her autobiography, the first thing that the police try to achieve after her arrest is the accumulation of all information relating to her. She is physically examined and fingerprinted. And although they fail in extracting anything, the cops repeatedly question her regarding her name and political affiliations. According to Foucault, such 'writing' of the prisoner into the state records "functions as a procedure of objectification and subjection." The writing, thus, fulfils a political function but "in a quite different technique of power" (Harlow 124-125).

This power is also manipulated by the media industry when instead of gathering and stating factual data, they set about vilifying detainees. As Shakur writes:

> [T]he press was trying to railroad me, to make me seem like a monster. According to them i was a common criminal, just going around shooting down cops for the hell of it. (49)

It is this knowledge of the "power of writing" that, according to Harlow, motivates censorship on the circulation of reading and writing materials within prison walls. Such restriction is all the more strictly imposed in the case of political detainees. In her autobiography, Shakur documents the ban on newspapers and magazines inside most detainment centres that she was kept. As a political prisoner, she was also denied access to television and radio which the other common prisoners were allowed. To quote Harlow, "[e]ssential to the maintenance of political fraternity inside the prison is the dissemination of information from outside" (Harlow 129). The ban is a strategic measure to disrupt the detainee's connection with the happenings of the outside world as much as possible so as to prevent any further resistant activities inside the prison.

Another way in which the prisoner's sense of autonomy or any personality is sought to be broken is through the behaviour of the prison authorities. Shakur, for instance, mentions a jail warden, Mrs. Butterworth in the Middlesex County Workhouse where she was initially detained, who insisted on 'infantilising' her along with the other inmates by always referring to them as "girls" and addressing them by their first names. The author, however, fights back by emphasising her status as a "grown woman" and asking to be called by her last name. When the warden refuses, Shakur retaliates by calling her "Miss Bitch" (47-48).

What serves as one of the most traumatic things for detainees is, however, the break in filial ties caused by the imprisonment. *Assata: An Autobiography* documents the psychological torture carried out on those detainees who had left behind their families, especially their children. Speaking about how one of the harshest prison rules in the Middlesex County Workhouse was the prohibition of children from paying visits to their imprisoned mothers, the author comments on the way such isolation served as a punishment not just for the mothers but also the children who kept "waiting outside…with sad, frustrated faces" (53). The "fanatic screams" (ibid) of the women calling out to their children to no avail similarly indicates the psychological turmoil to which they are subjected by such prison rules.

Shakur herself has to bear the pain of separation from her daughter, Kakuya Amala Olugbala Shakur, whom she conceives while facing trial with a fellow Black revolutionary named Kamau in a bank robbery case at the Federal Court in New York. The decision to allow the conception of a new life while still within the confines of the American legal and penal system was itself an act of resistance, a conscious and hopeful acceptance of life in the face of all atrocities. This, however, does little to shield either Shakur or her daughter from the pain that the severing of the mother-child bond right after birth causes. The author mentions the anger that is built up in the child as a consequence of this separation. In fact, a four-year-old Kakuya accuses her mother of 'willingly' staying behind bars and even refuses to accept her as mother. Shakur narrates in her autobiography the confusion of Kakuya regarding her real mother:

She calls me Mommy Assata and she calls my mother Mommy. (258)

The most painful sight for Shakur—one that makes her "cry until [she] vomit(s)"—however, is that of her daughter pulling, pushing, hitting, and kicking the prison bars in an attempt to "open" them and let her out (ibid).

Psychological torture, then, is an important way through which prison authorities seek to break prisoners. Another potent mechanism to break the prisoner is solitary confinement. Shakur speaks of the way she went mute after extended periods of such confinement, "i would forget how to talk" (83). American law and the judiciary, however, apparently remain blind to the gross human rights violations that solitary confinement represents. When Evelyn, Shakur's lawyer, files a petition against the mental handicap that it induced on her client, she is required to back it up with "psychological data" and expert opinions. The difficulty in finding such professionals who would support a Black woman with their statements is of course well known.

Solitary confinement has evolved from being a sort of corrective measure employed to make the prisoner "introspect," and "meditate" on the crime committed to a mode of mental torture intended to "destroy the psychological integrity of the isolated prisoner" (Harlow 151). Since political prisoners are feared to start off voices and acts of dissent even within the confines of the prison system, authorities try to destroy any affiliation that might develop between the detainees. Here too, solitary confinement comes in handy.

Prison memoirs like that of Shakur's, then, document the process of re-traumatisation of activists who had sought to heal the collective social trauma of living in an unjust world order through their radical activism. The sense of agency conferred by change-oriented meaningful social action is threatened by their subjection to mechanisms of abuse such as objectification, infantilisation, and near constant surveillance. Prison memoirs, thus, serve as important documents in understanding the cyclical flow of trauma triggers. A break in this cycle, as such texts exemplify, can only be possible in the context of a total elimination of traumatic markers in an egalitarian and just society.

A Taste of Power

Elaine Brown's *A Taste of Power: A Black Woman's Story,* in sharp contrast to Davis' and Shakur's narratives, presents internal clashes and conflicts of interest within one of the most prominent political/activist organization of the Black Power Movement—the Black

Panther Party (BPP). In the autobiography, Brown traces a journey that reveals as much about her individual story as about the strengths, weaknesses and loopholes that marked the Black Power Movement in general and the BPP in particular. As opposed to a strict eulogising of party ideals or the merits of the Black movement, generally seen in activist autobiography, her text puts forth to readers an insider's view of the workings of the once "most militant organization in America" (3). Perkins ascribes this unapologetic depiction of intimate or private details to Brown's motivations behind writing the text:

> Brown seems less concerned with writing a "political autobiography"…than with reconciling the meaning of her own past involvement in political struggle. This is reflected both in her narrative's avowedly personal slant…and her transgressing of the kinds of strategic silences observed in other activists' texts. (Perkins 12)

The author's narrative distance from the events described—the fact that she writes her autobiography after being disillusioned with the misogyny and power politics within the BPP and leaving it—allows her to see them only in relation to their contribution in shaping her identity. Unlike Davis and Shakur who had emphasized the collective struggles more than their personal experiences, Brown's "Introduction" insists that it is "her life" that is being chronicled:

> Reflected here is life as I lived it, my thoughts and feelings as I remember them…Memory seems a fragile spirit. It may be a river of reality that gathers dreams and desires and change in its flow. (*A Taste of Power* xi)

Instead of making the autobiographical "I" a mere medium to share the group's political ideologies, Brown asserts its authority over the narrative.

What the narrative also does is to highlight the psychic operations of a Black activist woman's mind. She exposes how external showcasing of strength and power can actually be a way to hide vulnerability or helplessness. Brown's *A Taste of Power* depicts the revelatory journey of an apparently powerful Black woman through her ordeals with issues of mental health, subsequent addiction to drugs, and sexist denigration from her own fellow Panther brothers that makes her question her identity and sexuality.

The text starts with the author's assumption of absolute power over the BPP in the absence of its founder leader, Huey Newton who has been forced to fly away to Cuba. The psychosexual dimension of power is emphasized when Brown speaks of its 'therapeutic'

value. Having been a victim of Newton's "madness" a few days ahead of her assuming leadership when he slapped her for thanking him, the knowledge that she now has complete power is almost healing to her. Indeed, despite the fact that she was proclaiming authority over a party where she herself had experienced the misogynous attitude of comrades and whose members she knew would "balk at a woman as the leader of the Black Panther Party," such proclamation "felt natural" to her (3-4). Speaking of how the new found power helps in recuperating her broken self, Brown writes:

> The feelings that washed over me as I spoke were baptismal. There was something in that moment that seemed a reparation for all the rage and pain of my life. (6)

This "baptismal" effect comes in the context of the party members'—to whom she had been addressing her first speech after assuming leadership—unquestioning acceptance of her as the replacement of Huey Newton. Brown's opening statement that she has "all the guns and all the money" and "can withstand challenge from without and from within" not only serves as a warning to the panthers but also as a sort of assurance to her own self (3).

The sense of power is especially recuperative given the context of Brown's earlier degeneration into feelings of utter meaninglessness and purposelessness. In fact, she notes how even as a child she had moments of existential crisis especially during the night when she would be grabbed by an unexplainable feeling, "Mama! Mama! It's that feeling!" (20). This feeling which usually comes when the young child is unable to place her poverty-stricken condition—the "darkness" and "nothingness" of her room "accompanied by the magnified sounds of mice scurrying"—within the context of her grandmother's providential God who would supposedly deliver her from all miseries is reflective of her deeply felt anguish. This same vulnerability is carried on in to her adolescence and even later on when she joins the BPP.

Brown is introduced to communism by Jay Kennedy, the old white man thirty-three years her senior with whom she enters in a relationship and later breaks up. Their discussions of communism help the author in placing her childhood fears in perspective—she starts seeing her lack of purpose as something derived from the injustices of a racist society which hinders any scope of growth for Blacks. Ironically, this same awareness ultimately leads to their breaking apart. Once when they were in San Francisco and had gone for a dinner to a restaurant named Eddie's, a young Black boy who was serving as the doorman came to attend them. Without betraying any sign of hatred or shame, he

carried on his task—opening the limousine door for Brown and giving her his hand to assist her. The author dressed in designer clothes gifted by her White lover is, however, mortified and brought face to face with her duplicitous existence. She once again is trapped by her childhood paranoia, the "constant longing for identity, the old "feeling"" (95). Although the boy shows no reaction and says nothing, she could feel him cursing her, "I heard him, though he said nothing at all. He called me "bitch" (ibid). While activists like Shakur had called a White woman "bitch" because of her misappropriation of power, in a complete reversal of situation Brown imagines herself being addressed with such derogatory terms. This realisation of having drifted away from her true identity and origin makes her ashamed of herself and gradually instils in her the desire to be an agent of positive change.

Similarly, her chance acquaintance with a woman named Beverly Bruce brings her closer to the reality of the conditions of Blacks in America. On her request, Brown goes to give piano lessons to a group of Black girls in an apartment in the Jordan Downs Housing Project which, according to her, was nothing but "a sprawling camp of desolation" (99). Seeing the "blankness" in the expression of the girls, Brown writes:

> There was my face, my pain, my nothing-little-nigger-girl expression lingering on their faces and in their eyes. (100)

She further illustrates:

> I saw the poverty of our lives, the poverty of little black girls who live on the same planet, in the same world where people, people like me, drank expensive bottles of champagne that clouded the mind with bubbles that obliterated them, us. (ibid)

It is this coming face to face with her own childhood self that makes her question her complicity in the American economic system which relegates fellow Blacks to deplorable conditions. Much like Shakur's coming to political consciousness, these encounters shape Brown's heightened awareness of her racial identity and solidarity. Comparing her relative luxury with the "ghetto myopia" to which she believed these young girls were "doomed", the author realises the need for more definitive and affirmative action which would create a better world "in which to grow" (101).

The realisation to work for the upliftment of Blacks in America, then, marks Brown's entry into Black militant action. The "old fears," sense of "dissociation" and

"separation from everything" however, continues even after her official joining of the BPP (146). Indeed, during her initial days when she was tasked with selling Panther newspapers, she is so traumatised that she has to seek help from a mental-health clinic. In her conversation with the doctor (whom she later discovers to be a psychiatric social worker and not a doctor), the confusion and purposelessness that has gripped her mind is obvious. When she is asked about her feelings, she fumbles for an adequate expression for her "lifetime of desperation and fear and self-hatred"(148). The desire to be a member of the BPP and yet her inability to whole-heartedly embrace it along with the realisation that there was nothing else that could give her life meaning fills her with a void, which like her childhood anxiety, she is unable to explain.

Brown is ultimately prescribed "Thorazine" to which she starts becoming addicted. The drug fills her momentarily with a sense of euphoria that she is unable to give up: "I lived in a lovely stupor. Thinking was no longer required. Pain was a memory" (149). It is only with the support and intervention of fellow comrade John Huggins that she is able to come out of her Thorazine addiction. Huggins guides her out of her initial doubts and fears regarding the decision to join a militant organization and instils in her again the desire to do something with her life and for her people (152).

As Brown becomes more and more involved in the party, gradually rising its ranks, she is however, made aware of the flaws within the party system. One of the things to which she was particularly opposed was the misogyny rampant in the attitudes of the panther brothers. Although Brown herself could enter the party's Central Committee and become Huey Newton's close confidante, most Black women members were relegated to inferior positions and had to deal with the sexism of men. Indeed, Brown's text serves to expose unseen facets of prominent panther leaders. In one of the meetings that she attends, the author observes Bobby Seale's extremely sexist treatment of a fifteen-year-old panther sister named Marsha. Marsha is forced by Seale to degrade herself by offering her sexuality as something to be used and abused by the panther men. In her enunciation of the duties and obligations of panther women, the young girl, still an adolescent, is pushed on to mention how one of those duties was to never deny her body to any of the panther brothers while preserving her modesty in the hands of White men. By divulging such information, Brown's autobiography creates a space for retrospective deliberation on what went wrong within the BPP in particular and the Movement in general. The text, written after she leaves

the Party, allows her sufficient narrative distance from the events described which, in turn, enables her to recognize and be critical of the flaws and divisions within the Black struggle.

The fact that Brown cannot do much despite being witness to such abuses of power and indeed even opens herself to Huey Newton's unpredictable temperament and often whimsical demands takes a toll upon her mental well-being which ultimately leads to her decision to leave the party. In highlighting the abject misuses of position and power within the party, *A Taste* also brings forth the sadistic dimension to power plays. The author, for instance, notes the way severe punishments and military disciplining were an important way in which the authority of the leaders was maintained. In fact, as Brown notes, she comes to stiffen herself against such tortures executed on members who fail the party in some way by trying to assure herself of the necessity of disciplinary action.

In one of her last meetings with Newton before he has to escape to Cuba, the latter was disciplining a member who had supposedly stolen from the party. Marvelling at her lack of sympathy for the person, the author writes:

> I ignored the bloodied face of the thief, as I had learned to do. I had become hardened to such things, like a Green Beret who learns to think nothing of taking a life: after seeing so many training films on brutal killings, he is no longer repulsed by blood or brutality. (9)

Such "hardened" emotions taken together with Brown's own sadistic enjoyment of the power she generates once she takes over Huey Newton's position as the party chief shows how power remains implicated with psychosexual aspects.

In this regard, Perkins notes the 'erotic' aspect of power that Brown's text highlights. She establishes this by citing an instance from the text where the author speaks of the "sensuous" feeling one gets on realising "that at one's will an enemy can be struck down, a friend saved" (319). Perkins, however, also talks of the way this sense of power actually turns out to be momentary and even illusory for Brown:

> Since the authority Brown is permitted to exercise over the organization emanates from Huey Newton, Newton always remains the power to usurp control at any time…Brown's power is merely "a taste." (123)

Brown's assumption of supreme leadership during Newton's absence, as Perkins observes, helps her get "a taste of power" but not the power itself. Her decision to finally leave the party comes after Huey, on returning from Cuba, allows some panther brothers to physically assault a woman member, Regina Davis as punishment for verbally reprimanding one of them. Brown's autobiographical text, which reveals such 'inside' information about a Party hugely influential as well as instrumental during the Black Power Movement, shows the author's increasing disillusionment with the Party objectives and principles. Her account, in as much as it is a retelling of her life, also seems to be an attempt at justifying her decision to ultimately leave the BPP.

Brown seems burdened with the pressure to project herself in a positive light after what can be interpreted as her abandonment of the Party and with it, the larger Black cause. Her *A Taste of Power*, thus, shows the psychological effects of power or the lack of it within the context of the larger Black Movement. Unlike the other authors discussed here whose struggles were with the outside White world and whose activism-generated trauma ensued from their confrontation with repressive state machineries, Brown' s psychological equilibrium is troubled and tested not just by outsiders but by the power equations at play in her own party.

For the autobiographers under scrutiny in this chapter, participation in resistant activities has not been a choice but a response to a painfully realised call for action. As the autobiographies narrate, radical action in the face of social injustices seemed to offer hopes for positive alterations in the social fabric. However, while their activism transformed them from passive victims into harbingers of change, it also exposed them to further violence and pain. It is through this cyclical frame in which we have placed traumatic social inequities and resistant political action that the texts under scrutiny have been approached or analysed. All the texts vouch for the fact that the cycle can be disrupted or brought to an end only when the social structure is 'permanently' changed for the better.

In conclusion, then, this chapter has tried to evaluate the chosen activist autobiographies in terms of their depiction of the mental processes that encourage or discourage activist action. By studying the ways in which the authors were gradually politicised, we have sought to understand the role of affirmative social action as an underrepresented but meaningful mechanism of trauma healing and recovery. Finally, the

chapter by its examination of how activism itself can result in severe psychic damages, highlights the otherwise ignored fact of the ‘retraumatisation’ of political activists.

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 Brittanica* 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 Theaphany 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 early1920s. 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, Walkers 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 agentive 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 paradisical 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 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.

CHAPTER FIVE

NARRATING SELVES, NARRATING HISTORIES

> Autobiography is, of course, always about stating an individuality while at the same time making it public, thereby giving individual experiences universal connotations. (Gunnthórunn Gudmundsdóttir, *Borderlines: Autobiography and Fiction in Postmodern Life Writing* 6)

> The relationship between private memories and public events can highlight some questions autobiography raises about our relationship with the past, and our representation of it…. (*Borderlines* 13)

> Giovanni explicitly and implicitly makes the main points: the identity of the self remains hostage to the history of the collectivity; the representation of the self in prose or verse invites the critical scrutiny of the culture. Both points undercut the myth of the unique individual and force a fresh look at the autobiographies of black women. (Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, in Benstock ed. *The Private Self*: *Theory and Practice of Women's Autobiographical Writings* 70)

This chapter examines those autobiographies/memoirs which do not just tell an individual's story but provide a background rich in history and social history. The selected texts are Maya Angelou's *All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes* (1986), Edwidge Danticat's *Brother, I'm Dying* (2007), Paule Marshall's *Triangular Road: A Memoir* (2009), and Jessica Harris' *My Soul Looks Back* (2017). These texts combine personal and public memory along with history. As the chosen authors narrate their lives, they inevitably enter into dialogues with and thereby, help reconceptualize received histories, whether it be Welfare Rights history, the history of slavery, immigration policies or literary history. It follows that private histories are intertwined with public history. As Benstock points out, "Personal experience must be understood in social context" (*The Private Self* 70).

If life writing is seen as more than documentation of a life, a product of language, a narrative, "the real is never more than an unformulated signified" (Barthes, quoted in White, *Content*. 15). White, in the context of objectivity of narrative discourse or history, says that:

> [E]very narrative discourse consists not of one single code monolithically utilized, but rather of a complex set of codes, the interweaving of which by the author-for the production of a story infinitely rich in suggestion and variety of affect… attests to his talents as an artist, as master rather than as the servant of the codes available for his use. (41)

White holds that artistic texts carry more meaning as they draw upon more cultural codes. Again, the information is presented with more virtuosity because of the cultural codes used. Apart from the richness of meaning provided by various cultural codes, multiple layers in the discourse add to its semantic depth. For him

> a discourse is…an apparatus for the production of meaning, rather than as only a vehicle for the transmission of information about an extrinsic referent. (42)

For White, the discourse of history is neither objective nor focused on capturing information alone. Similarly in autobiographical writing, as the author writes, meaning is produced from the context and the cultural codes the words bring to bear, not from information about the self alone.

Further, White observes that the historical narrative tests "the capacity of a culture's fictions to endow real events with the kinds of meanings that literature displays to consciousness through its fashioning of patterns of 'imaginary' events" (45). The narrative endows the chosen events of a person's life history "with patterns of meaning that any literal representation of them as facts could never produce" (ibid). Instead of a collection of moments or events from his or her life, the writer of the autobiography fits them into a life story, a narrative drawing upon culture and history for resonance and depths of meaning. White defends the importance of the narrative structure even as he does not dismiss the truth value of the events narrated. He contends:

> If there is any logic presiding over the transition from…fact or event in the discourse to that of narrative, it is the logic of figuration itself…tropology. This transition is effected by a displacement of the facts onto the ground of literary fictions or, what amounts to the same thing, the projection onto the facts of the plot-structure of…literary figuration. (47)

Figurative language offers nuances of meaning and interpretation to the bare facts of personal or public history. Since a person cannot operate in a cultural vacuum, he/she has to place himself/herself against a background with a culture and a society. Even when wandering alone, a person's language and meaning are culturally coded, or fed by existing structures of meaning. It follows that a narrator of a life history draw upon and refer to the background of myth and history, remote or recent.

While Maya Angelo records the experiences of African Americans who had moved to Ghana in the 1960s in response to Nkrumah's call to Americans and Caribbeans to reconnect with their ancestral roots, Paule Marshall connects to the history of slavery when she finds herself in Richmond and Barbados. She cannot overlook the long forgotten embedded/buried memories of America and Barbados. Edwidge Danticat describes the plight of her uncle who died in a US detention camp as he tried to escape from Haiti to the US. This personal story is anchored on the migration policies of the US government and its border disputes with neighbouring countries. Jessica Harris' narrative is about her friendship with Samuel Floyd and through him the circle of eminent people like James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, Paule Marshall, Rosa Guy, and Louise Merriweather to name a few. She also focuses on the literary-critical-artistic scenes of the sixties and seventies in New York mainly and in Europe at times. She also is witness to the advent of AIDS in America and the loss of a number of her male friends to it.

The hypotheses examined in the chapter are:

- That life writing is rooted in social history
- That private and public histories are intertwined in life writing
- That a person's autobiography can include the biography of someone close to the writer
- That the strands of history in life writing could be consciously researched or not by conscious design
- That history and memory are part of autobiography
- That stray events from an individual's life are often woven into a layered narrative

This chapter tries to show the interweaving of private and public histories in each of these narratives. It draws upon Gudmundsdóttir's comment in another context: "how each author has forged a unique conjunction between their own memories and public events and how that connection impinges on the borderline between fiction and autobiography" to carry forward this study (*Borderlines* 13). It will examine "the complex dialogue between public and private memory and the individual's relationship to history" (ibid). Even as the author's personal history is related to public history in a narrative, often private accounts are anchored on public events, witnessed or drawn upon as part of a collective history/memory.

All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes

Maya Angelou writes about her experience in Ghana in the 1960s in *All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes*. She had gone there from Egypt to get her son admitted to the University at Accra, but his accident and long hospitalization, made her stay there for some time. Angelou uses this period to get to know the people—fellow African Americans and Ghanaians—around her and when time allows, to explore her ancestral links. She combines elements of travel writing—in her recording of manners and customs of the natives of Ghana—along with her own life story, against the background of the Middle Passage and the history of slavery. In keeping with the focus of this chapter, Angelou's intertwining of personal and public events and history would be addressed.

In Ghana Angelou marks the dark-skinned people freely moving about, and reflects that "Theirs was the laughter of home, quick and without artifice" (*All God's Children* 24). At the same time, she is reminded of the situation in America:

> Their authority on the marble steps again proved that Whites had been wrong all along. Black and brown skin did not herald debasement and a divinely created inferiority. We were capable of controlling our cities, ourselves and our lives….Whites were not needed to explain the working of the world, nor the mysteries of the mind. (ibid)

While her reaction to the Ghanaians is not surprising, she is disappointed in her expectations from the public. Angelou meets other African Americans—who had come to Ghana as a form of repatriation, centuries removed—who reach out to help her and also introduce her to Ghanaians who are equally helpful.

She explains the circumstances of their all being there which connect their lives to the changes in Ghana's political situation:

> I was in Ghana by accident, literally, but the other immigrants had chosen the country because of its progressive posture and its brilliant president, Kwame Nkrumah. He had let it be known that American Negroes would be welcome to Ghana. He offered havens for Southern and East African revolutionaries working to end colonialism in their countries. (23)

Most of the African Americans had left their lives in America to try and settle in Ghana and help to rebuild it. They were full of hope and enthusiasm for the new republic and saw themselves as proverbial returnees: "I was one of nearly two hundred Black Americans from

St. Louis, New York City, Washington, D.C., Los Angeles, Atlanta, and Dallas who hoped to live out the Biblical story" (24). Angelou presents it as a return of the prodigal(s):

> I had finally come home. The prodigal child, having strayed, been stolen or sold from the land of her fathers…had at last arisen and directed herself back to the welcoming arms of the family where she would be bathed, clothed with fine raiment and seated at the welcoming table. (ibid)

As she explains their presence in that country, she puts it in the past context of slavery which had been the reason for their ancestors' first removal from the place. While they were expecting a warm welcome from the people of Ghana, they find that nobody pays them any attention. Rather, the "citizens were engaged in their own concerns. They were busy adoring their flag, their five-year-old independence from Britain and their president" (ibid). The trauma of slavery and its tragic history meant little to the people who had been fortunate to be not affected by it. Their lives continued, untouched by what went on in the Americas or in the Caribbean.

Angelou records the feelings of her fellow African Americans whom she calls immigrants:

> We had come to Africa from our varying starting places and with myriad motives, gaping with hungers, some more ravenous than others, and we had little tolerance for understanding being ignored. At least we wanted someone to embrace us and maybe congratulate us because we had survived. If they felt the urge, they could thank us for having returned. (25)

Having to accept that the ground reality was different, Angelou explains that they had not received personal invitations but were part of those who "buzzed mothlike on the periphery of acceptance" (ibid). That did not, in any way, rob the returnees of their enthusiasm:

> Julian's circle had stupendous ambitions and thought of itself as a cadre of political émigrés. Its members were impassioned and volatile, dedicated to Africa, and Africans at home and abroad. We, for I counted myself in that company, felt that we would be the first accepted and once taken in and truly adopted, we would hold the doors open…. (26)

Angelou finds that this group of bright young people with whom she identifies are kind and willing to make sacrifices. It is through them that she gets to meet local people like Efua Sutherland who helps her to get a job as a clerk in the University, while her son recovered from

his injuries. She is sure that they would be accepted in Ghana: "We didn't question if we would be useful. Our people for over three hundred years had been made so useful, a bloody war had been fought and lost, rather than have our usefulness brought to an end" (22). Angelou refers to the American Civil War of the 1860s fought between the North and the South to justify the potential worth of African Americans in Ghana.

Back in the University, Angelou overhears some European professors making careless remarks about black people—African Americans as well as the people of Ghana, in one of the dining rooms. She realizes that the discussion must have been occasioned by "the recent riot in Harlem which had been front-page news in Ghana" (53). A Yugoslav professor remarks that "the American Negroes are fed up with the system because Democracy does not work." A Briton adds that "Democracy was never created for the lower classes….Just like at Ghana." When a Ghanaian does not appear to mind what is being said, Angelou berates them about their careless observations. As she tries to leave the room, a waiter advises her not to allow such people to upset her: "This is not their place. In time they will pass. Ghana was here when they came. When they go, Ghana will be here. They are like mice on an elephant's back. They will pass." (56). Angelou is struck by his words and ashamed at her own outburst:

> A poor, uneducated servant in Africa was so secure he could ignore established White rudeness. No Black American I had ever known knew that security. Our tenure in the United States, though long and very hard-earned, was always so shaky, we had developed patience as a defense, but never as aggression. (54)

The cultural shock delivered by the Ghanaian's message reminds her of their lack of a stable history or tradition to sustain them in America. She is left pondering over his words with some envy:

> Their countries had been exploited and their cultures had been discredited by colonialism. Nonetheless, they could reflect…on centuries of continuity. The lowliest could call the name of ancestors who lived centuries earlier. The land upon which they lived had been in their people's possession beyond remembered time. Despite political bondage and economic exploitation, they had retained an ineradicable innocence. (55)

What stands out to her is that Africans and African culture have endured the pressures of colonization because of their being deeply entrenched in African life. Because they were on familiar ground, they could pick up the threads of their old lives and rebuild once the Europeans had left.

She feels that because of their history of slavery, African Americans "carried the badge of a barbarous history sewn to our dark skins" (78). Moreover, in America they "had matured without ever experiencing the true abandon of adolescence" (ibid). What appeared as childish actions "most often were exhibitions of bravado, not unlike humming a jazz tune while walking into a gathering of the Ku Klux Klan" (ibid). She realizes that she or other African Americans would not be able to penetrate the essence of African life, return to Africa in the real sense.

Angelou writes that they were all caught up in the positivity of President Nkrumah's acceptance of black people. They felt grateful and gratified in their faith in Africa:

> "For too long in our history Africa has spoken through the voice of others. Now what I have called the African Personality in international affairs will have a chance of making its proper impact and will let the world know it through the voices of its sons." (79)

They welcomed with gratitude Nkrumah's declaration that "West Indians and Black Americans were among Africa's great gifts to the world" and the knowledge that they "lived under laws constructed by Blacks, and…were held responsible by Blacks." They "could not lay any social unhappiness or personal failure at the door of color prejudice (ibid). They lived hard and worked hard to do the best they could for Ghana. For a while they felt good about not having to worry about colour.

Angelou writes about the visit of Malcolm X whose advice changed her life. She describes him as "America's Molotov cocktail, thrown upon the White hope that all Black Americans would follow the nonviolent tenets of Dr. Martin Luther King" (126). Even the timid admired him. When Julian asked Malcolm to tell them why he was in Ghana, he informs them that he had been touring the African nations "to confer with other African politicians. He needed as many governmental contacts as possible so that when he took the case of the Black American before the General Assembly of the United Nations, he could be sure at least of some African and maybe other nationals' support" (128). Angelou adds:

> When Malcolm mentioned arguing for our people before the United Nations, we shouted spontaneously and with one voice of approval. He said, "If our cause was debated by all the world's nations, it would mean that finally, we would be taken seriously. (ibid)

He continued to reach out to people and in a speech at the University "He spoke of America, White and Black Americans, racism, hate and the awful need to be treated as humans" (134).

He tells the Nigerian High Commissioner "We have much work to do at home. Even as you have your work here in Africa. We are lambs in a den of wolves. We will need your help. Only with the help of Africa and Africans can we succeed in freeing ourselves" (137). He identifies himself as "a Black Muslim man of African heritage" (135) and when someone comments on his complexion he explains as Angelou records:

> "As slaves, we were the property of slave masters. Our men were worked to death, our women were raped, then worked to death, and many of our children were born lookinglike me. The slave master fathers denied their children, but fortunately we retained enough Africanisms to believe that the mother's child was our child…." (ibid)

Malcolm X explains his lighter complexion with reference to the abuse of Black slave women and their children by White Americans.

Angelou writes of Malcolm X's serious advice to them: "he was a big brother advisor, suggesting that it was time for me to come home" (136). He tells them:

> "The country needs you. Our people need you. Alice and Julian and Max Bond and Sylvia, you should all come home. You have seen Africa, bring it home and teach our people about the homeland." (ibid)

His advice and finally her son's desire for independence convince Angelou to return to America. When she speaks to her friend Julian he says: "I suspect we'll all be home soon. Africa was here when we arrived and it's not going anywhere. You can always come back" (187). She decides to leave and before going drives towards the coast to see some of the villages.

On the visit to the old coastal town of Keta, Angelou is escorted by a local acquaintance, Mr Adadevo who hailed from that area, along with the daughters of Nana Niketa, the former vice chancellor of Ghana University and the chief of his tribe. As they near the ocean front market, she is taken to meet Adavedo's sister who had a stall in the market. They move further inside the market after meeting her when a tall older woman hails Angelo as someone she knows. It takes some time for Mr. Adadevo to convince her about Angelo's American identity. Finally when she understands, she leads Angelou to meet other women who all appear to be mourning something. Mr Adadevo tells her what he learns from them:

> "During the slavery period Keta was a good sized village. It was hit very hard by the slave trade….In fact, at one point every inhabitant was either killed or taken. The only escapees were children who ran away and hid in the bush. Many of them watched from their hiding places as their parents were beaten and put into chains. (198)

Informing her that that they find a resemblance in her with their own people—"They are sure you are descended from those stolen mothers and fathers"—he continues with what they tell him:

> "The children were taken in by nearby villagers and grew to maturity. They married and had children and rebuilt Keta. They told the tale to their offspring. These women are the descendants of those orphaned children. They have heard the stories often, and the deeds are still as fresh as if they happened during their lifetimes…. That is why they mourn. Not for you but for their lost people." (ibid)

Angelou is saddened by the story of those past people and their trauma, even as she is surprised and not unhappy to connect with the women. She reflects that:

> I had not consciously come to Ghana to find the roots of my beginnings…. And here in my last days in Africa, descendants of a pillaged past saw their history in my face and heard their ancestors speak through my voice. (ibid)

She realizes that without her having to search actively for her roots, her past and that of her ancestors, plucked from that land, were confronting her through these women in Keta. She now knows where they hailed from and their sad story simply reinforces the tragic history of slavery for families and individuals alike. Angelou can now anchor her life story on the displacement and re-routing of her ancestors in America.

Brother, I'm Dying

Edwidge Danticat's *Brother, I'm Dying* overlaps the author's personal story with the life stories of her family, most significantly that of her father, Mira and uncle, Joseph. By intertwining the accounts of different family members into her personal narrative, the book becomes as much a biography as it is autobiography. Danticat's narrative is, however, not limited to a mere mingling of these two genres: in retelling the history of her family she also revisits the troubled history of her home country, Haiti and its volatile, complicated relations with the United States. Haiti and its history remain the larger canvas against which her family memories are played

out. Significant events of the author's personal family history are related to dates and public events important to Haiti's history.

Danticat, who had been born in Haiti in 1969, was left in the foster care of her uncle Joseph and aunt Tante Denise when her parents—initially her father and then the mother—migrated to the United States in search of better economic opportunities. It is with her uncle's family that the author spends twelve years of her life before she and her brother are brought along to America by their parents who had by then settled comfortably enough in the new country to be able to keep their children with them. Her years spent in Haiti, however, endow her with a deep sense of attachment to it so much so that she keeps going back to it—both literally as well as figuratively through the medium of her writings. By embedding Haiti's socio-political milieu into her recounting of familial memories, Danticat's autobiography revises dominant histories on the country which often too easily glides over its complexities and reduces it to a country with no other legacy than internal conflicts and poverty. Similarly, the text is also critical of celebratory, nationalist narratives that attempt to romanticize Haitian life by taking an escapist route away from its problems.

In weaving a narrative that is attentive to the plights of Haitians even as it never completely assuages them of blame and that understands the role of foreign, especially US interventions in aggravating political turmoil within the country, the author provides a frame to engage in a more complex understanding of the country. Also, in placing the life of her father, her own life, and that of her uncle in parallel planes, Danticat's narrative has to invariably keep shifting geographies—between that of Haiti and the US. Although never made explicit, discussions of these shifts as well as the intricate ways in which these two geographical locations become implicated provide an opportunity to critique US immigration policies and laws that fail to take into account the pain of immigration.

The chapters are not chronologically arranged: different accounts, including what appears to be biographical sketches of different family members, are interspersed in no particular order so as to arrive at some cohesive meaning. In this regard, in *Borderlines: Autobiography and Fiction in Postmodern Life Writing*, Gunnthorunn Gudmundsdottir writes:

> Writing on one's family constitutes a part of the more general search for origin and identity present in autobiographical writing….They write about what was 'all there always, everywhere, layered away' and by writing on it they give these layers of family

> history a sense of coherence and they save the 'dust from going down the drain,' and thus their family history from disappearing. (183)

The interspersing of family details with personal stories helps arrive at a better understanding of one's own life in relation to one's family. Preservation of family details is an attempt to preserve in writing the writer's lineage and hence, his/her very identity. Danticat's mingling of biography with autobiography provides her the narrative frame to bring together the story of her life along with that of her father and uncle and thereby, a way to present how their lives were intricately connected to each other. The author seems to imply that the account of her life as narrated in the memoir can only be understood when placed in the context of the lives of her father and uncle. To quote Danticat:

> This is an attempt at cohesiveness, and at re-creating a few wondrous and terrible months when their lives and mine intersected in startling ways, forcing me to look forward and back at the same time. I am writing this only because they can't. (26)

The author, here, is referring to the way circumstances in the year 2004 form into a triad of events that entwine their lives together. Her narrative is an attempt to give voice to not just herself but the lives of the two men whose stories are inseparable from her own.

In fact, Danticat's narrative arc begins in 2004, a year which conjoins her life with that of her father and uncle as already stated. Although the events are isolated ones bearing no causal connection, the fact that they all happen in the same year and that their repercussions could be felt by the entire family establish a tragi-ironic relation of sorts amongst them. 2004 happens to be the year in which Danticat conceives for the first time. Yet, it is also the year which marks the diagnosis of her father's pulmonary fibrosis—a terminal lung disease, and the detention of her uncle at the Krome Detention Centre as he flees to the US compelled by circumstances in Haiti. While her uncle's tragic fate ending ultimately in his death is unfurled only towards the end of the autobiography, the author's pregnancy and her father's illness are intertwined right from the beginning of the text. In fact, Danticat's *Brother, I'm Dying* opens with the following sentence,

> I found out I was pregnant the same day that my father's rapid weight loss and chronic shortness of breath were positively diagnosed as end-stage pulmonary fibrosis. (3)

From this interlinking of the fate of the two, the narrative unwinds to show how people and events get implicated with each other by unexpected turn of events and historical forces beyond

their control. As Danticat's and her father's lives follow their own course with neither of them playing a hand in it, news of birth and death become woven into each other. The author's inability to process these two very different bits of information received at the same time highlights the more general condition of human incapacity in the face of unwanted albeit uncontrollable circumstances. As the author writes,

> *My father was dying and I was pregnant*. Both struck me as impossibly unreal. (14)

Faced with the prospect of a new life and the parallel fear of losing someone very close and dear, she fails to comprehend the magnitude or even the 'reality' of the events.

Danticat's autobiographical narrative keeps referring and reverting to this idea of the inevitable failure of human beings in the face of fate or the forces of history which take their own due course of action. This is again made evident in the memoir when even the very simple act of calling up a family member is linked to the birthday of a political figure. The first hint of the sustained link between her immigrant father and his erstwhile homeland Haiti, that Danticat gives in her autobiography, is in the context of a telephonic conversation between him and his family that he had left behind in Haiti. The author recounts her father calling up his brother, Joseph on the birthday of Jean-Bertrand Aristide:

> It was July 15, 2004, the fifty-first birthday of Jean-Bertrand Aristide, Haiti's twice-elected and twice-deposed president…Aristide was now…in exile in South Africa. However, the residents of Bel Air…had not forgotten him…[T]hey had marched…through the Haitian capital to call for his return…[T]wo policemen had been shot. My father called my uncle, just as he always did whenever something like this was happening in Haiti. (25)

Any political disturbance or revolt conspiring in Haiti is, thus, immediately related by her father to its potential consequence for his brother. Indeed, Danticat writes about how he had always been urging her uncle Joseph to leave the politically dangerous situation in Haiti's capital Bel Air and settle in a different place. Upon diagnosis of his own terminal illness, he had wanted to ensure the safety of his brother before his death and hence, had called to try and persuade him yet again.

The maintenance of familial relations, thus, gets contextualized against the backdrop of larger events of national/historical significance to Haiti. Indeed, as Danticat's narrative unfolds, there is a parallel unfolding of the country's politically turbulent history. In depicting a family

history which had, in many ways, been inadvertently shaped by Haitian history, the author also briefly traces the volatile political legacy of her home country. There are references in the text to the changing leadership of Haiti: Paul Magloire and Daniel Fignole's rule in the 1950s, the extremely ruthless dictatorial reigns of Francois "Papa Doc" Duvalier and Jean Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier beginning in the late 1950s and ending only in 1986, and the brief period of presidency of Jean-Bertrand Aristide during the last decade of the twentieth century and beginning of the twenty-first. Interspersed in between the chapters are also references to the period of 1915 to 1934 when Haiti was under the occupation of the U.S. and the 1990s when it had once again been bombarded by U.S. interventionism in its internal affairs.

While writing about the initial days of courtship between her uncle Joseph and Tante Denise and how they had decided to settle in Bel Air, for instance, Danticat reflects on the historical significance of the place in which their house had been built:

> The hill in Bel Air on which the house was built had been the site of a famous battle between mulatto abolitionists and French colonists who'd controlled most of the island since 1697 and had imported black Africans to labor on coffee and sugar plantation as slaves. A century later, slaves and mulattoes joined together to drive the French out, and on January 1, 1804, formed the Republic of Haiti. (29)

A personal family detail like her uncle's building of a new house is, thus, linked to the nationally significant history of the formation of the Haitian Republic. Danticat continues with this depiction to write of the U.S. occupation of the country:

> [A]s World War I dawned and the French, British and Germans, who controlled Haiti's international shipping, rallied their gunboats to protect their interests, President Woodrow Wilson, whose interests included…the United Fruit Company and 40 percent of the stock of the Haitian national bank, ordered an invasion…[T]he U.S. Marines landed in Haiti in July 1915 for what would become a nineteen-year occupation. (29)

The author, here, shows how Haiti's troubled legacy could be attributed to the selfish interests of colonizing missions. Through these casual mentions of historical details within her personal narrative, then, the author implicitly manages to re-engage with socio-historical evils such as colonialism so as to critique them. By tracing back the country's political upheavals and conflicts to what had been its continual occupation by other nations, Danticat shows how the ramifications of colonialism continue to hinder erstwhile colonies even long after.

As much as the author is critical of external elements disrupting Haiti's unity and stability, she is also aware of the nation's own internal loopholes exemplified for instance in the myopic vision and lust for power that has defined much of its political leadership. While sketching the brief biographical account of her uncle in the early pages of her autobiography, Danticat mentions his idolization of Daniel Fignole, who had served as Haiti's president for a brief period of nineteen days before being deposed by Francois "Papa Doc" Duvalier, whose dictatorship proves to be personally devastating to many Haitians. By way of talking about the consequences brought about by this political transformation on the lives of individual people, she notes a series of turning points that ensue in the Danticat family in its aftermath.

Joseph Danticat, inspired by Fignole had for a while thought about entering the political mechanism of Haiti, but becomes completely disillusioned with politics after his political idol is forced into exile by the new Duvalier regime. In order to come out of his "ideological void," he decides to join church and chooses "a Baptist congregation that one of his friends belonged to" (33). Leaving aside his political ambitions, Joseph Danticat goes on to become a pastor.

It is however in the turn of events that occur in the lives of her father, Mira and the adopted daughter of her uncle and aunt, Marie Micheline that one realizes how larger political and social transformations can prove to be individually traumatic. Given the socio-historical forces beyond his control, Danticat's father has to keep changing his means of livelihood. For her father, career choices, then, are determined not always by choice but inevitable circumstances. He had to first give up his tailoring business—sewing children's shirts and selling them to different vendors—in the 1960s when "used clothes from the United States…became readily available" (49) in Haiti. Forced to take up a different occupation, he starts working as a salesman in a shoe shop. It is while working here that he becomes the victim of Duvalier's autocratic regime. Danticat, again, writes about how her father's life becomes unwillingly governed by the course of events that follow "Papa Doc" Duvalier's assumption of power:

> That period in my father's life, the early sixties, was also shadowed by much larger events. Papa Doc Duvalier…had created a countrywide militia called the Tonton Macoutes…Upon joining the Macoutes, the recruits received…an indigo denim uniform, a .38 and the privilege of doing whatever they wanted. (51)

The 'macoutes,' armed not only with their guns but with an uninhibited freedom to do "whatever they wanted," would come to the shop where Mira Danticat worked and take away

the “best shoes” without paying for them (51). Talking of the helplessness of her father, Danticat writes:

> He couldn’t protest or run after them or he might risk being shot. (51)

The author matter-of-factly comments on the irony of the situation where death became a very real possibility for ordinary Haitians like her father under the Duvalier regime.

The heavy losses incurred on account of the macoutes make the owner of the shop decide to keep cheap, duplicate copies of the real leather shoes. Whenever the macoutes came, Danticat’s father was expected to show them the cheap “three-dollar shoes” (51) in place of the real ones. While they could never make out the difference, the author recounts her father always getting “a knot in his stomach when a Macoute asked him if there were other shoes” (52). This constant fear of being shot or getting killed while working at the workshop ultimately forms the basis of his decision to emigrate to the U.S. As Danticat writes:

> In the end, it was this…worrying about being shot that started him thinking about leaving Haiti. (52)

The author, thus, shows how her own family’s immigration history is a testament to the forced, painful dimension of migration. Her parents’ decision to migrate to the U.S. is not a fond choice, then, but an existential response to the political situation in Haiti.

Similarly, Marie Micheline’s unfortunate marriage to a Macoute and the physical and emotional tortures she has to endure as a result shows how political situations can facilitate the way for individually experienced, personal tragedies to take place. Micheline had hastened her marriage to a man she knew little about after having conceived out of wedlock and been rejected by her lover and the child’s father. This marriage, however, becomes the cause of unbearable agony as the man she had married in a fit of dejection turns out to be a Macoute. Married to such a member of Duvalier’s militia who forcefully take her away to a place unbeknownst to her family, Micheline becomes prey to his psycho-sexual violence and her body the site where he could assert his powers. Her foster father, however, risking his own life, manages to rescue her from the Macoute and bring her back to her family.

Marie Micheline’s story epitomises the instances of deeply shattering individual fallouts of political expediencies which often go undocumented. Her husband Pressoir Marol’s power to unabashedly sway his violence upon her—to a large extent—comes from the political situation which endowed Macoutes with unrestricted power under all circumstances. In

reportages and depictions of the violence wreaked by them, the focus is never on these isolated, private ordeals faced by individual victims. In writing the account of her cousin Marie Micheline, Danticat tries to give voice to such unvoiced episodes and also creates a platform to critique the unethical, problematic leadership that gives rise to such individual tragedies.

Marie Micheline's subsequent fate—her untimely death again makes her an unwilling casualty of political upheavals. She had been working at her uncle's newly started church clinic when she fell victim to the violence ensued in the battle between two warring military factions. Again, in the manner of a political historian, Danticat relates the events leading up to the development of such factions within the military: the fleeing of "Baby Doc" Duvalier from Haiti to France; the consequent taking of charge by "a military junta" led by Lieutenant-General Henry Namphy; the swearing in of Leslie Manigat as new president; the reassuming of power by Lieutenant General Namphy by deposing him only to be himself ousted by his rival, General Prosper Avril; and finally the creation of hostile factions within the military—with one faction supporting Avril and the other formed of Duvalier supporters. And once again, in such detailing, the author shows how important historical dates tally with dates personally significant to their family: February 7, her uncle's birthdate, also happens to be "the official date for Haitian presidential inaugurations" as "Baby Doc's departure had taken place" on that particular date in 1986 (134).

The violence generated by the conflict between the "opposing military factions" (134) which kills Marie Micheline only worsens with time ultimately forcing Danticat's uncle Joseph to flee Bel Air, Haiti, at the age of eighty-one and seek temporary shelter in the U.S. The last few chapters of the autobiography rapidly glide over Haitian politics from the 1990s to 2004—the year with which the autobiography begins and also around which it ends. The extremely baffled state of Haiti's political scenario during this period—Jean Paul Aristide's coming to power in February, 1991 followed by his ousting in the September of the same year, his return in 1994 "accompanied by twenty thousand U.S. soldiers" (140) with the launch of Operation Uphold Democracy by then U.S. President Bill Clinton, Aristide's second overthrowing in February, 2004, the passing of the Brazil-led stabilisation mission, MINUSTAH by the United Nations Security Council—and their implications for the lives of the common people of Haiti who are forcefully drawn into the desperate state of affairs are all briefly dealt with by Danticat who gloss over these issues without in any way diminishing their political or historical significance.

In writing about these political turmoils, the author also writes about how the involvement of external forces such as the U.S. or the U.N. soldiers deployed with the intention to proffer peace only further aggravates the conflicts. She recounts what she believes must have been her uncle's reflections on the morning of October 24, 2004 when the MINUSTAH soldiers as well as the CIMOs, in the name of controlling the violence perpetrated by gang members, themselves indulged in wreaking havoc upon the common public:

> [T]he United Nations soldiers…were supposed to be protecting them. But more often it seemed as if they were attacking them while going after the chimeres, or ghosts, as the gang members were commonly called. (173)

Danticat's uncle Joseph himself becomes an indirect victim of the mayhem created by the stabilisation operation that morning. Even in the absence of any authorisation from him, the roof of his church had been used by the soldiers to fire at gang members. This leads to false rumours about his complicity in the whole affair, thereby incurring for him the wreath of gang members. With threats to his life, he is forced to make the decision to leave Haiti—something which he had been refusing all his life no matter what.

In the U. S. however, Joseph Danticat falls victim to racist immigration laws which ultimately leads to his tragic death. Unaware of any dire consequences that might befall him, he had honestly told the Customs and Border Protection (CBP) officials at the airport that he was seeking for temporary asylum. Upon this statement, he and his son Maxo—despite having valid visas and passports are held by the officials and then sent to the Krome Detention Centre. In a transcript of the interview that Danticat collects from the Bureau of Customs and Border Protection and later recounts in her memoir, one can see the lack of empathy of the interviewing officer to the plight of Joseph Danticat. To quote from the text:

> "What is your purpose in entering the United States today?" asked Officer Reyes.
> "Because a group that is causing trouble in Haiti wants to kill me," my uncle answered.
> According to the transcript, Officer Reyes did not ask for further explanation or details. (217)

The officer's asking no further details regarding the situation in Haiti that forces a citizen to seek shelter in a foreign land shows his mechanical response to Joseph Danticat's statements. Danticat's uncle's old age, his valid documents have no impact on the official.

The author's remarks regarding the illogical circumstances of her uncle's detainment shows the U.S. Immigration Department's complete apathy towards Haiti and Haitians:

> I suspect that my uncle was treated according to a biased immigration policy dating back from the early 1980s when Haitians began arriving in Florida in large numbers by boat. In Florida, where Cuban refugees are, as long as they're able to step foot on dry land, immediately processed and released to their families, Haitian asylum seekers are disproportionately detained, then deported. (222)

By thus commenting on the inherent bias in immigration policies which treats immigrants from different nations differently, Danticat further reflects:

> Was my uncle going to jail because he was Haitian? This is a question he probably asked himself. This is a question I still ask myself. Was he going to jail because he was black? (222-223)

Her autobiographical narrative shows how innocent people like her uncle Joseph fall victim to Haiti's fraught relation with the U.S.

The same lack of empathy and inhuman treatment meted out to her uncle at the Krome Detention Centre results in a deterioration of his health and ultimately brings his death. While at the Detention Centre, his medications—which included a herbal syrup as well as prescription drug for blood pressure—were taken away from him. And when during the process of the asylum interview, Danticat's uncle started vomiting and showed all symptoms of having a seizure, the registered doctor kept insisting that he was faking it. When he was admitted to Jackson Memorial Hospital where he ultimately surrendered to death, no one was allowed to meet him. As Danticat writes, "[A]ny contact with the prisoners, either by phone or in person, had to be arranged through their jailers, in my uncle's case, through Krome" (241). The author's uncle, thus, becomes the victim of unfair immigration laws and has to die an unexpected death.

In the depiction of her uncle's fate, Danticat shows the irony of the situation wherein U.S. immigration laws and policies are completely indifferent to the plight of Haiti even though its military interventions in the country are to a great extent responsible for that plight. The author in her memoir, as in many of her fictions, makes a case for more humanitarian approaches to Haiti and its socio-political conditions.

Triangular Road

Paule Marshall's *Triangular Road* draws upon a history that goes back to the African slave trade. By revisiting specific episodes from her life and in that process crediting people and places that have been formative of her as a writer and person, Marshall creates a reverse journey

that pays tribute and homage to her ancestral roots. The memoir is shaped round the motif of travel. The "triangular road" of the title is indicative of these travels and traces her journey through the United States, the Caribbean Islands, and finally Africa. The travels are as much figurative as literal: the 'triangular road' that the author traverses, becomes the occasion for reflecting upon the triangular route map of the African slave trade. Marshall's narrative journey which documents her mental as well as physical itineraries, then, keeps moving back and forth across wide geographies and temporal zones.

The memoir—shaped as a series of reflections with no chronological sequence, although thematically connected—opens in the year 1965 as a young, "fledgling of a writer" (3) Marshall is asked by the United States State Department to accompany none other than Langston Hughes on a state sponsored "month-long cultural tour of Europe" (2). The author with barely one novel and a collection of short stories to her credit then all too happily agrees and the tour goes on to become a learning experience for her in many ways. As she writes of her memories of the trip: "During those Copenhagen nights, Mr. Hughes became a kind of West African griot, a tribal elder passing down black American culture and history…"(29).

It is this role of a writer—that of functioning as a mentor and a torch-bearer "passing down" his/her knowledge to coming generations—that Marshall imbibes and tries to accomplish in her memoir. Just as Hughes by "recreating for [her] the glory days" (27) of his youth had passed on the invaluable lessons that he had gathered from his experiences and through his travels all over the world, she too, by recounting her experiences and travels in her memoir, performs that function. And just as the experiences of Hughes give her a view of history "that had been all but omitted in the standard textbooks of [her] day" (29), she too fashions her memoir as a sort of narrativization of undocumented histories.

History and travel—through which the former often manifests itself—become intricately, inextricably linked in Marshall's text. In fact, in the opening chapter itself, she recalls her decision made as a teenager and again, under the inspiration of Langston Hughes to travel extensively. Reading his travel memoir, *The Big Sea*, Marshall had been so motivated by the "travelin' man" that she had determined to follow his tracks:

> Not only would I become a writer, but a travelin' woman as well. (29)

The teenage promise made to her own self becomes a passion as the author keeps embarking on a travel that is both metaphorical as well as literal. And through these travels and the first-hand view of history that they enable, she hopes of carrying forward the struggle for Black

rights and freedom left unfinished by earlier generations. As she recalls Hughes' response to a group of young Blacks who had criticized his "lack of militancy" (20) during a lecture given at Africa House, London:

> He and his generation had done their part: marching, demonstrating, picketing….[I]t was for [the younger generation] to educate themselves and understand the complexity of a struggle that fundamentally involved people of color around the world. (21-22)

The Black struggle in America and elsewhere was a continuum with each generation putting in their contribution to it. Marshall's memoir embodies her idea of contributing to the cause of Black people: re-visiting and revising history to counter the erasure of Black people from major historical studies.

In travelling back through time and retelling, recreating the history of Black people, Marshall recognizes the primacy of different water bodies to that history. And this recognition also reflects in the text. In fact, in the "Author's Note" to her memoir, she mentions how the memoir developed from a series of lectures given in 2005 at Harvard University "on the theme of "Bodies of Water"—specific rivers, seas and oceans—and their profound impact on black history and culture throughout the Americas."

The first 'body of water' that she reflects upon in *Triangular Road* is the James River, "America's most historic river" (36) to go by her words. The ruminations—occasioned by a leisurely trip that she and her friend, Virginia make to the north bank of the river and where she encounters a group of youths rafting down the James along its south bank —take Marshall down the lanes of history to see the complicity of the James River in generating White America's massive wealth over the course of time. Speaking of the way the river bifurcated into two once it "reach[ed] the heart of downtown Richmond" (44), she writes:

> The city's downtown marks "the Falls," meaning the end of the rock-bound James, "where the water falleth so rudely and with such a violence, as not any boat can pass," and the beginning of the river's long, smooth tidal basin that is navigable all the way to historic Jamestown and the Atlantic Ocean some sixty miles downstream. (44)

Marshall continues to reflect on the way the river's characteristic co-presence of heavy current and smooth tidal waters facilitates the growth of industry and economy:

> Rough water and smooth. They lie side by side… Indeed, it was the combination of the whitewater power of the James fueling the new industries, together with the tidewater

> offering safe passage to the ships up from the Atlantic, with their chattel cargo, that made for the wealth and status the Old Dominion would enjoy for nearly two centuries. (45)

A casual holiday by the bank of the James, thus, sparks off reflections on the history of slavery, of the "chattel cargo" brought in to America via the tidewater of the James. From this observation on the part played by the James in fostering the industrial growth of the place, Marshall engages in a metaphorical travel further down the river. To quote her:

> [T]he truant part of my mind continues along what is now the tidal James, even though it knows what it will encounter there: all those wrenching landmarks—and all of them within the city limits. They begin, those landmarks, with the replacement of the notorious old Mayo's Bridge that had been the first to link the river's north and south banks. (45-46)

Marshall, thus, assuming the role of the "travelin' woman" takes her readers along a backward journey all the while pointing out and commenting on the relics of the brutal past of slavery. The "Mayo's Bridge," she informs her readers, was built for the sole purpose of facilitating the operation of the slave trade, its "nightly traffic" being the "chained and coffled" (46) slaves marched from the docks on the south bank to the town of Richmond on the north bank.

Relating how 'free muscle power' became the basis of the cultivation as well as railway industry, she again ponders:

> The Old Dominion…needed an endless supply of John Henry muscle, brawn and sweat to produce what became the cash crop of all time. Tobacco….[T]he same muscle, brawn and sweat also figured in the rail system (CSX) that soon reached from Florida to Mississippi, with its hub Olde Richmond Towne. (48-50)

Marshall's imagination, as she sits by the bank of the James River, thus, serves to bring alive the extremely inhuman and shameful past of slavery and the Atlantic slave trade which made it possible. She thinks of the utter degradation of the victims of the slave trade as they were commodified and bought, sold and exchanged as such. The author mentions how scrambles—about which "she had never…come across so much as a word" (53) in the pages of 'standard' history books—were conducted for the exchange of the 'chattel cargo':

> In a "scrambles," the chattel cargo was taken from the hold, off the boat, and herded into a fenced-in yard or pen or stockade with a locked gate. Waiting outside would be

> a crowd of eager buyers, each with a long rope…[T]he "scrambles" began, with the buyers dashing about…desperate to lasso and corral as many chattel as possible never mind…the stench, the running sores, the caked shit. (47-48)

By making her memoir a platform to highlight such ignored dimensions of the slave trade, Marshall's memoir sets about 'rectifying' what had been missing in authoritative accounts of history. Similarly, she throws light on a different view of Richmond, Virginia when she links the town to its role in the slave trade. To quote her again,

> Richmond, VA. It was the principal port of entry for Africans brought to the New World in the eighteenth century. (47)

The ruminations go on till the imaginary reverse journey through history ends at Jamestown. Interspersed in between such ponderings on history, are also reflections on her life and her time at VCU—a two-year teaching tenure at which, brings her to Virginia in the first place. The library at the university becomes the place where she starts her "private crash course in southern history" (52). The books she finds there on Early Southern History gives her a chance to "finally…redress the truncated, once-over-lightly, deliberately sanitized version of the antebellum South" (52) that is generally presented in accounts of history. Marshall comments on how conventional histories on the subject taught as part of academic courses never do justice to the extent of brutality with which that history is marred. The library, thus, helps her come out of the "educational shortchange" that she had so far been suffering from:

> At long last making up for having been educationally shortchanged. (53)

In her memoir, too, Marshall tries to dispel the myopic views of history passed down as authoritative accounts. In one instance, she mentions her coming across the "Eddict of 1808" in one of the books she discovers in the library. The Eddict, which she quotes, states the following:

> Be it enacted, by the Senate and the House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, that from and after the 1st day of January, 1808, it shall not be lawful to import into the United States from any of the kingdoms of Africa any Negro with the intent to be sold or to be held to service or labor... (53)

Marshall notes the irony of the situation where the white traders, notwithstanding the law passed, come up with alternatives to perpetuate the trading of slaves:

> The Tidewater big houses: the Shirley Plantation, the Sherwood Forest Plantation, the Flowerdew Hundred Plantation, Monticello, Mount Vernon, the Swan's Point Plantation et al. began the purposeful breeding and sale of homegrown chattel. The enterprise proved so successful that, by the mid-1800s, there was a surplus of a quarter million chattel labor and more. (54)

The author, thus, refers to the inhuman commodification of slaves whereby the very natural and human instincts of sexuality are mechanised and turned into a tool for business or commerce. Continuing with her description of the whole mechanical process by which slaves were bred and the "surplus" made another tool for profit-generation, she writes:

> The surplus was simply, periodically, herded by cart into Richmond Towne, where it was quickly sold in the Bottom ; then, as quickly, packed into the cattle cars of the CSX Railroad and into the holds of the ships at the Manchester Docks to be railroaded and shipped due south, deep south: New Orleans. The Mississippi Delta. (54)

By presenting these reflections on the breeding and selling of slaves, Marshall highlights the ways slavery functioned as an enterprise in its own right with natural geographies, modes of navigation and commercial houses all manoeuvred and made use of in its operation.

These contemplations that the river James incite in the author make way for other memories to emerge as well. Marshall remembers the time her white, Jewish editor had come to visit her and another Southern white writer named Lee Smith. What she seems to remember more specifically, however, is her sense of fury at the short-sightedness and lack of understanding displayed by the editor who was all too excited to visit the Tidewater plantations along with the other southern writer Lee. Marshall is shocked by the editor's failure to comprehend the role played by those plantations in the tragic history of Blacks. To quote from her:

> Although my editor has been impeccably educated…she was shortchanged in certain aspects of the country's history…Equally appalling is the fact that my editor is Jewish. How, I wonder, would she have reacted had I announced that I was on my way to visit Dachau or Buchenwald to pay my respects to the millions who had perished there while doing the boogaloo and snapping my fingers? (56)

The editor's behaviour is representative of the more general lack of lack of empathy towards the historical plight suffered by Black people. The very fact that the plantation houses which

are relics testifying to the brutality of the whole enterprise of slavery serve as "favourite" (ibid) tourist spots indicates this inability. That the editor's Jewish background does not in any way help her in understanding the gravity of the history the plantations are suggestive of shows not only her own short-sighted view of Black history but also the general atmosphere of negligence or unwillingness to promote better, more empathic understandings of the subject.

After recounting her meditations roused by the James River, Marshall's memoir goes on to share her reflections on the Caribbean Sea and the island of Barbados. The island and the sea again suggest how convenient natural geographies contributed to the perpetuation of the slave trade. Speaking of Barbados, the author writes:

> When the trade in chattel cargo began in earnest, diminutive Barbados was invariably the first bit of terra firma sighted on the long, grueling Atlantic run. The island was at once landfall and a safe haven, with a natural harbor along its Caribbean coastline. Thus, it was often the place where the chattel cargo—those that had somehow managed to survive the crossing—were prepared for market. (62)

Barbados with its convenient geographic location became the transit point where the "chattel" brought from the African countries via the Atlantic Ocean and the Caribbean Sea were kept for a while before they could be transhipped to various locations. As Marshall mentions:

> Barbados being, circa 1600, as important a holding pen and transshipment point as Richmond,Virginia, would become, circa 1820, owing to a surplus at the time of locally bred chattel. (61-62)

In recreating the route of the trans-Atlantic slave trade in her memoir, Marshall, thus, points out the strategic location of Barbados, whose own slave population also grew as a result of this. She notes how the country's Black people owed their origins to the Africans who were left behind to fuel the country's tobacco and sugarcane industries while the rest were traded to different places. Amongst those left behind were also the slaves who refused to succumb to the atrocities meted out to them and hence could not be sold. To quote Marshall:

> Then there were the incorrigibles, those among the consignment who somehow withstood the whipping post and the pillory, their resistance unbroken. Difficult to sell, they, too, were left behind on the little wallflower island. (63)

It is to these group of "incorrigible" slaves that Marshall would like to trace her own ancestry.

From contemplations on the historical significance of Barbados in the success of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, then, the author moves on to deliberate on her family's roots in the place. These deliberations in as much as they provide readers with biographical information regarding her life are also tributes to the people who consciously or unconsciously direct her writings and form the basis of many of the characters in her fiction. Moreover, the portrayal of the strength, resilience and complexities of these people also serves as an indirect way of modifying and rectifying a history loaded with images of Black people reduced to nothing.

Marshall's mother Adriana Viola Clement, to whom her birth had been a "grievous and permanent disappointment" (82) and with whom her relationship had never been smooth, nevertheless, turns out to be the one informing her craft. As the author writes:

> I couldn't have known it at the time, but I had my first lessons in the art and craft of writing while being forced to listen to Adriana and her friends in the kitchen at 501 Hancock. Decades later, I would christen them the "Mother Poets" and pay grateful homage to them in an article called "The Poets in the Kitchen." (89)

The gossips and conversations which her mother had amongst her Bajan friends—women from Barbados who had all immigrated to America—become the basis of Marshall's own craft. In their everyday apparently mundane tasks and talks, she realises, there was beauty and poetry.

Similarly, Marshall's grandmother M'Da-duh, whom she meets only once at the age of seven when Adriana along with the children are called by the former to Barbados, remains a lasting inspiration in her writings. In her words:

> Decades later, still taken with her authority, I would write a story about her and her island world. Indeed, she appears, in one guise or another, in every book I've written. (70)

M'Da-duh was the matriarch who with her financial acumen had put to good use the "Panama Money" sent to her by her eldest son, Joseph Fitzroy Clement. In noting her grandmother's proper use of that money, Marshall provides another bit of historical information—the building of the Panama Canal and the exploitative use of Black labour in it. Talking of the inhuman conditions in which workers like her maternal uncle Joseph Clement had worked, she writes:

> [T]he legion of young men from the islands…work(ed) from the time God's sun rose till it set, hacking away at the near-impenetrable jungle, draining the huge pestilential swamps, carving a waterway to link the two great oceans. A hellhole of mud, torrential

> rains and brutal sun, with temperatures at 120 degrees well before noon. Close to 5,000 would die over the course of the construction. Malaria. Yellow fever. Bubonic plague. (66)

In the hope of making money, many young men from Barbados had gone to work in the construction of the Panama Canal in 1905. While they did manage to make some money, many had to surrender their lives to the extremely unbearable weather and environmental conditions which made the site of construction a breeding ground of diseases. While the Panama Canal is seen as a significant achievement of human history, the exploitation of human labour that went into its making is often ignored.

In *Triangular Road*, Marshall mentions how the islands of West Indies provided her the most comfortable spaces to work on her writing projects as the cost of living there happened to be much lesser there than anywhere else. As she writes, "I kept returning to the West Indies as simply the best and cheapest place to get the writing done" (122). These travels that she makes—first to the island of Barbados in order to work on her manuscript of *Brownstones, Browngirls* and next to Grenada while working on a new historical novel she was attempting to write—also offer her the chance to reconnect with her ancestral roots. While in Grenada, the author gets a chance to visit Carriacou where she witnesses a collective dance performance celebrating the African roots of the performers:

> Each time the old men drumming announced the theme of a particular "nation," the women who claimed it as theirs swept onto the dusty circle…Led by the elders…the group repeatedly toured the circle—dancing. They sang, hailing in patois the "nation" to which they traced their lineage while their bare feet spelled it out in a dusty calligraphy on the ground. (144)

The Black community in Carriacou had, over the centuries, attempted to retain their African ties by claiming origin to specific nations from Africa. Severed from their nations centuries back, the Black people there had still held on to their roots by such ritualistic performances. The festival shows how the Black community has utilised the power of oral tradition and cultural memory as a way of preserving their lineage.

Marshall, thus, anchors her memoir on the history of Black people in America and the West Indies—a history whose making has been intrinsically related to natural geographies. The author, by recounting her travels to the specific sites, locations and routes via which the slave

trade operated and flourished, offers insights into a gruesome past. At the same time, she also shows how autobiography, when it depicts individual stories that can only be understood as part of a long historical continuum, offers the scope of merging the genres of history and autobiography.

My Soul Looks Back

Jessica B. Harris' *My Soul Looks Back* documents the period of the 1970s—a period of tremendous boom so far as Black intellectual and cultural life was concerned. Her autobiography, anchored in the memories of her encounters and friendships with some of the greatest figures of Black America—James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou amongst many more—serves as a historical recording of the 1970s intellectual/cultural/literary scene of Black America mirrored through her personal lens. Like the other autobiographies discussed in this chapter, Harris' narrative, too, offers history in hindsight—the author's retrospective inspection of a burgeoning period of Black American literary and cultural achievements. Instead of African Americans, the term Blacks will be used in the context of Harris writing as she includes her Caribbean friends and acquaintances as well. In her depiction of that period, she also renders an 'impersonal' history 'personal'—bringing to life vignettes of the private lives of people considered celebrities and icons in their respective fields. Through a portrayal of her life vis-a-vis the lives of the luminaries she discusses from an insider's perspective, then, the author manages to create a narrative that attempts to re-examine her own life for sure but also provides access to a very intimate, private world of friendships, conversations and parties shared by these public figures.

As a book reviewer for New York magazines, Harris got to meet a lot of writers and publishers who were becoming successful, at parties publishers hosted "where authors mingled with editors" (39). She writes that "Random House and Doubleday were two of my favorite stops":

> The gatherings were filled with those that Zora Neale Hurston had baptized the "niggerati" decades earlier….I was a regular invitee because Black books were being published. The books and the book parties seemed to indicate just how much progress was being made—at least in getting the word out. (40)

Harris not only points to the earlier writers like Hurston who was part of the Harlem Renaissance but draws a connection between those writers and her contemporaries or seniors

who had established themselves and who would continue to produce their work for a long time like Toni Morrison and Maya Angelou. Baldwin died in 1987.

Harris mentions how she had developed a friendship with the publishing houses who gave her copies of all their books. They also persuaded her to interview new writers and that is how she got the chance to interview Alex Haley for his *Roots*.

For the most part of the narrative, Harris' point of view remains that of an erudite yet enthusiastic participant, in events she feels too privileged to be part of. Her access to those events is gained primarily through her then lover, Samuel Clemens Floyd, a colleague at Queens College, Albans where she worked and who happened to be fifteen years her senior. Harris, whose voracious reading habit had led her to work as 'book review editor' at Black publications such as Encore and Essence, had already been in personal terms with the calibre of writers like Toni Morrison whom she had met at Random House. As Harris writes speaking of the contribution of the publishing house to her professional growth:

> [T]hat building on East Fiftieth Street treated me to an even greater treasure: a fledgling friendship with Toni Morrison. She was still working as an editor at Random House but was clearly an heir apparent to Baldwin's throne. (40)

The friendship with Morrison educates the young Harris regarding the nuances of the literary world, so much so that the former becomes "an unspoken big sister/semimentor" (40-41) for her. She writes that "At one point, she even asked me to read the French translation of *The Bluest Eye* to make sure that they'd gotten the nuances. I was much honored and did so" (42). This shows a respect on Morrison's part for Harris' command of the French language as well as a sensitive reader of fiction. What Harris does not mention at this point is the close friendship and mutual respect between Morrison and Baldwin, which she sees in Paris.

Harris notes Toni Morrison's efforts to shape Black writers and their writing not only as editor at Random House but also in her own time:

> Masked behind her true name, "Chloe" Morrison…she mentored writers young and old and worked to form the vision of much that is the Black literary canon of the period, introducing writers like Gayl Jones and Henry Dumas, spearheading works by Toni Cade Bambara and Lucille Clifton, and…Rudy Lombard. (40)

Each of these writers she helped became famous later on. Harris' autobiography records periods/moments from her life alongside simultaneous developments in some public area like

Black Writing. In fact, because of her own love of reading and her work as a reviewer of books, she continues to acquaint herself and report on developments in Black writing from time to time.

Harris writes about herself as a person on the fringe of a lot of things: "I was a conundrum, a pile of insecurities about not being Black enough or pretty enough or anything enough: too light to be dark and too dark to be light" (43). She came from a middle-class family without financial want like some of the other struggling African Americans she met. She could not identify with particular groups because of a feeling that she might be considered not one of them. This brings to mind Toni Morrison's *Paradise* where lighter skinned Black people were considered outsiders. Accepting that "color counted," Harris notes that she tried to look like one of the more visible African Americans:

> I had my thick but fine hair whipped up into an Afro and wore aviator glasses in the style of Angela Davis. Inside, I still had the little "bourgie" girl from Queens who wanted desperately to belong with the in crowd—who was at odds with the socially aware SEEK Program teacher who wanted to fit in with colleagues, and who was dueling with the newly emerging international sophisticate. (ibid)

On one hand, she was a college teacher with exposure to European schools. She had studied French in Paris and had returned to the U.S.A. to build her career as a teacher and literary critic. That is where she met Sam. On the other hand, she was the only child of caring, protective parents who wanted to her to get married and settle down. For all her exposure to interesting people and places, Harris writes of her yearning to be one of the swinging crowd of brilliant artists, academics and musicians in New York.

Through her friendship with her colleague Sam Floyd, she gets to know Durham in North Carolina, as it was his home. Visiting with Sam, she notes:

> Like all other southern cities of the period, Durham was segregated; Blacks lived in the south and southeastern quadrants of the city in an area known as Little Hayti (pronounced Hay-tie in an erudite if mispronounced reference to the hemisphere's first Black republic). But Durham was different. (46)

Despite the segregation, Durham was a significant place for Blacks:

> From the turn of the twentieth century onward, Durham had a unique place in the history of Black America because it was, in the words of no less than W.E.B. DuBois, "the business Mecca of the South." (ibid)

Durham had thousands of prosperous Black people making it the "incubator for Black success" known as "a southern Black bastion of aspiration and attainment…an incubator for business" (ibid). She sees the contradiction; the segregation and the success of the Black community:

> Parrish Street, Black Durham's main drag, boasted a section of Black-owned banks, insurance companies, and other businesses. There were a Black-owned hotel, two theaters, and numerous restaurants, clothing stores, and other businesses. It was known as the Black Wall Street. (ibid)

Even as she saw the city, she got to see another part of her friend and his background—his family, the church, the college and the numerous joints he frequented as a young man. Harris sums up her trip to Durham as an adventure and a gift.

Harris' associations with the literary/cultural/intellectual world of the Black America of the time were, however, primarily forged as a result of her relationship with Sam. She recounts his close relationship to literary luminaries like Baldwin:

> [B]eing with Sam was being with someone who was a major part of a twentieth-century literary court: that of James Baldwin. Their proximity as neighbors had led to Sam becoming…one of Baldwin's "closest and most trusted friends." If Jimmy, as I learned to call Baldwin, was the sun king…around whom the court revolved, Sam was…its master of the revels and depended on by all of the members. (48)

This intimate association with Baldwin gives the author an access to his personal life and the opportunity to know him as a human being beyond his known public profile as a famous literary figure. Finding entry into his personal world, Baldwin becomes Jimmy for her. Harris also offers some personal details regarding him in her autobiography, such as his unsuccessful desire to enter into a relationship with economist Mary Painter. Her autobiography, thus, becomes an occasion to provide readers with less known aspects of the heroes—literary, cultural or otherwise—they look up to. Talking about Baldwin's relation to Painter, she writes:

> Mary had met Baldwin in 1950…She became his rock and often his salvation, and the woman he truly loved. He'd even dedicated Another Country to her…Baldwin once said of her, "When I realized I couldn't marry Mary Painter, I realized I could marry no one." (70-71)

In her autobiography, then, Harris takes on the role of a biographer of revered public figures, detailing before readers the very human dimensions—fragilities, frustrations, love etc.—that lie beneath the façade of fame. In doing so, she offers a more humanized version of Baldwin, the king or magnate of Black American literature. Other information regarding his personal life such as his rootedness to family is also provided. To quote Harris again:

> Mother Baldwin's home was special and seen only by the intimate inner circle. There, Jimmy was comfortable in the heart of his family. Fame often distances "golden ones" from friends and family. That was not the case with Baldwin; he was blessed. His family remained a family, and he was treated as another member, albeit a famous one, within the circle. (80)

As a young woman getting a chance to see some of the most intimate details of iconic figures such as Baldwin, the author seems awestruck by the ordinary humanity of these personalities.

Harris' relationship with Sam Floyd also introduces her to a wider network of intellectuals and intellectual discussion. It is through him that she comes to know personally some of the prominent names featuring in the literary field of the time: Maya Angelou, Paule Marshall, Rosa Guy, Louise Meriwether etc. Again, in her depictions of the friendships they shared amongst themselves, their intellectual and personal discussions, Harris gives us the views of an insider privy to details not known to many. In her words:

> Rosa and Louise were friends of Sam's and intimates of Maya's. (In fact, Maya had roomed with Rosa on her arrival in New York.) In my mind, they formed a triumvirate with Paule Marshall, another pivotal member of the group. If Louise and Rosa were accessible, Brooklyn born Paule Marshall was more of a cipher. (63)

Harris mentions Paule Marshall's Barbadian roots although she had grown up in Brooklyn. Marshall's first book *Brown Girl, Brownstones* was significant to Harris because it deals with the immigration experience in America. According to Harris: "She wrote about her life on the hyphen between American and West Indian and was one of the first to talk of the challenges

facing those who arrived from the Caribbean" (ibid). Marshall was one of the earliest writers to address that problem in her writing and Harris records that fact.

Harris' rendering of such social and intellectual networking amongst these writers help see the Black literary community in terms of a closely knit group sharing ideas, perceptions and together shaping the literary scene of the latter half of the twentieth century so far as Black literature was concerned. Talking of Sam's role she recalls: "Our love of language and literature resulted in long conversations about everything from the denizens of the Harlem Renaissance, whom Sam had known, to chats about the latest books that were coming out" (56). Looking back to the years 1973, 1974 and 1976, she writes:

> In 1973, we compared notes on *In Love and Trouble* by Alice Walker and *Sula*…by Toni Morrison….1974 saw Angela Davis's autobiography, Maya Angelou's *Gather Together in My Name,* and *If Beale Street Could Talk,* by Baldwin himself. By 1976, there was a tidal wave of work, including Alice Walker's *Meridian* and *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas*, the third instalment in Angelou's autobiographical saga…. Then there was the publishing juggernaut that was *Roots*: *The Saga of an American Family*. (ibid)

In her retrospective accounts of these social transactions amongst major literary figures, her autobiography becomes a history of some of the most formative years of Black American literature, albeit one that looks at the period not with the distanced parlance of scholarly investigation but with the emotionally charged language of a person who has been a participant in the unfolding of that history.

In a continuation of her deliberations on the intimate circle of these writers, she further writes:

> This…was the way of their world: profound conversations about all aspects of life, heart-felt rage tempered by equally intense laughter…It was a time of life lived fully, deeply…[B]ut always underneath it all, there was the heartbeat of work and writing and speaking and teaching and all of the daily madness of life. (75)

Harris' autobiography, thus, recreates the private world of major literary figures—otherwise mostly thought of in isolation—in their relation to each other and in the contributions they make to each other's growth as writers and intellectuals.

My Soul Looks Back is, however, not just limited to the 1970s literary scene of New York City. It evokes how the cultural and literary worlds morphed into each other. The writer,

for instance, recounts how Mikell's—a jazz club in New York's Upper West Side zone—served as a regular venue where Baldwin socialised with his circle of friends and acquaintances. As one of the leading jazz clubs, it happened to be the place where many well-known musicians and bands performed. But it was also the place which served as a meeting point where all sorts of intellectual discussions concerning Black life was held. In the memoir, Harris recounts:

> Mikell's was a literary as well as a musical landmark. Journalists and those whom they were covering, as well as literary lights, all met up at Mikell's, including Charlayne Hunter-Gault, Novella Nelson, Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor, and Jayne Cortez. Jimmy and his world also made this spot their spot. In so doing, they made it a cultural epicenter of Black New York life. (86)

Mikell's offered the space where leading figures from different areas met and hence, where convergence and confluence of different ideas took place. The club, therefore, turned into a place where the future of Black America was discussed, deliberated and given shape. Harris, continuing with her emphasis on the significance of the place, writes:

> In the 1970s, Mikell's was the special hub of that world, where to cross the threshold was to know that something important was going on, something new was being created…The place had a sense of possibility that was palpable. It was a spot where the world was debated and re-created nightly. (87)

During the 1970s, the Black literary-cultural field was speedily evolving and the coming up of spaces like Mikell's was a part of this evolution. It presented a place, a space, a mentality and a mood for bright Black people to interact and enjoy themselves.

Like the changes in the cultural landscape, the residential areas, occupied by Blacks in New York were also changing. Greenwich Village which had been popular amongst "writers, artists, dancers, actors, and others who toiled at the impecunious end of fame's equation" was soon becoming too expensive. According to Harris, this gentrifying resulted in people moving to other locations with cheaper rent— "the East Village and Alphabet City" or "the Upper West Side" (83). A new class of Black intellectuals and artists coming from different parts of the U.S.A. and the Caribbean had to be accommodated in New York and there was a demand for better and more housing spaces. Even as things were improving for some sections of the Black community, the contrasts remained:

> [T]ownhouses were being renovated and apartments slowly being turned into co-ops or condos. The apartments were grand, and the brownstones were bastions of nineteenth-century glory. However, around many corners, drug addicts, welfare hotels, and appalling schools still lurked. (82)

Harris notes the changes in other areas as the old residential buildings were pulled down to be replaced by new buildings. She recalls some of the early localities:

> Blacks had traditionally lived in San Juan Hill, the area south of Sixtyseventh Street, since the turn of the twentieth century. It was demolished in the late 1950s to make way for the construction of Lincoln Center. The…former old-line tenements with their cramped rooms and their fire escapes did their last public duty before demolition as the sets for the movie West Side Story. (ibid)

Both the city of New York and the Black people who had made the city their home, were 'in transition,' old landmarks giving way to new and within the same place, new buildings replacing old ones.

Harris notes how this demand for change in infrastructure is also reflected in the new housing projects that catered to the needs of the new gentry—formed mostly of different artists, writers, editors of emerging publishing houses etc. The memoir documents the construction of "Park West Village" which became a "West Side mecca for many of the Black intelligentsia" (ibid) with writers like Angelou, Rosa Guy, Louise Meriwether, and Paule Marshall having their apartments in it. As the author mentions, Park West Village was part of an emerging "West Side hub that attracted many other African American artists and writers to the neighbourhood" (ibid). These artists and writers included singer Harry Belafonte, actor Morgan Freeman, editors in chief of Essence, Marcia Ann Gillespie and Susan Taylor amongst others.

In her memoir, Harris also brings alive a culinary culture that was rapidly evolving with inputs from different cuisines of the world. She writes that Sam taught her "how to love cooking and to entertain lavishly" (54). She gives credit for her later interest in food and cooking completely to him:

> Sam fine-tuned my entertaining skills. I'd certainly cut my teeth on my mother's parties of my youth, and I had inherited her flair for the dramatic along with my father's love of spectacle, so I had a lot going for me. Sam, however, cultivated my cooking skills and saddled me for the rest of my life with the shopping habits…. (ibid)

Harris refers to the interest and vitality that Sam brought to cooking as to everything else:

> Sam was never happier than when puttering around in the kitchen preparing some elaborate feast that he'd devised in his head. A gourmet and gourmand, he'd plan a menu, shop for the best ingredients, and serve it proudly to friends. (ibid)

Their mutual interest in food took their friendship further:

> So we bonded over cooking and cooked together, and even though we lived in apartments several blocks apart, it seemed as though there was one larder and certainly one set of cooking equipment. Our batteries de cuisine cohabited even if we didn't. (55)

Apart from serving food to their friends, this training helped her to take an interest in the food served in different places. Food became a topic of research in addition to being a means over which people connected and bonded. The author's own "developing love of food" (71) and her "burgeoning work in the area of food and culture" (64) is indicative of this interest in food or culinary habits as another area of interest. Her travels across the African diaspora researching on its diverse food items and habits and how they have influenced cuisines all over the world become the basis of her cookbook *Iron Pots and Wooden Spoons: Africa's Gifts to New World Cooking.*

Harris' memoir, thus, brings to the fore the Black America of the 1970s—a period of huge growth and change in virtually every aspect of Black life. It was during that time that Americans became aware of what turned out to be a dreaded disease—AIDS. Gradually as people became infected and died, Harris' circle of friends had to live with that shock. Harris' earlier lover and long-time friend, Sam was infected by AIDS and after his death they became aware of the fact that he had been secretly gay. Maya Angelou flies over to New York to mourn with Harris the loss of their dear friend. Soon other known and unknown gay figures from their circle died of AIDS, making everybody conscious not only of the disease but also of the shadow of mortality.

Harris continued with her life and gradually her friendship with Maya Angelou became stronger till the latter's death. This memoir also touches the lives of numerous other writers like Rosa Guy, Paule Marshall, Louise Merriweather to name a few. Before Maya Angelou rose in stature the scene was dominated by Toni Morrison and James Baldwin. Harris provides the chance to see and understand Black literature, culture and even architecture of the time as part of a common enterprise of intellectual growth and expansion. Told from the perspective

of a young person who has been a participant in this change and who has lived to see the implications of these developments for the future, Harris' memoir offers unique access to the private lives of some of the people instrumental in bringing about that change and also the opportunity to understand literary history in relation to the larger socio-cultural history.

To conclude, this chapter has tried to show how autobiography's ability to merge the private with the public is manipulated by the writers under question to incorporate larger historical concerns into their autobiographical narratives. They defy received histories and by evoking in their autobiographies the complex socio-political/cultural factors that go into making those histories offer a better and more nuanced understanding. Their autobiographical texts become a medium of self-presentation that no longer remains obsessed with the self but that seeks to elevate the Black race as a whole by representing larger public issues. By offering their own versions of the histories they discuss, the chosen authors resist myopic understandings of Black life. Resisting received histories, in this regard, becomes a means of challenging stereotypical representations of Blacks and of forging their entry into major epistemologies like the writing of history for posterity.

CHAPTER SIX

LIVES IN "AFFECTIVE COMMUNITIES": MICHELLE OBAMA'S *BECOMING*, SUSAN RICE'S *TOUGH LOVE*, AND KAMALA HARRIS' *THE TRUTHS WE HOLD*

> I still believe that the arc of the moral universe bends toward justice, but nobody is going to do the hard bending, if not you and me. It's our choice, and I have always believed we must choose each other. (Susan Rice, *Tough Love* 1*8*)

> My sincere hope in telling my story is that others may find in it inspiration and empowerment, perhaps a source of strength and fearlessness. If nothing else, I aim to share what I have learned along the way: the importance of always doing your best; picking yourself up and dusting yourself off; and driving down the court to the bucket—all while maintaining grace under fire. (Susan Rice, *Tough Love* 18-19)

> It was possible…to live on two planes at once—to have one's feet planted in reality but pointed in the direction of progress…You got somewhere by building that better reality, if at first only in your own mind…[Y]ou may live in the world as it is, but you can still work to create the world as it should be. (Michelle Obama, *Becoming 446*)

> [I]t privileges after Derrida, the trope of friendship as the most comprehensive philosophical signifier for all those invisible affective gestures that refuse alignment along the secure axes of filiation to seek expression outside, if not against. Possessive communities of belonging. (Leela Gandhi, *Affective Communities* 10)

This chapter examines the autobiographical narratives of three famous Black American women of the twenty-first century—Michelle Obama, Susan Rice, and Kamala Harris—who have come to occupy some of the most privileged and coveted positions in the US society and administration. The chosen texts, as indicated in the title, are Michelle Obama's *Becoming* (2018), Susan Rice's *Tough Love: My Story of the Things Worth Fighting For* (2019), and Kamala Harris' *The Truths We Hold: An American Journey* (2019). These texts reflect the authors' attempts to bridge the gap between the private and the public. The fact that these writers document to some extent their very public lives under constant scrutiny of the media and their political detractors, indicates that they have something to tell. Their narratives are about their lives, their relations with their families and the public, and they also draw upon contemporary events and past history as they try to put their work and their views in perspective.

It is argued that these texts challenge the American autobiographical tradition as well as the Black American autobiographical tradition by working out a two-pronged strategy. On the one hand, these texts highlight how the authors move through a series of well-recorded struggles to positions of public importance and notice. These journeys are distinct in the sense that the authors make use of whatever opportunities come their way in spite of severe racial and sexual restrictions. To this extent, these texts are not celebrations of opportunities or condemnation of opportunities denied, a characteristic one associates with American autobiography, both White and Black. Having achieved some distinction in their respective fields, these writers adopt a politics of empathy and enabling, choosing to develop in their social set-up a project of community building, always enlarging the scope of the community thus built. In other words, they employ empathy and compassion along with a strong moral character as tools for social transformation and changes in political structure and instrumentation. It is in this respect that these autobiographical texts serve as exempla or illustrative examples for the community to follow. It needs to be noted here that Black lives can serve as tools for social change and in the same sense, Black autobiographical writings can serve as tools that shape this change. Arguably, these autobiographical texts record not so much individual as affective transformations of unprivileged Black girls into powerful Black women. The larger picture presented in this chapter is one of affective politics. The emphasis is not on criticism, resistance or revision but on enabling communities irrespective of affiliation to specific ideologies. The writers under scrutiny work through poverty and marginalization on their way to public success. However, they choose not to celebrate their success stories as in the bildungsroman. By choosing to thread through affective moments, these texts visualize communities that empower not only members who, in a narrow sense belong to their own groups, but to a larger world of multiracial, aspirational youth.

The objectives of the chapter are:

- To analyse select Black American women's autobiography in the light of reparation and the concept of affective communities
- To examine how public figures (especially Black women occupying public positions) re-order life's choices in order to push forward a politics of reparation (i.e. act and write in order to create a society where past fault lines are repaired)

- To examine how Black women writers in public positions reframe life and life-writing with public welfare as a major objective

This chapter rests on the following hypotheses:

- that the act of life-writing is more in the mode of re-telling/re-examining than recalling
- that the autobiographical texts of public figures return to lives in order to justify, and reframe choices made in life
- that recalling these choices recontextualize and revalidate perspectives that are not available when the choices are made

The texts document how these women use their positions of power and privilege to break racial barriers and establish grounds for more positive relations across racial or gender divides. Remaining true to their Black identity and unforgetting of their humble origins or early career struggles, they, nevertheless, eschew hatred to embody a politics guided by humility, empathy, clarity and hope. In so doing, they propose new relational possibilities whereby the identity category "Black American" no longer remains antithetical to being simply "American." These texts show how they learn to get anchored in a politics of love and hope, and channel their energies in creating a heterogeneous society founded on "affective communities." In their lives, these women fight to overcome sectarian notions of race-gender-class based differences. As writers, they use the medium of autobiography as a political tool in writing 'forward' to a future free of identity politics. Their autobiographical texts which are embodiments of their policies and politics carry the imprint of empathy, enabling and community empowerment.

The writers show how a politics of 'affect' can be a new and alternative mode of resistance. These texts under scrutiny are a response to the twenty-first century's call for new strategies and modes of expression. The importance of these texts is borne out by the fact that studies on the contemporary Black American condition tend to focus on the insidious presence of race even amidst talks of a 'postracial' America. In her "Representing Whiteness in the Black Imagination" (1997), bell hooks presents this condition in a powerful passage:

> In contemporary society, white and black people alike believe that racism no longer exists. This erasure…diffuses the representation of whiteness as terror in the black

> imagination…Black people still feel the terror, still associate it with whiteness, but are rarely able to articulate the varied ways we are terrorized because *it is easy to silence by accusations of reverse racism*…. (345; emphasis added)

Significantly, hooks argues that since race and race-based atrocities can no longer be overtly mentioned, the battle is now against a cloaked, nameless ideal. According to her, a false picture of racial and gender progress serves to cover the "terror" that Black Americans now have to deal with. There is a tendency amongst people, irrespective of skin colour, to avoid issues of racism. It is as if by ignoring it they can deny its reality. This has been the position of writers like Morrison who believe that racism has to be addressed as racism and that only by revisiting this bitter and troublesome issue can one look to bring change. Otherwise, denial of racism or racialised sexism would take over with the fallout that genuine concerns or critical discourses of race are dismissed as irrelevant banter or as "reverse racism."

Ralina L. Joseph's *Post Racial Resistance: Black Women, Media, and the Uses of Strategic Ambiguity* (2018) also points to the presence of racism in contemporary American lives. She argues that 'postraciality' tends to overexplain the idea of context and in the process signifies an ideology where racial hatred is muted but insistent. Joseph's argument is that writers like Michelle Obama, Oprah Winfrey and Shonda Rhimes work around "racism" and "racialized sexism" (197) to move upward. Joseph also points out that public recognition comes to these women through "strategic" use of "ambiguity" (21), which translates into subtle silences and negotiations with prejudice. Her reading of these writers does not deal with the fact that these women do not hold on to their success. That said, raising questions regarding their strategic ambiguity in dealing with race restricts the scope of reading these texts. It is in this respect that the chapter engages with Black women's autobiography consciously adopting a politics of love and hope. Instead of looking back with anger or remaining too obsessed with contemporary racial inequities, they look forward to a futuristic model of society where love and respect for all human beings is guaranteed. We argue that the authors under scrutiny consider their emphasis on building affective networks and communities as a better and more effective solution to America's race problem and that such a response can actually be traced to a Black Feminist insistence on love as a political weapon. The chapter would try to define "affective communities" according to Leela Gandhi's use of the term and would, then, also look into how such communities manifest themselves in Black Feminist 'love politics.'

In her seminal work, *Affective Communities: Anticolonial Thought, Fin-De-Siècle Radicalism, and the Politics of Friendship* (2006), Leela Gandhi points out how 'friendship' has been a significant trope in the anticolonial struggle. Adding to Edward Said's notions of "contrapuntality" and Homi Bhaba's "hybridity," Gandhi highlights how binary oppositions between colonizers and colonized were at times questioned and rejected even before the gradual process of hybridization rendered the construction of rigid binaries a near impossible task. Such challenge came from anticolonial thinkers from within the empire who were neither complicit in the imperial project of colonization nor participants in anticolonial nationalist claims of cultural purity. This challenge manifested itself not solely through dissolving binaries but by forging "new and better forms of community and relationality hitherto unimaginable within the monochromatic landscape of imperial divisions" (*Affective Communities* 6). Practitioners of Gandhi's 'affective politics,' then, rejected both "occidental modernity" (5) and "anticolonial nationalist purity" (ibid) in favour of a new politics of friendship which made possible more meaningful equations and transactions between the colonizers and the colonized.

While the concept of "affective communities" was framed by Gandhi in the context of postcolonialism, the current chapter applies it as a model to understand the political stand maintained by the chosen authors. Challenging binary constructions of Black and White, the women under question create possibilities for the forging of a new space that better accommodates alliances across divisions. Their gesture of friendship is multidirectional: contending race-induced hatred politics, they reach out beyond the Black community to endorse a more cosmopolitan humanitarian approach, and yet as highly educated women with power and privilege and hence, participants in the Black bourgeoisie, they consciously elide divisions between Black bourgeois and proletarian culture to empathically connect with less privileged fellow Blacks. Their network of "affective communities" is, thus, spread across multiple axes of American society.

The chapter grounds the women's desire for friendship and community empowerment in a Black feminist ethics of love. In "Practicing Love: Black Feminism, Love-Politics, and Post-Intersectionality" (2011), Jennifer C. Nash discusses how a persistent aspect of Black feminist thought has been its insistence on the power of love to bring about positive socio-political changes. This love, according to Nash, manifests itself in Black feminism's "advocacy of the formation of affective political communities" (12). Such formations lead to a reconceptualization of the public sphere as new negotiations and

transactions continually keep altering the boundaries and scopes of that sphere. Nash argues that Black Feminist love-politics supports the formation of "heterogeneous" and fluid public spheres where the forms in which affective networks manifest themselves have not "solidified" into fixed 'institutional,' 'organizational' or such 'identitarian' patterns (13). Such a politics rooted in love helps overcome socio-historical disputes, ill-feelings or even traumatic experiences and memory and thereby, lays open the scope for forging friendlier, more positive relations. She writes:

> [B]lack feminist love-politic "shed[s] new light on the possibilities of the public sphere," imagining the public sphere as a site organized around a shared utopian vision rather than around a wounded, shared identity that demands recognition of the wound. (15)

"Utopianism" or the hope for an ideal society in the near future, then, forms the basis of black-feminist love-politics. This investment in the future rather than a preoccupation with the problems of the present is, then, another distinctive characteristic defining the politics of love and friendship that Nash talks about.

A viable politics rooted in love, friendship, and hope calls for collective, transformative action that looks forward to bringing about the desired change. Muñoz and Duggan, for instance, whom Nash cites, argues for an approach based on "could" rather than "ought":

> "Practicing educated hope is the enactment of a critique function. It is not about announcing the way things *ought* to be, but, instead, imagining what things *could* be." (Muñoz and Duggan, p. 278; qtd. in Nash 17)

It is in this faith in the possibilities that the future holds, in all the things that "could" be achieved that we see the benefits of a radical politics committed to the cause of a collective good for all. Black feminist love-politics, like Leela Gandhi's "affective communities," endorses the hope for a 'utopian' society where differences do not translate into hostility but are instead transcended in the interest of a common cause.

The authors discussed in this chapter are well-known, famous personalities as already stated. Michelle Obama (b.-1964) served as the first Black FLOTUS (First Lady of the United States) from 2009-2017 during the two terms of presidency of her husband, Barack Obama. Susan Rice (b.-1964), currently serving in the position of Director of the

United States Domestic Policy Council, had, at the time of writing the autobiography, finished serving as US Ambassador to the United Nations (2009-2013) and then National Security Advisor (2013- 2017) in the Obama administration. Kamala Harris (b.-1964) is the current and first female Vice President of the US and at the time of composing the autobiography was serving her term as the United States senator from California. The autobiographies were published around the same time as President Obama completed his terms of presidency and the new President Donald Trump assumed power. All three are Democrats and see Trump's presidency as predictive of a period of political doom. Privy to some of the innermost details of the US administration owing to their positions, they also realize and reveal in their autobiographies the extent of racial prejudice that still characterizes parts of the administrative machinery. However, as this chapter aims to enunciate, what stands out predominantly in the texts is their preoccupation with retaining hope under all circumstances, genuine feelings of love for America and Americans and their efforts to build "affective communities" across all divisions.

Becoming (2018)

Michelle Obama's *Becoming* documents the author's journey from being an ordinary Black girl from the south side of Chicago to becoming the first Black FLOTUS—First Lady of the United States—and the consequent challenges she had to face. It is a journey marked by numerous obstacles. Yet, it is one that endorses the power of hope and resilience in overcoming all hardships, negativity and backlash. Published after the end of Barack Obama's second term of Presidency, the text is chronologically arranged into three parts—"Becoming Me," "Becoming Us" and "Becoming More"—with each part dedicated to a different phase of the author's life.

The first part, "Becoming Me" starts with Obama's early childhood through her days at Princeton and Harvard Law School and finally deals with the formative years of her career as a young lawyer in Sidley Austin law firm. This initial part shows the contribution of her parents—Fraser and Marian Robinson towards shaping her worldviews and defining her identity as an independent woman. "Becoming Us" finds the author meeting her future husband, Barack Obama, their courtship period followed by marriage and the start of their family. It also highlights her role in the growing political career of her husband and her decision to leave the corporate sector and contribute to community service via participation in non-profit organizations as a way of complementing the

political goals and agendas of her husband. This second part concludes with Barack Obama winning the 2008 election to be declared the 44th President elect of the United States. The final section "Becoming More," as indicated by the section heading, sees the author transcending her identity as merely "Michelle Obama" in order to grapple with her newly defined role as the FLOTUS—a role which becomes all the more fraught with difficulties and complications owing to her being the first Black American woman to assume that title.

From her initial representation in the media as unbefitting the grace and dignity that should be characteristic of a potential First Lady to being hailed as one of the most popular fashionistas and icons of the twenty-first century, Michelle Obama has been witness to a complete transformation and reversal in the public's appraisal of her. She has been able to overcome all racist and sexist stereotyping and establish positive self-images in the popular imagination. In this regard, Joseph in *PostRacial Resistance* has tried to look into how Obama has managed to bring about such tremendous positive changes in her public representation. In talking about her transformation—from being attacked with "astoundingly racist and sexist vitriol" to being eulogized by the public as "mom-in-chief, down-to-earth fashionista" (41)—Joseph posits the following questions:

> What happened to precipitate such a flip? Did the country somehow magically become less racist and sexist, or did Michelle Obama do something to win the hearts and minds of America? (41-42)

She finds the answer in what she sees as the author's employment of "strategic ambiguity" (21), a subtle, coded form of resistance as already mentioned earlier. Instead of outrightly rebelling against her early representations as "unpatriotic, unfeminine, emasculating, and untrustworthy," Obama, according to Joseph, showed the possibility of reverting these negative images imposed upon her by carefully reformulating her earlier speeches.

This strategy, Joseph maintains, is manifested in the First Lady's framing of her subsequent public speeches in terms of her "patriotism," "Americanness" and most importantly, in the presentation of her story as an epitomizing of the "American Dream." Her counternarrative to the media's initial narrativizing of her person in highly racist and misogynistic terms was, then, not the typical one: it was a highly coded narrative which emphasized the fulfillment of the American Dream in her overcoming of all socio-economic barriers and becoming successful. In the words of Joseph,

> This narrative was one of moving from lack of economic opportunity and racialized specificity to wealth and postracial universalism. This narrative wasn't false; it waspartial and it had an agenda. Obama's story was contingent upon silences and exclusions as she omitted the realities of structural, institutional, and historical racism affecting the South Side of Chicago" (6).

Obama's narrative, through its silences, looks beyond the narrowness and racism, to a wider audience with empathy and humanitarianism.

Obama's stress on the framing of a 'patriotic' narrative which gives due credit to the unique opportunities for personal and familial upliftment that America as a nation offered without focusing on the racial or gendered barriers to such achievement is seen by the critic in terms of her "strategic ambiguity." Indeed, both Barack and Michelle Obama, throughout their campaigning and two terms of presidency, focused on the unity and the capacity to transcend differences that, according to them, have always defined America and Americans. This refusal to overtly name race and racial prejudices while also carefully pushing her way into public acceptance is, according to Joseph, a manifestation of the First Lady's use of "strategic ambiguity."

This chapter, however, as already argued in the beginning, seeks to understand Obama's focus on unity, hope and empathy not only in terms of her forging of a counternarrative but in the context of a desire to truly overcome differences by investing in a politics of friendship. Her autobiography, *Becoming* is a fitting demonstration of this politics that guides her ideologies. Indeed, the third and final section of the text, which focuses on the author's official tenures as First Lady, shows her being baffled by the media's infringement upon every bit of her life and its attempts at dissecting every aspect of her personality. It depicts her struggles to balance the demands of her family life—most significantly her apprehensions regarding her role in what would have been a 'normal' and 'proper' upbringing of her daughters—Sasha and Malia—with the professional expectations and obligations incumbent on a First Lady. However, "Becoming More" mainly depicts the author's determination to use her position, irrespective of the limitations, as a way of ensuring maximum community participation thereby, also paving the way for maximizing community empowerment. Obama already sees for herself a role that is more than that of a wife, mother and woman. In fact, she retrospectively sees herself expanding into a more inclusive person so that she can do more by fitting into more roles.

The section starts with an acknowledgement of what may be seen as the 'confusing' position of a First Lady:

> There is no handbook for incoming First Ladies of the United States. It's not technically a job, nor is it an official government tile…It's a strange kind of sidecar to the presidency, a seat that…had already been occupied by more than forty-three different women, each of whom had done it in her own way. (339)

In the absence of well-defined guidelines or set obligations, the responsibility falls on the shoulders of the concerned First Lady to define and decide her own course of action. While this flexibility might have its own freedom, it also comes with the pressure, as the author realizes, to devise strategies, plans and goals that conform to public expectations. And as the first Black First lady, Obama well realizes that the demands upon her and the grounds on which she would be judged would be very different from what had been faced by preceding First Ladies. This is more so, given the pressures of her racial identity:

> I understood already that I'd be measured by a different yardstick. As the only African American First Lady to set foot in the White House, I was "other" almost by default. If there was a presumed grace assigned to my white predecessors, I knew it wasn't likely to be the same for me. (ibid)

Passages such as this indicate Obama's initial sense of alienation from the purely 'White' legacy of the White House. At different points in the text, the author keeps referring to the unique challenges that comes with being Black. As a Black First Lady, Obama understands that unlike her White predecessors who were perhaps judged in terms of their action alone, her colour and racial identity would be subjected to public scrutiny before her acts. Continuing with her deliberations on the hurdles ensured by her Black American identity, she says:

> My grace would need to be earned…[M]any Americans wouldn't see themselves reflected in me…they wouldn't relate to my journey….[N]ot for one second did I think I'd be sliding into some glamorous, easy role. Nobody who has the words "first" and "black" attached to them ever would. I stood at the foot of the mountain, knowing I'd need to climb my way into favor. (340)

It is important to note, however, that she consciously rejects any bitterness in this retrospective ordering of facts. Much to the contrary, she exhibits an eagerness to 'work' her way into acceptance.

As Obama repeatedly keeps asserting in her text, her way of "earning" her grace involves conscientious efforts to be of service to the people. It is with this intention that she initiates all her community driven projects. In her capacity as First Lady, Obama initiates three major projects. First, there is the plantation of a White House Garden which expands into her "Let's Move" campaign focused on fighting childhood obesity. The second is an initiative named "Joining Forces" jointly started with then Vice President Joe Biden's wife, Jill Biden, which had as its primary target the providing of emotional and financial support to military families as well as educational aid to military children. Finally, there is her project called "Reach Higher," initiated with the objective of providing mentorship and financial assistance to young students. These initiatives by the author are all designed with the express intention of reaching out to what to she sees as social concerns that need attention. They are a part of the larger objective to inspire and instigate change.

As Obama mentions, the projects help her take up meaningful jobs within or as part of the White House, while remaining aloof from intervening in her husband's actual politics. More than her own self-fashioning, however, these jobs help to fashion exempla, ideal acts, for the community to follow. As she provides an inclusive lead that combines aesthetic and wellness concerns, the move transcends its specific context. Community service, she believes, can give her the opportunity to engage in a positive manner with the media's near constant gaze upon her every move and help her define the priorities and goals that she has set for herself as First Lady. When she initially kickstarts her project of improving the overall health of children across the country with the plantation of the White House garden, she is aware that this might not work for people at large. Noting the constant pressure to perform, she writes:

> The garden was popular…wholesome, but I also knew that for some people it wouldn't feel like enough. I understood that I was being watched with a certain kind of anticipation, especially by women, maybe especially by professional working women, who wondered whether I'd bury my education and management experience to fold myself into some prescribed First Lady pigeonhole. (382)

As First Lady and especially as a Black First Lady, Obama recognises that she has to excel in all dimensions of her life—personal as well as professional. If she focused more on her work life, she risked being castigated as 'unfeminine' or being stereotyped into the image of the 'strong Black woman' who 'emasculated' her man as was exemplified in the public criticism of her during the campaign days. On the other hand, an absolute concentration on the domestic dimension invited critiques from women and especially feminists who considered it a negative influence on common women's professional ambitions and goals. In this context, Obama refers to her campaign days when on being interviewed regarding the role she would assume if her husband gets elected as the President, she answered that it would be a continuation of the role she was already performing—"mom in chief" of the Obama family. While this comment was applauded by a section of the people as being respectful of the highly demanding task of raising children, certain others read it as an indication of her failure to understand the professional requirements incumbent on a First Lady. Commenting on such narrow straitjacketing of her roles, she writes:

> The truth was, I intended to do everything--to work with purpose and parent with care—same as I always had. The only difference now was that a lot of people were watching. (ibid)

Being made the object of a constant gaze with even the minutest of her decisions being dissected by the media and the public, the First Lady has to carefully manoeuvre through every project that she upholds or endorses. As she mentions in the autobiography, "optics" (387)—how one is presented to the outside world, governs the life of the First Family always. What adds to the pressure and anxiety, then, is the knowledge that as First Lady, she cannot go public with any of her apprehensions, can never allow her physical expressions to betray her real feelings. Obama metaphorically refers to this condition when she compares herself to a swan gliding on a lake:

> I felt sometimes like a swan on a lake, knowing that my job was in part to glide and appear serene, while underwater I never stopped pedaling my legs. (383)

Under the apparent lavishness and glamour of life in the White House, then, there can be tremendous emotional anxiety. Obama responds to this anxiety by committing herself to proactive service. In fact, this worked to her advantage as the service undertaken demanded collective efforts by like-minded people committed to the cause, thus, giving her the scope to expand her fold.

While working on her "Let's Move" campaign dedicated to fighting childhood obesity, for instance, the author realises that the task demanded effective networking not only amongst her team members. More than that, there was the need for the building of a unique community of commercial/corporate houses as well as non-profit organisations committed to the cause. She understands that childhood obesity was a problem that could be traced to multiple factors ranging from the exorbitant prices of organic food products to the chain of commercial houses profiting on the marketing and distributing of unhealthy packaged foods and beverages. She also realises that the success of the initiative depended on rooting out these factors. Her next step was to bring the corporate giants who regulated the market to her side and convince them of the importance and urgency of improving children's nutrition and health. In all of these, Obama's mode of operation is based on inclusion rather than coercion:

> When it came to dealing with the CEOs of soft drink companies and school-lunch suppliers, I thought it was worth making a human appeal as opposed to a regulatory one, to collaborate rather than pick a fight. And when it came to the way families actually lived, I wanted to speak directly to moms, dads, and especially kids. (391)

The "human appeal," then, remains the guiding principle in all of her commitments as First Lady. In her autobiography, Obama recounts the connections she had helped establish amongst different organizations—the American Beverage Association, the American Academy of Paediatrics, television and media houses such as Disney, NBC, Warner Bros, big retailers like Walford—all in the united attempt to curb the rising issue of obesity amidst children.

It is in such positive use of the "huge platform" that the position of FLOTUS offers that Obama finds a sense of purpose and meaning beyond being a mere "sidecar" to the President. Talking about how such service helped define the course of her actions and the roles she set for herself, she comments:

> I was beginning to realize that all…that felt odd to me about my new existence—the strangeness of fame, the hawkeyed attention paid to my image, the vagueness of my job description—could be marshalled in service of real goals. I was energized. Here, finally, was a way to show my full self. (392)

Obama, then, locates the realisation of her "full self" and potential in the rendering of measurable community service. She creates a huge community unified only by its purpose: "a network of advocates, a chorus of voices speaking up for children and their health" (401). Throughout her two tenures as First Lady, she directs her efforts towards a continual extension of the boundaries demarcating her networks as well as towards maximising the number of beneficiaries benefitting from her community projects.

This same zeal towards building affective communities rooted in love, empathy, sense of service, hope and resilience is again what guides the author in her subsequent projects: "Joining Forces" and "Reach Higher." Through the "Joining Forces" project, Obama, along with Jill Biden, reaches out to "support the military community and raise its visibility" (ibid). Here again, they seek to build a larger empathic community that would together work for the purpose:

> I…reached out to the country's most powerful CEOs, generating commitments to hire a significant number of veterans and military spouses. Jill would garner pledges from colleges and universities to train teachers and professors to better understand the needs of military children. (401-402)

Obama's efforts to garner public interest and empathy for those afflicted or affected by different forces shows the inadequacy of mere laws and policies to ensure social change. An egalitarian society based on mutual understanding, cooperation and social justice demands the coming together of disparate social elements and groups willing to transcend their differences for a collective good.

Apart from continuing with her earlier campaigns and initiatives, the project that Obama focuses on during her second term as FLOTUS is the one named "Reach Higher"—a White House initiative to make higher education easily accessible to all sections of the society by providing counselling, mentorship and financial aid to the needy. The author recounts how her own confidence as a child had been constantly buttressed by her family as well as her mentors and teachers who infused her mind with the "simple message: *You matter*" (435). It is this same message and legacy of self-belief that Obama seeks to pass on to new generations of American children, adolescents and young adults as they prepare to enter "a global job market" (434).

In all her initiatives, then, Obama, notwithstanding her position as FLOTUS, remains grounded in her roots. Through a worldview powered by love and hope she seeks to empower as many people, groups and identities as possible, irrespective of any narrow definitions of identity that boils down to race, gender or sexuality. Early after Barack Obama's assumption of presidency, when she makes her first official tour of England as First Lady during the 2009 G20 summit, she makes a visit to a public girls' school there named Elizabeth Garrett Anderson School. The majority of the students, "more than 90 percent of the school's nine hundred students" (373) consisted of Blacks, different ethnic minorities while about a fifth were children with immigrant history. Obama asserts how such visits, unlike the highly politicised nature of her husband's meetings, allowed her a chance to go beyond authorities and policy makers to meet the 'actual' people who lived in such places. Looking at the girls, the author immediately is able to visualise the struggles and battles they would have to win as marginalised and minority people:

> I knew they'd have to push back against…stereotypes…all the ways they'd be defined before they'd had a chance to define themselves. They'd need to fight the invisibility that comes with being poor, female, and of color. They'd have to work to find their voices and not be diminished, to keep themselves from getting beaten down. (374)

But the very next moment, she is able to see how these girls, despite their conditions have been able to sustain their hope and resilience. Continuing with her ruminations on the girls, she writes:

> But their faces were hopeful, and now so was I. For me it was a strange, quiet revelation: They were me, as I'd once been. And I was them, as they could be. The energy I felt…had nothing to do with obstacles. It was the power of nine hundred girls striving. (ibid)

It is hope and fortitude that binds her to these girls and connects them to her own past. Obama's success is a living example of the power of kind words and encouragement proffered by people's belief in one's abilities: "My early successes in life were, I knew, a product of the consistent love and high expectations with which I was surrounded as a child, both at home and at school" (434). If she could overcome all obstacles and come all the way from Euclid Avenue in the South Side of Chicago to the White House, then anyone and everyone else could. Guided by this principle, she takes the girls of the school to visit

Oxford as part of a mentorship program later on and assures them that they too, could belong there. The message, as she recounts, was always the same—the one she herself had been imparted with:

> *You belong. You matter. I think highly of you.* (435)

This undaunting belief in the nurturing power of love and in its efficacy in bringing about meaning oriented change drives most of Obama's politics, then, as has been repeatedly asserted in this chapter.

During her visit to Harper High School in West Englewood where episodes of gang violence were rampant, the author maintains this same staunch belief in the power of persistence, patience, hope and resilience. While she accepts the bleak picture that presented itself when it came to any solid, tangible political measures adopted to counter gang insurgency, she still motivates the students of Harper that the answer to the scenario lay in their ability to hold on. Just as she had taken the girls of Elizabeth Garrett Anderson School to Oxford, she takes a group of students from Harper to Howard University where she hopes and wishes the students could see their true potential. Unpretentious of any vain pride in the power of her position as First Lady to transform lives, "I will never pretend that words or hugs from a First Lady alone can turn somebody's life around" (439), she nevertheless understands how changing a narrative of doom and despair can go a long way in boosting self-belief:

> But I was there to push back against the old and charming narrative about being a black urban kid in America, the one that foretold failure and then hastened its arrival. If I could point out those students' strengths and give them some glimpse of a way forward, then I would always do it. It was a small difference I could make. (ibid)

In all her community-oriented services, thus, Obama seems to be inspired by a black feminist insistence on the power of love and hope to shape a desired future. Rather than focusing on what "ought" to be there, she shows an interest in investing on all that "could" be achieved.

Becoming is also Obama's tribute to all the relations that she had been able to forge, all the "affective communities" she had managed to build both within and beyond the premises of the White House. When she had initially started living in the White House as

a resident, Obama along with her husband had set about the task of "democratising" it by relaxing many of the rigid formalities that defined life within it. This had been sought to be done by introducing as minute changes as making the art and decorative pieces on the walls of the White House more inclusive—adding more works by Black American artists for instance. The elitist culture was also challenged by providing the butlers—in case of days unmarked by any formal events—a choice of donning a more casual dress of khaki and golf-shirt if they so wanted, by opening the doors of the White House to more and more kids and military families and by initiating such other small changes. Over time, Obama establishes more human relations with the staffs at their service, even managing to recognise many of them from their voices and always taking extra precaution so as to never make them feel "invisible" (369). As the author writes:

> Life was better, always, when we could measure the warmth. (369)

This warmth, Obama tried to ensure, radiated to all her employees through establishing familiar, friendly relations based on mutual respect.

Finally, even though she recognizes that her experiences as the first Black First Lady might have been very different from all preceding First Ladies, it is in this "continuum" (347), this unique community formed of all previous as well as all forthcoming First Ladies who are to occupy that privileged position in the future, that she places herself in. To quote Obama:

> As different as we all were, we'd always share this bond. (346)

This ability to look beyond differences and value bonds and connections informs the author's larger perspective of the nation as well. Although the Epilogue betrays her apprehensions regarding the incumbent Trump administration, it is on a note of optimism that she concludes her autobiography:

> I continue…to keep myself connected to a force that's larger and more potent than any one election, or leader, or news story—and that's optimism. For me, this is a form of faith, an antidote to fear. (469)

Obama's autobiography, thus, finds its author unapologetically grounding herself in an ethics of love and friendship. Invested in her dream of a better America, she looks forward to it with hope and optimism guiding her along.

***Tough Love* (2019)**

Like Michelle Obama's *Becoming*, Susan Rice's *Tough Love* was also written and published at the end of Barack Obama's presidency during which she served initially as the US ambassador to the UN and then, as National Security Advisor. Rice's autobiography documents some of the upheavals that have marked her political career, the repercussions or ramifications of which could also be felt in her personal life. However, the current chapter argues that it should also be credited as a testament to the enduring power of love, hope and faith. "Tough love," almost an oxymoron, suggests how love, especially in the context of a politically charged figurative battlefield, can empower and confer upon people, burdened with the weight of decision-making for the entire nation and indeed at times the entire world, the courage to take ethically correct even if personally painstaking decisions. It is also suggestive of the friendship and solidarity that sustains any community during tough times.

A major push behind writing her autobiography, as Rice mentions in the "Prologue" was to assuage herself of the accusations and assaults with which she had been charged after the 2012 Benghazi incident. On September 11, 2012, the American diplomatic facilities in Benghazi had been attacked and four American officials—ambassador J. Christopher Stevens, foreign service officer Sean Smith, and two CIA contractors, Tyrone S. Woods and Glen Doherty—had been killed during the violence. In the aftermath of the incident, Rice had appeared, in her then official capacity as US ambassador to the UN, "on the September 16, 2012, Sunday shows, all five of them—ABC's This Week, CBS's Face the Nation, NBC's Meet the Press, Fox News Sunday, and CNN's State of the Union" (310). After the interviews, her statements had been subjected to all sorts of distortions and misinterpretations leading ultimately to her portrayal as incompetent and untrustworthy. *Tough Love*, written after the end of her service in the Obama administration as already mentioned, provides her with the medium and the opportunity to present the story from her point of view and thereby, clear her name from the episode with which she had almost become "synonymous." As she writes:

> Ever since my name became synonymous with Benghazi, I have wanted to tell my story. Almost overnight, I went from being a respected if relatively low-profile cabinet official to a nationally notorious villain or heroine, depending on one's political perspective and what cable news channel you watch. (16)

Rice's autobiography is an answer to her long-cherished wish to give voice to her personal account. She had been unduly vilified and focused on when she indeed, as she explains later in an entire chapter dedicated to the Benghazi incident, was in no way a key figure in the entire episode. Continuing with her defence against such vilification or heroization by different media houses, she asserts:

> I am neither. The portrayals of me on both sides are superficial and uninformed by who I am and where I come from, by what motivates and truly defines me. (ibid)

The author, thus, detaches herself from all media representations, which positive or accusatory, were in any case a distortion or exaggeration of the actual thing. In the Prologue, she further justifies how her desire to tell her story had been thwarted so far because of her official position as an insider in the administration and how that repression had been affecting her all the while:

> I could not tell my own story—until I left government. When I was a senior official who spoke publicly, I was speaking on behalf of the United States of America and our president…It's hard to convey how frustrating that feels, especially when the public portrayal is false or demeaning. (ibid)

Rice uses her autobiography as an outlet to the emotions she had been holding within her. It gives her the chance finally to define her image—whether public or private—in terms of how she would like to see herself or be presented. Her personal narrative is meant as a counter to the media's hitherto "false or demeaning" representation of her.

In digging her memories five years after the Benghazi incident to tell her side of the story, she also inevitably looks at all the experiences which had helped shape her personal and political outlooks and made her believe in the power of remaining tough in hard times. In that process, the autobiography also becomes a means to pass on to coming generations the "tough love" lessons that her life had taught her: love can proffer strength in times of adversity, can provide the courage to sacrifice/compromise for the greater good of one's community/society if and when the situation demands it. Rice's political career, as recounted in her autobiography, exemplifies how love, often regarded as a highly subjective and personal emotion, surpasses all narrow barriers to become a potent means of effecting positive societal/political transformation. In highlighting the power of love to

alter social reality and foster a more just future, her autobiography becomes an endorsement of the basic tenets of Black feminist love-politics.

Rice's *Tough Love* begins with an acknowledgement of how her life is a reflection of the family values that had been deeply implanted in her. Her ancestors from both sides—maternal and paternal—were classic cases of realising the American Dream. Her maternal grandparents had immigrated from Jamaica to the US in search of better work opportunities, worked very hard upon getting those opportunities, and promised to themselves that their children would earn a decent education and live better lives than the ones they themselves had been forced to live. Her paternal grandparents, on the other hand, were descendants of slaves but they too had struggled to rise above that ancestry and give their future generations a better life and education.

Indeed, as a way of linking her political beliefs and career with the values that she had imbibed from her family, Rice starts the initial chapters of her autobiography which deals with her family history and early life with italicized ruminations on her time "leading up to and including the Obama years" (18). In these early chapters, Rice creates a link connecting her own family principles with what she considered as Barack Obama's visionary thoughts about America. Commenting on Obama, she writes:

> He was neither an icon of the civil rights era nor a "race-man"…He was a new American leader…[H]e spoke movingly of one America—"Not a liberal America and a conservative America, there's the United States of America." For the first time in my life, I had found a political leader to whom I could completely relate and who excited me. (22)

In Barack Obama's vision for a 'united' America, Rice finds a political model worth idealising and emulating. It is this politics driven by the dream of a united nation that ultimately marks the author's own personal and professional aspirations as well.

After penning down these reflections on Obama's visionary ideals at the outset of her first chapter, she goes on to show how this America based on the "fundamental equality" (23) of everyone was the one her ancestors had always hoped for and believed in. In her words:

> This is the same America in which my family, the Dicksons and the Rices, believes. These are the values that my parents and grandparents instilled in me. (23)

By focusing on the success story of her grandparents despite rampant racial prejudices, Rice speaks for America as a nation of opportunities and possibilities. These scopes and avenues for betterment can be sustained and amplified, her autobiography asserts, only when there is a sense of community, mutual sharing, and a recognition of one's moral obligation to give back to society what one has received. This ethics on which she had been grounded by her family—one that emphasised bearing responsibility towards the society she came from, which also seemed to be the guiding principle of her political role-model Barack Obama—directs her entire life. Continuing with the lessons she had been imparted with by her family, Rice adds:

> They raised me to remember where we came from. To honor the richness of my inheritance, value myself, do my best, and never let others convince me I can't. With good fortune came responsibility, they taught me; therefore, my duty was to serve others, in whatever way best suited my talents. (23-24)

These teachings form the crux of her life and guide her professional life. As a Black American woman, she can remain true to her roots, be respectful of her Black heritage, and yet can embrace the wider world.

The sense of service, Rice asserts, was "embedded in [her] genes and seared into [her] soul" (26). Stressing on the call for service that had been dutifully followed by each generation of her family in their own ways, she mentions:

> My forebears on both sides heeded the call to serve, to pay back far more than they were grateful to receive. (ibid)

It is this desire to serve, to give back to the community that prompts her maternal grandfather to dedicate the insurance money received after the premature death of his youngest son, Frederick to Bowdoin College "as an annuity" (34) honouring his dead son. Rice can see the big-heartedness on the part of her grandfather who, notwithstanding his own meagre annual income that never exceeded $5000, could willingly give away the $10000 insurance payout for what he knew was a much nobler cause. This financial assistance, which has continued till date, was named the "Mary M. and David A. Dickson scholarship fund" on the death of her grandfather and, as the author comments, is a living embodiment of her family's devotion towards the society at large.

In a similar manner, her great-grandfather on her father's side, Walter Allen Simpson Rice—himself "born a slave in South Carolina" (36)—had on gaining his freedom, nevertheless, sought to educate other former slaves. His efforts had ultimately resulted in the foundation of the Manual Training and Industrial School for Colored Youth, more popularly known as the Bordentown School. Bordentown, Rice writes, although founded by a slave went on to become a centre of excellence producing many successful Black Americans until it was compelled to shut down in 1955 after the 1954 Brown v/s Board of Education made segregated education unlawful.

Re-visiting her formative years, retelling lives of her family members gives her the opportunity to offer her family's acts of sacrifice and service as exempla for the community. It also shows how investing in the community is both a privilege and a duty of the American. The writing of her autobiography, thus, lends Rice a perspective to the specifics of her life that was not available otherwise. It makes her see how the necessity/need to serve others so as to enable community empowerment is something she learnt from and therefore, attributes to her own family. Born into a family legacy of unflinching devotion to education and community service, the sense of obligation towards her country and countrypeople, Rice's autobiography suggests, comes naturally to her. It is this attitude of always remaining responsible and attentive to the greater cause and always being mindful of the repercussions of one's actions on other people's lives that determines her course of action after being wrongly accused and labelled in the Benghazi affair.

As stated earlier, Rice's decision to appear in all five shows on the Sunday of 16th September, 2012, proves devastating in terms of her political career as well as her personal life. She was not only maligned and defamed, but her professional competence and ethical grounding was questioned and doubted. The American and international media almost resorted to a sort of 'witch-hunting' in her portrayal. The attacks were so vicious that Rice's eight-year-old daughter unable to process and handle the media's negative representation of her mother started hallucinating about a man coming to attack her. Although she recovered with time, her daughter's development of a psychic problem, though temporary, indicates the amount of mental harassment she and her family faced on account of such vilification. What amplified the family's pain was the sheer ferocity with which the media presented Rice as distorting and hiding facts from the public when there were ample proofs to the contrary.

The defamation which led to doubts regarding her credibility and merit also deterred her political advancement when her potential nomination for the portfolio of the Secretary of State met with heavy criticism, doubts and debates. Political detractors capitalised on the controversy to discredit her, and through her the Obama administration. Indeed, Rice became the face with which to attack the supposed failure of the administration in countering terrorist attacks and upholding the trust of Americans. The assaults became so vicious that at one point she made the decision to compromise and refuse her nomination in accordance with media demands.

While the Benghazi incident and Rice's implication in it was widely televised and well-known to many, her autobiography offers readers first-hand insights into the personal toll it took on her life, her thoughts regarding it, and the motivations behind her decision to back away from being nominated as the Secretary of State. On reading her account of the entire episode, one can begin to see her response as an epitomising of the idea of "tough love" that she proposes and promotes. Rice recounts the conversation with her mother where she explains her decision of backing out, asserting that it was in no way a passive acceptance of guilt or a meek surrender to opponents. Stressing on her larger perspective, she argues:

> "First, I don't think it is worth the demolition derby—to myself, our family, and the president's priorities. It's a manufactured controversy and a political hit job. But it isn't worth fighting just because I feel vilified…[T]here are bigger things than my ego, my reputation, or even my perceived integrity. Things like our policy priorities and our country." (330-331)

Rice's decision is an exhibition of extraordinary courage and grace during tough times. It is one that rises above narrow personal interests and instead is guided by love for the country and maintenance of its internal harmony. As the deeply rooted principles imprinted upon her mind and soul direct her, she places the call for duty towards her nation above all private considerations.

Rice's autobiography gives readers a new perspective to contextualise her post-Benghazi media and consequently public reception as well as her own reactions and responses. Consciously rejecting any response dictated by hatred, she takes the measure of love and service to her nation as the most effective answer to her defamation. As she writes:

> My revenge was simple: to continue serving my country undaunted and unbound. (339)

Reflecting on the events that precipitated in the aftermath of the Benghazi attack, Rice argues, has helped her learn and grow from them. As she mentions in her autobiography, she has learnt important, practical lessons—such as being extra careful about giving media appearances, building professional networks who would stand up for her, or maintaining friendly working terms with the media—from the events that unfurled in the wake of the incident. But the most significant lesson, according to her, has been a reaffirmation of her commitment to serve and prioritise the nation above everything else.

Rice's autobiography provides her with an opportunity to see the lessons acquired from her own family and those gathered in the course of her professional career together as a seamless narrative emphasizing unity over differences. Her father, who had been a member of the Tuskegee Airmen and had gone on to become governor of the Federal Reserve, had, nevertheless, seen how racial prejudices threatened Black people's growth. And yet he had been adamant in his belief that race could never hold back a person who truly worked hard to set himself/herself free from its clutches. As Rice writes about her father:

> Despite all this, my father was a deeply patriotic American. He traveled the world extensively and recognized the exceptional nature of America, its democracy, its values and its institutions…Until he died…my father's life was a mission to prove America wrong about race. (42-43)

Her father had tried to impart these same lessons to her. From her father, the author had learnt the power of hope, fortitude, and resilience. And she had seen those principles, inherited from her father and other family members, challenged and reinforced by her own life experiences.

The circuit seems to be completed when her own son, Jake—with his very different nature and inclinations—teach her the same thing: the possibility of harmonious existence despite differences of thoughts and opinions. Talking about her relationship with Jake who, with his Republican leanings, had a completely different set of political ideologies, Rice writes:

> Jake and I agree that we cannot allow our differences to overshadow what we have in common—an abiding bond of family and country—even in the most testing times. (468)

Using her own family as a model, Rice concludes her autobiography by reemphasising her vision for America. Despite the fact that America had been historically divided along race lines, it still was more united than divided. To quote the last few lines from her autobiography:

> For better, for worse, we are in this together. And we cannot afford to part.
>
> That's why I remain fundamentally optimistic about America. We have overcome far greater challenges as a people, a nation, and a global leader.
>
> No one has ever won by betting against America's long-term capacity for growth, change, and renewal. (483)

In the face of what Rice sees as political despondency set in by the new Trump administration, her autobiography asserts the power of the common people to rise above hopelessness and together turn the dream of a united nation to reality. Shaped into a narrative that imagines the nation in terms of a wide, extended family, the author makes a case for the enduring power of love in difficult times.

***The Truths We Hold* (2019)**

In the preface to her autobiography, *The Truths We Hold*, Kamala Harris quotes the following lines from Thurgood Marshall's July 4, 1992 speech:

> "Democracy just cannot flourish amid fear. Liberty cannot bloom amid hate. Justice cannot take root amid rage. America must get to work….We must dissent from the indifference. We must dissent from the apathy. We must dissent from the fear, the hatred, and the mistrust." (10)

The preface portrays a grim picture of America and American politics under the Trump administration—an atmosphere marked by distrust, racial prejudices, police atrocities, unfair incarceration and a mockery of all basic humanitarian values and ideals. However, much like Marshall's call to rise above fear, prejudice or mistrust, if only to sustain the core of democracy, Harris' autobiography is intended to be a plea for change-oriented meaningful action. Affirmative action, the author argues, is possible when 'truths', no matter how bitter or painful, is confronted and analysed. In the context of a bleak political

environment where hatred looms large, only an unhindered laying bare of truths can help dispel public paranoia and re-build trust, the cornerstone of any democratic setup. To quote the author:

> I believe there is no more important and consequential antidote for these times than a reciprocal relationship of trust. You give and you receive trust. And one of the most important ingredients in a relationship of trust is that we speak truth. (11)

Harris, then, begins with the belief that all fissures in American politics could be repaired only by investing in public trust. In order to redeem America and its glory, both the state and the people must enter into a conversation whereby the nation's most vital truths are divulged, discussed and accounted for. To quote Harris again:

> We cannot solve our most intractable problems unless we are honest about what they are, unless we are willing to have difficult conversations and accept what facts make plain.
>
> We need to speak truth: that racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and anti-Semitism are real in this country, and we need to confront those forces. (11)

It is only when the reality of the problems affecting a country is accepted, can action be taken in that regard. Harris uses the autobiographical mode not to recall her political choices and interventions but to return to America the basics of the American ideal.

The Truths We Hold unpacks the truths of her life in order that the text forwards her politics of reparation, and her fellow Americans learn from the lessons and small bits of wisdom that she has managed to gather in the course of her journey. In the process, the book holds a mirror to the ugly societal realities she gets to see and confront by virtue of her association with the legal system and the US Senate. Harris—like Michelle Obama and Susan Rice—uses the medium of her autobiography not just to point to the darkness that overwhelms the nation, but to assure people that those dark facts are reversible and that they can be altered through mutual trust and collective social action. In so doing, she centres her work around "affective communities" irrespective of kinship or filial relations and advocates the idea of reparation in which love and friendship become credible political tools of effecting change.

Towards this end, she gleans the memories of a whole community of friends, family and well-wishers who have all left behind imprints of their contributions in her work. As in Michelle Obama and Susan Rice, we find in Harris a person who remains rooted to her origins and ever grateful to an ever-expanding community even as she gets into the centre of power and privilege. Similar to Rice, who starts her autobiographical narrative by situating the bases of her political sensibilities in the values and principles inherited from her family, Harris begins her autobiography by crediting the way her personality had been shaped by the academic fervour and activist sentiments that were a part of her upbringing. Born to immigrant parents with high academic qualifications and expectations—her Jamaican father, Donald Harris, was a professor of Economics at Stanford University and Indian mother, Shyamala Gopalan was a researcher obsessed with developing a cure for breast cancer—she witnesses the Civil Rights Movement and protests even as a toddler. This is when she realises the importance of education and develops an intrepid activist desire for change. Harris records how her mother had inherited her activist inclinations from her own parents who were politically aware and active. To quote her:

> [F]rom both of my grandparents, my mother developed a keen political consciousness. She was conscious of history, conscious of struggle, conscious of inequities. She was born with a sense of justice imprinted on her soul. (17)

Her mother Shyamala Gopalan inherits from her parents a keen sense of historical inequities and the reasons behind them and a desire to orchestrate change. It is this same legacy that she, in turn, passes on to her children:

> [M]y mother learned that it was service to others that gave life purpose and meaning. And from my mother…I learned the same. (17)

Rooted in a family tradition of service, for Harris, life becomes meaningful only in a relational frame where one is accountable to others, including those from the immediate family and the larger community.

Harris writes with great care and affection about her mother's dedication towards service. Doing something meaningful for others is the trigger behind her Indian-origin mother's involvement in the 1960s Civil Rights Movement. Harris recalls how Civil Rights protest and heated discussions about Black rights and freedom were entrenched into

her childhood. She recalls how her parents "brought [her] in a stroller with them to civil rights marches. [She has] young memories of a sea of legs moving about, of the energy and shouts and chants" (17). The most interesting part of this episode is a bit climatic and humorous:

> My mother would laugh telling a story she loved about the time when I was fussing as a toddler. "What do you want?" she asked, trying to soothe me.
>
> "Fweedom!" I yelled back. (17-18)

Framing it as the narrative of a toddler's participation in the Civil Rights movement, Harris retrospectively records the 'inheritance' of 'freedom'. The child's innocent, mechanical picking up and blabbering out of a word she heard the most around her goes on to actually become the thing she would crave for: a free society with equal justice for all.

It is important to note that the text repeatedly refers back to 'these' talks, deliberations and rallies during the formative years. As she writes back as a public figure, she has the power and privilege to select the events that teach her the value of friendship and sense of belonging to a particular community/community. Deep bonding, Harris learns as a child, and recalls as an author, could ensue between people who have no other ties apart from a shared worldview. Talking about how the Civil Rights protests were also occasions and platforms where some of her mother's most lasting connections were formed, she writes:

> My mother surrounded herself with close friends who were really more like sisters…"Aunt Mary," was one of them. They met through the civil rights movement that was taking shape in the early 1960s…As black students spoke out against injustice, a group of passionate, keenly intelligent, politically engaged young men and women found one another— my mother and Aunt Mary among them. (18)

She recalls how protests against common deprivations and acts of injustice helped create a community. Like-minded people came together whose sense of friendship and solidarity surpassed politics to form meaningful bonds that transcended personal relations. As Harris writes, it is in her mother's acquaintance with the black community that she finds a family in an otherwise foreign country: "In a country where she had no family, they were her family—and she was theirs" (ibid). To show the power of bonding, she refers to her

mother's long-distance relationship with her family back in India. She insists that physical presence or meetings were inconsequential when it came to maintaining relationships: "our sense of family—of closeness and comfort and trust—was able to penetrate the distance…We were always there for one another, regardless of what form that would take" (19).

The text records how friendships and long-distance relationships become the bases of the author's understanding of community: a broad, widely dispersed group of heterogeneous peoples can still form a unified community in the presence of a unity of purpose and a shared vision for the future. It is necessary to add here that it is her narrative reconfiguration that allows her to reiterate the value of community. Recalling her own life and training as a public figure allows her to put together a story of an aspirational community that builds itself up through fights but teaches the value of love and sacrifice and collective trust. Harris chooses her heroes carefully in order to slow the power of compassion and community. Her mother's acquaintances in America—whether be it Aunt Mary or Ms. Regina Shelton—reinforce an ethics based on pure community participation whereby filial ties or affiliations are secondary to a shared sense of belonging to the community. Harris writes about how the Shelton's nursery school and after-school program at home became a respite for many working women like her own mother who could leave their children under the care of the Sheltons. Even in her meagre capacity, Ms. Shelton with her constant appreciation and motivation, managed to touch the lives of the Black children left in her care. And yet, as Harris recounts, she never once gave the impression that she was doing something remarkable: "To her, these deeds were not extraordinary, they were simply an extension of her values" (21). Adopting a girl named Sandy and taking in many more as her "foster children," Ms. Shelton was, in Harris' eyes, an epitome of the sense of service to one's community, always working selflessly without seeking any credit.

Harris recalls the power of religion in the community, when she is given her lessons in the Bible and taught regarding God's command to speak up for the voiceless and help the needy. She instantly relates to the fact that "faith" is more a verb than a "noun," "I believe we must live our faith and show faith in action" (23). This trust in the power of faith and the will to transform that faith into action is seen as a social tool.

In Harris' book, the importance of individuals who assist her or advocate change is closely linked to institutions that enable such acts and thoughts. A major influence during her formative years that injects the spirit of community bonding in her was the "Black cultural center: Rainbow Sign" (ibid). The role of Rainbow Sign, presented as the epicentre of all progressive thoughts and ideas of the community, is significant in the narrative recollection of Harris' formative years. Harris recalls:

> Rainbow Sign was a performance space, cinema, art gallery, dance studio, and more. It had a restaurant…[Y]ou could take classes in dance and foreign languages, or workshops in theater and art…[T]here were screenings, lectures, and performances from some of the most prominent black thinkers and leaders of the day…men and women at the vanguard of American culture and critical thought. (24)

The inclusive nature of the place and the exposure to the most current thoughts and debates served to broaden the outlook of the people who visited it. Aimed with the motto, "For the love of people," (ibid) it kept its doors open to all sections of the public, especially children for whom the center designed special programs in order that they have face to face interactions with invited speakers from different fields. In as much as it was a place serving multiple purposes and catering to a variety of intellectual and cultural demands, its role as a catalyst becomes increasingly evident in the process of narration. Retrospective ordering of events in this case lends the centre an added aura, that of a community enabler for the Black people.

Such exposure and access to Black people, who dared to transcend the barriers of race and thus become models of leadership and success worth emulating, infused Harris and the other children with the confidence that they too 'could' succeed. The author reflects on how the center's programs served to buttress and reinscribe the "daily lessons" (25) imparted by her mother at home. 'Rainbow Sign' became, for Harris, the place where she could see her mother's teachings being verified by actual, real-life examples:

> My mother…would tell us, "Fight systems in a way that causes them to be fairer, and don't be limited by what has always been." At Rainbow Sign, I'd see those values in action, those principles personified. It was a citizen's upbringing, the only kind I knew, and one I assumed everyone else was experiencing, too. (ibid)

It is important to note how she shapes her upbringing in retrospect. She reorders her life in such a way that it privileges a collective production of a future—not of the dark past or the bitter present—that is the United States of America. One has to invest in memories that produce a world that is bound to be very different from "what has always been." Harris' narrative of her mother as well as the community she grew up in produces a discourse of trust where people and institutions seek and share the knowledge of the rights that a citizen is entitled to. As American citizens, it was expected that they would fight for their fair share of rights and privileges undaunted by any history to the contrary.

Harris sees her choice of law for a career in this light. She can claim, looking back, that it is this intention to help create a 'fairer' society that serves as the guiding principle, "I cared a lot about fairness, and I saw the law as a tool that can help make things fair" (27). She can also identify, in retrospect, a similar motive that informs the decision to start her career as a prosecutor in the district attorney's office. As someone who had been exposed to activist protests regarding civil rights and justice right from infancy, Harris could see that change can ensue only when outside protests are bolstered by empathic ears from within the system. While remaining on the battleground to highlight and carry forward voices of protests against an unfair social order was necessary—perhaps even fundamental to change—it was equally important to enter that structure so as to be a part of the decision-making process. To quote Harris:

> I…knew that what was wrong with the system didn't need to be an immutable fact. And I wanted to be part of changing that…I also knew there was an important role on the inside, sitting at the table where the decisions were being made. When activists came marching…I wanted to be on the other side to let them in. (30)

Exercising agency in service of the larger society remains the primary guiding force. Reality could be altered, the future transformed for the better—provided there were people willing and striving to bring about that change. As Harris keeps on insisting, even in her early career days as a prosecutor, she was always "conscious of the immense responsibility [she] held—the duty to protect those who were among the most vulnerable and voiceless" (31-32). One of the most fundamental tenets of the American judiciary—the idea that while representing a person, prosecutors actually stand up for the entire society—remained, according to the author, the core value throughout all the cases she handled. As prosecutor, she was supposed to stand/speak up "for the people" and that motto had always

been her “compass” (32). In retrospect, the idea of justice is not just a case of appropriate judgement but a key social instrument of enabling.

Harris’ subsequent decision to run for elected office is yet again propelled by a desire to effect positive change by being engaged in the very process of policy-making. While serving in the San Francisco City Attorney’s office after being offered a job there, she got a chance to work on the level of policy. As Harris’ experiences in the American legal system taught her, many of the crimes recorded could be attributed to wrong policies that did not heed to the needs of those marginalised or underprivileged. Her success in the City Attorney’s Office in “co-founding a task force” (36) dedicated to addressing the concerns of young victims of sexual exploitation made her realise the service she could offer in terms of “policy work without being a legislator” (38). The linking of professional values to social enabling in the text is a key to her life as a politician. The realisation that she could use her agency not just to help attain justice in the aftermath of a crime but to look into the very causes that allowed such crimes to take place ultimately justifies her decision to run for office.

As Harris asserts, her experiences in life and the knowledge she had been able to gather from different people and places taught her to be weary of any myopic understanding of treating crimes and criminals. Any frame that contextualises approaches to dealing with crimes in uncomplicated terms of being “either tough on crime or soft on crime” (30) risks overlooking the complex and often interlacing factors behind crimes. What was needed, then, was a different approach that could be parallelly both—rigid in administering lawful punishments yet also understanding of what drives certain people, often unwillingly and without choice, to crimes. As a lawyer and legislator, she was required to recontextualize any crime or criminal offence that came to her notice.

After being elected as the District Attorney, Harris directs her attention to this task of developing a model which would allow empathy to be a guiding force in the criminal justice system—a system otherwise seen as operating devoid of any emotions. Moreover, as she writes in the autobiography, her unique position as a Black woman along with the experiences that she had garnered as a prosecutor endowed her with a very different perspective from many other district attorneys. She positions herself as exceptional, especially as a Black woman district attorney. Harris recalls:

> At the time, there weren't many district attorneys who looked like me or had my background. There still aren't. A report in 2015 found that 95 percent of our country's elected prosecutors were white and 79 percent were white men. (45)

On the one hand, recalling 'produces' an ideology that was not apparent at the moment. That office bearers are mostly from privileged backgrounds make the understanding of crimes as fallouts of the administration's or society's apathy difficult. Harris' own position as a Black woman, she realises via the process of writing her autobiography, better equips her to understand such linkages. Again, it is important to recall the consolidation of a perspective that emerges in the process of writing:

> The courthouse was supposed to be the epicenter of justice, but it was often a great epicentre of injustice. (ibid)

Clearly, it is this affective dimension—an empathic understanding of the implications of socio-economic disparity and injustice on the rate and numbers of crimes committed—that she sought to bring to the understanding of crime. As a writer of her life, she 'emplots' the growth of this perspective. In other words, life writing gives to the event a new dimension that emerges in retrospect.

Harris uses her office as the district attorney of San Francisco or later as the Attorney General of California to build sustained, more personal relations with "both the victims of crimes committed and the victims of a broken criminal justice system" (46). She, moreover, is also witness to the kind of resilience and positive endeavour that victims at times are capable of displaying. She recalls—it is important to recognise this aspect—her encounter with a mother whose child had been killed in street violence. Harris recalls how instead of indulging in the expression of grief, the woman manages to rise above her sorrow and work towards creating greater awareness on street violence. Along with other grieving mothers, she joins the Mothers of Homicide Victims—a mutual support group working together to overcome the sorrow of having lost their children and channelling their grief to organize for justice. Harris recalls her instant recognition and sense of connection to the woman's deeply personal sorrow and her fortitude in the face of that shattering grief:

> I knew exactly why she was there. She was the mother of a murdered child…She was grieving and exhausted. And yet her being there at all was a testament to her strength. (47)

In being able to "literally see" (ibid) and understand the plight of the woman who had lost her child, the autobiographer is able to connect with her and the other women of the Mothers of Homicide Victims group in much more empathic terms than the impersonal office of district attorney allowed her. Looking back, this and other such moments allow her to forge a philosophy of life that is linked to social welfare. However, linking social welfare to friendship, community bonding and transforming personal problems or grief into enabling tools is as much a perspective as a fact of life. In autobiographical writing, linking the two is related to the question of reordering life's choices.

Dividing her goals into "short-, medium-, and long-term" (55), Harris tries to do her part in contributing to the creation of a more just society. In all her dealings with the various problems affecting the country—racial bias, heavy bail bonds prices, drug addiction, police brutality, foreclosures—she adopts a humane view which looks into the very roots of the problems so as to be able to curb them. Regarding the problem of foreclosures with which Harris had been significantly involved throughout her career, for instance, she writes:

> Foreclosure is not a statistic. Foreclosure is a husband suffering in silence, knowing he's in trouble but too ashamed to tell his partner that he has failed. Foreclosure is a mother on the phone with her bank…It is the changing of locks, the immolation of dreams. It is a child learning for the first time that parents can be terrified too. (67)

It is such understanding of the human situation that drives her to humanise the justice system as a whole: to bring in an ethics rooted in love and empathy and by so doing, have a better view of the ramifications of individual tragedies on entire families.

In her different capacities as district attorney, attorney general and then as a US senator with which she ends her autobiography, Harris, in a manner similar to Obama and Rice, operates with the fundamental belief that current social reality, although not too optimistic, can be worked on and a better future envisioned. In her politics she works with the assumption that once/if disillusionment is rejected in favour of forging meaningful

networks, especially ones that transcend filial markers of identity, a just, egalitarian society foregrounded on love, mutual trust, and empathy cannot be far behind. In her autobiography, she reconnects the belief to an "affective community."

As she recalls her experience as a member of the United States Senate Intelligence Committee, she discusses the challenges to national security, challenges of cybersecurity and climate change, while investing in hope and deep belief in the narrative of America's unity as a nation and as a world leader. Even as disturbing information regarding Russia's role in the manipulation of sensitive election data during the 2016 US Presidential Elections keep coming in and make the threat of cyberwar very real, she strings up an optimistic adherence to faith in the system and people's goodness and commitment to fair play:

> We must remember what we have worked and in some cases bled for…Imperfect though we have been, ours is a history in pursuit of a better, safer, freer world. In the years to come, with all the challenges to come, we cannot lose sight of who we are and who we can be. (189)

Her autobiography supplements her politics. Her insistence on the 'can'—on the scopes that the future holds and offers—is at once a reiteration of her vision and an invention of a growth narrative of justice. Harris ends her autobiography by penning down a series of slogan-like messages for anyone who would like to benefit from her experiences just as she had been encouraged and inspired by the wisdom of other people—her mother, her extended family, the community she grew up in, Howard University, and the many other acquaintances and friendships she had built over the course of her career.

In all three of the autobiographies under scrutiny, we find mentions of the 'American Dream' and how it could be coupled with a Black narrative of progress. The rise of the authors into important 'public' positions integrates the success stories of marginalized people including Blacks. The autobiographies show how the American Dream can effectively translate metanarratives of individual success into narratives that vouch for the collective will of communities, inclusive stories of individual growth and progress, alongside the American nation.

In conclusion, the current chapter has tried to see how contemporary Black American women, who have managed to rise to top public positions integrate real life

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

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

CONCLUSION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 5 has tried to show how autobiography's ability to merge the private with the public is manipulated by the writers under question to incorporate larger historical concerns into their autobiographical narratives. They defy received histories and by

evoking in their autobiographies the complex socio-political/cultural factors that go into making those histories offer a better and more nuanced understanding. Their autobiographical texts become a medium of self-presentation that no longer remains obsessed with the self but that seeks to elevate the Black race as a whole by representing larger public issues. By offering their own versions of the histories they discuss, the chosen authors resist myopic understandings of Black life. Resisting received histories, in this regard, becomes a means of challenging stereotypical representations of Blacks and of forging their entry into major epistemologies like the writing of history for posterity.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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- "A Modern Shakespeare: Shakespeare, Modernity, and the Sonnets" in UGC SAP-DRS Conference on "Shakespeare at 400: Producing Modernity/Modernities" organized by the Department of English and Foreign Languages, Tezpur University on 15th of November, 2016.
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- “Curriculum as Identity: Renegotiating the Northeastern in English Literature Classrooms” in an International Seminar on“Language, Ethnicity, and Identity: 21st Century Perspectives” organized by English Language Teachers Association of India in collaboration with Oil India Limited & Department of English, Tinsukia College from 11th to 12th February, 2017.

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

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CONCLUSION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 5 has tried to show how autobiography's ability to merge the private with the public is manipulated by the writers under question to incorporate larger historical concerns into their autobiographical narratives. They defy received histories and by

evoking in their autobiographies the complex socio-political/cultural factors that go into making those histories offer a better and more nuanced understanding. Their autobiographical texts become a medium of self-presentation that no longer remains obsessed with the self but that seeks to elevate the Black race as a whole by representing larger public issues. By offering their own versions of the histories they discuss, the chosen authors resist myopic understandings of Black life. Resisting received histories, in this regard, becomes a means of challenging stereotypical representations of Blacks and of forging their entry into major epistemologies like the writing of history for posterity.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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