CHAPTER - V

AT THE TURN OF THE CENTURY: CELEBRATING AFRICAN AMERICAN AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

“1 who am poisoned with the blood of both,
Where shall I turn divided to the vein?”

There is a pit in false dichotomies, and there is no pit deeper than race. Color had always been the only thing that mattered in the world of African Americans. Feeling the deep satisfaction that leads to joy is impossible for anyone who cannot feel safe. Being black is the most unsafe thing in the world. A single drop of African blood lays one open to the assault of racial violence, and this puts one at war with the world. Fighting this war creates a personality that is cold beyond telling. It makes one afraid somewhere deep inside that can never be touched. Race is such a weak vessel for human emotion. Human emotions when mixed with racial issues are prone to shatter like glass. An African American has a ragged place deep inside herself/himself that can never be made whole. It is hollow place. Anger and rage has created that vacancy in them. Some part of their capacity to feel is destroyed by
their experience of the dangers of simply being a black. They haul this painful and untouchable core around them.

Race has become the prison that blacks and whites have made for each other. Whites suffer psychologically from the problem of race prejudice as much as blacks. Race prejudice is a definite tool to keep people divided and economically helpless. Blacks abhorring whites and whites hating blacks, with conditions of both groups pitiful, both economically and psychologically. It seems to be beyond the ability of both groups to reach understanding and to live peacefully side by side, that the organization of blacks and whites by labor was/is certainly one step forward toward that end. Dreams of equality are imperiled by the virus of race hate.

Ideas about race lie at the core of the American character and the American dream. Americans have been talking about race for a long time. It is a constant theme discussed in their lives and in their common language. Although the specific topic changes over the years--varying all the way from fugitive slave laws to affirmative action--the theme remains. In general, discussions about race center on the state of relations between black Americans and white Americans. They focus on who will control the resources: freedom, jobs, schools, housing, medical care. In this debate, black people call white people mean, ignorant and hateful
and white people call black people the same. Besides, groups that might appear to be outside this debate are nonetheless connected to it. Among the millions of Americans who participate in this discussion, points of view differ drastically. There seems to be profound agreement, however, with the notion that race is a serious matter in America and always has been. Although Americans talk a good deal about race, there is an enormous and weighty silence that surrounds the issues such as—problems of color and the longing for racial purity.

The need for racial purity laws arose in America as soon as an African and a European had sexual relations and produced a child. At the beginning of the seventeenth century, when sexual contact between these two groups took place, it was generally between enslaved and free blacks, and white indentured servants in the colonies of Maryland and Virginia. Initially the status of these relationships and of the children born of these relationships was uncertain. But, by 1662 the state of Virginia, troubled by these relationships, passed its first law banning miscegenation. By the early 1760s, the upper South had begun to formulate the social rule that held, that all children with African ancestry would be considered black. The upper South decided that the taint of Africa was so strong that one ancestor from Africa ("one drop of black
blood") would mark a child "black". Eventually, this social norm was codified into law.

In 1940s, a major shift in the government's handling of discrimination resulted from the efforts of National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and the National Urban League. The government responded with Executive Order 8802, forbidding discrimination on the basis of race, creed, color, or national origin in the nation's defense industries. In 1941, the Federal Employment Practices Commission was established to implement the executive order.

President Abraham Lincoln in 1861, and President William Jefferson Clinton in 1997, took steps to abolish and exterminate racism. W.J. Clinton states in his second inaugural address, January 20, 1997, thus: "[...] The challenge of our past remains the challenge of our future—will we be one nation, one people, with one common destiny or not? [...] The divide of race has been America's constant curse." According to a Washington Post-ABC News Poll conducted shortly before the President's speech, only one in ten

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1 This rule is popularly called "the one black ancestor rule" or "the one-drop rule." Anthropologists call it "hypodescent", which means that racially mixed people are assigned the status of the subordinate group. This rule applies only to African Americans in the United States and apparently also exists only in this country.
said the country faced a racial crisis and only three percent cited race or civil rights as the most serious problem facing the country. The poll also showed that whites and blacks had very different perceptions about the racial climate in the United States. Three-fourths of white Americans believed that blacks in their community were treated the same as they were; only half the blacks thought they were. Even more disparate were the perceptions of discrimination. According to the poll, forty-four percent of blacks but only seventeen percent of whites believed that blacks faced a lot of discrimination in American society. A Gallop Poll conducted at about the same time found that fifty-five percent of blacks and whites believed that race relations would “always be a problem” in the United States (Inaugural Addresses 314-315).

President Bill Clinton made a major speech on the subject of racism in October 1995, thus: “Basing our self-esteem on the ability to look down on others is not the American way [...]. Now we must break down the barriers in our lives, our minds and our hearts” (Inaugural Addresses 324). President George W. Bush, by virtue of the authority vested in him by the constitution and laws of the United States, proclaimed February 2003 as National American History Month. He called upon public officials, educators, librarians, and the people of the United States to observe this month
with appropriate programs and activities that highlight and honor the myriad of contributions that African Americans have made to the Nation. He encouraged the citizens to gain awareness of and appreciation for African American history. As they remember this important part of their Nation's past, they look to a bright future recognizing the potential of an America united in purpose, guided by spirit, and dedicated to equality.

Notwithstanding, it can be said that America is a country where it is dangerous to be too dark, and where it is wrong to be too light. There is something about living on the margins of race that gives a unique view of the categories black and white, that presents a different picture of white Americans and black Americans, of America itself. The African American community has been devastated by a vision of the world in which light skin and dark skin are seen as meditations on good and evil, civilization and savagery, intelligence and ignorance. This crucial lesson has not only affected how blacks see themselves in comparison with white Americans it has also informed how blacks look at each other within their own community. Historians inform that dark-skinned blacks who had other attributes of high status, a skill, a formal education, wealth, were often excluded from the social life of the elite communities because of their dark skin. If one is black and white at
the same time, one finally realizes that it is not one that is strange, but that, something very strange is going on in the society. *Race* is a socially created metaphor it is no longer a tangible reality as reflected through color. *Race* is not a biological fact but a social construct. *Race* is not something that just exists. It is a continuing act of imagination. Racism works when one believes in it. If one doesn’t believe in it, it doesn’t work.

Racism is so deeply embedded in the consciousness that one doesn’t often realize that society asks on a regular basis, to reject part of the family, of a white black American, when they are required to take sides in this tragic war-game of race and color. Choosing up sides means buying into the craziness of American-style racism. For there are many black Americans with white ancestors, and there are plenty of white Americans with black family members. A person with mixed blood is neither *black* nor *white*. She/he yearns to belong to either group. But, none is ready to accept her/him completely. Living on the margin forces them to live with and therefore, to see the complications. As, the truth is that all Americans with some African ancestry are indeed *black*, as that is how they are defined. And, it is also true that *black* people are not only *black*, since they also have ancestors who came from
Europe, Asia, South America and the South Pacific. Their heritage is complicated and rich.

White blacks are faced with the dilemma of being black and looking white in a society that does not handle anomalies very well. They are passing all the time as they walk through the world. They abhor themselves for not being able to solve the dilemma. Split in two, living a split life whose separate lines do not intersect. If the white blacks cross over the walls built by whites, they risk rejection, which reminds them that it is safer to stay in their place. It takes a lot of courage to ignore those barriers or to climb over them. They are the ones who get to wave the magic wand of exclusion and inclusion. They are the ones who feel the difference and are non-disabled. And thus, they are the insider and the outsider.

The terms, ethnic group or race, describe the distance between the speaker and the group, and the complexity of their connection. In America, the earliest Italian immigrants who lived in the South were sent to Negro schools. They were so different to white Southerners that they seemed to be a different racial group. Today, less than a hundred years later, Italian Americans have assimilated to the point that they are considered an ethnic group. Historian John Hope Franklin thinks of "ethnicity" as "a way station, a
temporary resting place for Europeans as they become American". But, even this temporary resting place is denied to African Americans. They are still members of a race, not an ethnic group. Thus, when the African Americans suggest replacing the term *black* with the term *African American*, it is more than a word game. It is about moving the group definition--and hence themselves--from a racial group to an ethnic group. It is about wanting to become a more integral part of the American community, to move closer to the norm.

But how helpful is that new phrase? Does the term *African American* have the same meaning as *Polish American*? One immediately sees one poignant difference, for the term *African American* refers to a huge continent, a continent filled with hundreds of different groups of people who speak hundreds of different languages--groups with different ways of working and defining kinship and raising babies and organizing celebrations. One can only refer back to a continent, not knowing which of those many different groups was home to their ancestors. They have a vague, undifferentiated *there*, a sense of loving for that unknown *then*. But, how does that vague *there* and *then* blend with *this* America today for African Americans? Some give up after trying for hundreds of years to catch hold of the *American* part of *African*
American, some decide to accept the definition other, to celebrate it and raise that celebration to high art.

The American rules of racial purity state that Americans who can trace any ancestry back to Africa are black, African American. And, all the people in this country started out on their journey to America from Africa. The result is startling, but cannot be escaped. Those Americans who call themselves white are all pretending to be something else—"passing". But they deny her to no avail. "For Mother Africa is mother to us all", writes Judy Scales-Trent, "and we are all African Americans."

Besides the historical reality conflicted explicitly with the tenets of Black Nationalism, which essentially blamed all black people's problems, both in America and Africa, on the greed and corruption of whites. A study of history shows that Africans were just as responsible as Europeans for promoting and carrying on an immoral slave trade!! What if Africans weren't thinking about morality at all when they sold other Africans to the slave ships? Blaming white people for all the problems of black people only made the whites loom more powerful than they actually were. Why not accept the role blacks had played in the demise of African

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\[ \text{Zora Neale Hurston also points out this fact in } \textit{Dust Tracks on a Road} (200). \]
culture that resulted from the slave trade? Wasn’t that a more empowering strategy than placing blame?

It was greed that brought about the ruin of African economies, African political units, and African cultures. America imported slaves to build economic empires with cheap labor, but at the price of introducing a moral dilemma that undermined its most fundamental claims as a nation of free men. At the center of it all was simple human weakness, which had spawned the notion of racial supremacy that had touched the very center of the blacks' life. None of it would have been possible without the cooperation of those Africans who were quite willing to exploit other human beings every bit as mercilessly as the Europeans were. Who, then, was guilty and who was innocent?

Anzaldúa writes in *Borderlands* (1987), “the answer to the problem between the white race and colored, between male and females, lies in healing the split that originates in the very foundation of our lives, our culture, our languages, our thoughts.”

Yet, economic, political and social understanding is not all. There is need for a new type of spiritual understanding. One should be concerned with something far more meaningful in the lives of individual men and women, of greater practical value and for better potentialities for personal and social growth. Then no person will
look at another with fear, patronage, condescension, hatred, or disparagement, under pain of one's own spiritual death. The survival and development of the blacks depends on their ability to turn their peculiar status in the Western world to their own advantage, and it may be, to the very great advantage of that world. It remains for them to fashion out their experience that will give them sustenance and a voice.

A human being fashions out her/his experience through the medium of autobiography. Erik Erikson, profoundly influential in forming twentieth-century views of human development, has said that one writes autobiography late in life, in order to confirm and solidify a myth of self. But such myths remain social as well as personal and the twentieth century myth of selfhood centers on adolescence--partly, paradoxically, because the adolescent is seen as relatively free from the pressures of society. People write their autobiographies now at increasingly early ages, more and more people seem to write them and more often they concentrate on adolescence. Autobiographies sometimes end with the end of adolescence, some brilliant examples are Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Frank Conroy's *Stop-Time*, and Mary McCarthy's *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*, as though everything important had already happened by then. Or they go on and on like
Bertrand Russell's but lose passion and energy after reporting the adolescent years. The autobiographical records of members of minority groups, for whom the likelihood of affecting society often disappears in the hard struggles of everyday survival, emphasize this point by their own use of the material of adolescence. Anne Moody's *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, an account of a black girl's simultaneous discovery of sexual power and social powerlessness, achieves poignancy by its constant implicit and explicit contrast between what the girl can imagine and what she can do.

The cultural critic's task is to identify and connect the mythic and ideological components of an individual's story, noting the distinctive ways each author manipulates ideas to make bridges between public life and private experience, past and present, and between writer and reader. In the present century such linkages between public and private history may prove easier to establish than in some earlier eras. The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries contained periods of relative social calm during or about which, it can be argued, few significant autobiographies were written. After nineteen hundred (1900) there is scarcely a year that has not been recreated in autobiography and endowed with larger than private significance. The twentieth century saw the publication of a cluster of influential and highly ideological autobiographies including

Critical awareness of this new form of literature also blossomed in the books and essays not only of Wilhelm Delthey and William Dean Howells, but also of George Misch and Anna Burr. Since then, the publication of socially significant autobiographies by both women and men has continued virtually without interruption. All the major intellectual and political events and crisis of the modern era are represented in this literature.
Immigration and the movement of Americans from country to city, from Southern farms to Northern ghettos, abroad to Europe and Africa; the impact of science and technology upon all areas of life; the struggle against the color line and the emergence of the Third World; women's emancipation from male definition of their rights and roles; new movements in art, architecture, literature, and the mass media; the roaring twenties and the Depression decade, the strife-ridden 1960s—all these and many other social phenomena have been recreated as someone's personal experience to be collectively shared by the curious audiences of autobiography.

To make matters even more ambiguous, many twentieth-century autobiographers are well schooled in the language of the psyche, many have read their Freud, George H. Mead, or Eric Erikson. This self-conscious familiarity with process psychology is still another distinguishing feature of twentieth-century autobiography. Yet even the best read autobiographers, like Conrad Aiken or Anais Nin, are aware of the dangers of abstract psychological explanations. Often the stubborn voice of the individual autobiographer is heard speaking against the very abstractions and hypotheses her or his own story suggests.

Violent experiences have characterized the lives of so many Americans, famous and obscure, that writers like Richard Wright
have sought understanding and order for their turbulent memories in the act of autobiography. Public violence like war, for example, has occasioned important autobiographies of the past like Grant’s *Personal Memoirs* and Walt Whitman’s *Specimen Days*. And this mode of coping with violence continues into the present in a powerfully bitter autobiography of the Vietnam War, Ron Kovic’s *Born on the Fourth of July*. But, it can be argued that the American domestic scene and private life have produced even more autobiographical occasions for the confrontation with violence than have the battlefield and military hospitals. This helps to explain that the number of modern autobiographies powerfully recreate the identity-forming experiences of racial violence, crime, punishment and mental sickness. If American public violence is recorded first in Indian captivity and slave narratives and later in the strife-ridden lives of Black Elk, Alexander Berkman, Emma Goldman, and Malcolm X, then quieter careers have provoked life-histories nearly as violent, if less well publicized. Helen Keller, Maya Angelou, Clifford Beers, and Conrad Aiken are but four names in a long list of autobiographers who have witnessed or endured family and psychic violence. By recreating such experiences they have sought to turn painful memories into something of value.
Preserving the concept of personal identity and using it to bridge history and discourse, and thus to continue to celebrate autobiography as discourse-history, becomes highly problematic for many writers of late twentieth century. It is a desperate personal necessity for some. Whether one has a public identity to record and defend like Norman Mailer and Lillian Hellman, or a wholly obscure life to recapture like Frank Conroy, the situation of the autobiographer today juxtaposes unprecedented cultural, literary, and psychic problems. Neither Henry Adams nor Gertrude Stein had such chaos to consider. Like the issue of collaboration, the twilight zone of fact and fantasy will doubtless constitute a future battleground for autobiographers in America and for their audiences as well.

Despite the strictures of para-fictionists and the chaos of public history, autobiography today remains vital as an individuating language act and shared cultural activity. As to the future, however, threats and doubts abound. For instances, Elizabeth Bruss in *Eye for I: Making and Unmaking Autobiography in Film* perceptively compares linguistic and filmic images as vehicles of self construction within a culture rapidly given over to impersonal technologies. She foresees serious threats to traditional narratives, as movies and television turn us all into viewers, button-
pushers, and screen images. Bruss' eloquent argument celebrates the unique power of words to satisfy the deep desires people have to share and confirm not only ideas but also identities. Unless literacy, the individuating impulse, and the institutions that sustain both are driven completely underground, autobiography stands as good a chance of surviving as any other mode of story telling. This will happen, however, only through the continued creation of fresh forms and idioms for the new experiences and changing values of future women and men everywhere.

Though there are but two among thousands of women's voices from the past, Anne Ellis and Anais Nin help define the cultural boundaries within which autobiography in modern America has developed as a feminine art. In style, form, and content, *The Life of an Ordinary Woman* (1929) and *The Diary of Anais Nin* (1966-76) are radically different and yet secretly similar. Anne Ellis is so inconspicuously and humorously herself that she does not really represent the so-called average woman. Other vigorous expressions of personality also characterize works in the same manner, from *Autobiography of an Elderly Woman* (1911) and *The Autobiography of a Happy Woman* (1915) (Mary H. Vorse) to *Ossie: The Autobiography of a Black Woman* (1971) (Ossie Gufly). Each so-called ordinary individual seeks to escape that pigeonhole by
reshaping common experiences and emotions in the necessarily uncommon act of telling their own life story. Their stories afford intimate and irreplaceable accounts of political and social reforms, like the suffrage movement, as well as inside perspectives on more private battles against physical, sexual, racial and cultural barriers. Thus, they strengthen the twentieth-century tradition of women’s autobiography, whether as the record of public or private experience as essentially protest literature.

Edith Wharton and Ellen Glasgow, Gertrude Stein, Lillian Hellman, Mary McCarthy, Maureen Howard, Gwendolyn Brooks and Nikki Giovanni are just a few of the notable women artists who have revealed their historic and creative selves through acts of memory as well as imagination. One stimulus to explorations is the remarkable outpouring of autobiographies by American women, which have appeared since 1962. As the expression of what Adrienne Rich calls in *Of Woman Born* (1976) “the dim simering voice of self” autobiograpy now forms as essential part of the network of feminine communication and cultural critique which blossomed in the 1960s and 1970s. Internationally, influential spokeswomen like Simone de Beauvoir, Margaret Mead and Anais Nin have made their own life stories, sounding boards for fresh social ideas, poetic images, historical visions and revisions, and
psychological models. In doing so, they address both male and female readers. The conversations which Ellis and Nin initiated two or more generations ago have thus grown into a major cultural dialogue.

Perennial yet ever-changing aspects of women's problems in contemporary culture are highlighted through these acts of autobiography. That is the preoccupation often more pressing than issues of work, political power, marriage, or leisure with defining a female self in this culture. As Betty Friedan asserted in 1963, "the core of the problem for women today is not sexual but a problem of identity [...]. Our culture does not permit women to accept or gratify their basic need to grow and fulfill their potentialities as human beings". Indeed, for readers attuned to the delicate interplay between literary text, social context, and the individual psyche, a woman's autobiography offers an incomparable means of "pick[ing] up the discord between the vitality of existence and the rigidity of social myth", as Barbara Watson puts the matter. This discord clearly present in the anecdotes of Ellis and Nin becomes the major theme in many recent twentieth-century women's autobiographies.

Writing and reading personal history means unavoidably to confront and question such imposed definitions of self and
experience. If the act of recreating one's past and discovering one's identity is a riskier enterprise for women than it is for men, that is because such an occasion is likely to challenge traditional beliefs (usually enunciated by men) about what it means to be an American female.

Sharp contrasts and intimate connections between public and private spheres, which make works like *Prison Memoirs* (Alexander Berkman) easier to translate into cultural narratives than *Ushant* (Conrad Aiken) or even *Black Boy* (Richard Wright), are also to be found with increasing frequency in modern women's autobiographies. As Richard Sennett and Peter Berger have both argued, that historical process loosely labeled "modernization" creates no more decisive divisions within personality than the one between public and private life. This split in social experience, defines women's identities even more painfully and creatively than it does for other groups. Tensions between old conventions and new circumstances, between rigid social stereotypes and the urge to define oneself in wider terms, have become so intimately part of modern women's lives that they inevitably affect the writing and reading of autobiography. The outpouring of personal histories by American women and the recent critical attention devoted to them
by feminist scholars and others are notable aspects of culture studies generally and Women's Studies in particular.

Today, both American women and African American women are struggling to define and assert themselves. As individual accounts of widely shared encounters with perceived beliefs and stereotyped roles, *Blackberry Winter* (Margaret Mead) and Volume I of the *Diary* (Anais Nin) open up vistas upon other cultural milieus in which becoming a woman occurs differently than in the America of the early and mid-twentieth century. "We are all engaged in the task of peeling off the false selves", Nin writes, "the programmed selves, the selves created by our families, our culture, our religions. It is an enormous task because the history of women has been as incompletely told as the history of blacks."9

Many women, to be sure, have made their way onto the stage of history carrying heavy burdens of disadvantage and oppression. The autobiographies of Emma Goldman and Ida B. Wells, to mention only two obvious cases, are more passionate, though less self-conscious, accounts of becoming a woman in male capitalist white America. These women know and show that they are all physical beings. The quest for a different, more graceful and ingratiating body takes different forms in contemporary women's autobiographies. It may originate in shameful moments like a little
girl's stammering recitation in Stamps Colored Methodist Episcopal Church which opens *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, or the case of typhoid fever which makes a fastidious father exclaim how ugly his daughter is. Or it may arise in less dramatic desires to become like a beautiful mother or competent grandmother. Whatever pasts have been confronted, the present and future need not find a woman caught in the same way within the cage of her body. The autobiographies of African American women declares continuing faith in lurch and stagger progress toward the solution of the twentieth-century's central problem and records the author's many roles in this racial struggle. The comparison through contrast of the African American autobiographies illustrate for later autobiographers the problems of recreating historical identity under the bewildering circumstances of modern American life.

As contemporary black autobiography is such a characteristic and influential form of cultural expression that it has attracted critics, historians, and commentators in growing numbers. It is the only subdivision of American autobiography to have in print four full-length studies devoted to it. The descendents of Du Bois and Wright are thus beginning to receive the critical appreciation their works demand.
One aspect of this rich subject noted by nearly every commentator but little discussed in detail is the fact that many recent black autobiographies are not written by their subjects alone but are the result of collaboration. This practice has characterized American autobiography since antebellum times, when some slave narratives appeared as the work of a ghostwriter or amanuensis. Collaboration is of course by no means confined to black autobiography but has been practiced by all sorts of persons willing to satisfy the curiosity of their fellows about the lives of the inarticulate, uneducated, or the preoccupied. By this device readers have recently been given the autobiographies of many different black Americans: Muhammad Ali, Arthur Ashe, Pearl Bailey, Sammy Davis, Jr., Althea Gibson, Dick Gregory, Billie Holiday, Mahalia Jackson, Joe Louis, Willie Mays, Archie Moore, Floyd Patterson, Jackie Robinson, and Nate Shaw. “Edited by Ed. Fitzgerald”, “As told to Charles Einstein”, “with Evan McLeod Wylie”, “Billie Holiday with William Dufty”, The Autobiography of Malcolm X with the assistance of Alex Haley, All God’s Dangers: The Life of Nate Shaw by Theodore Rosengarten, Ossie: The Autobiography of a Black Woman, “As Told to Caryl Ledner by Ossie Guffy”--these and similar title-page notations draw attention to an increasingly prevalent autobiographical occasion in
contemporary America. Indeed, if *nigger: “An Autobiography by Dick Gregory with Robert Lipsyte”*, is at all representative, the ersatz life-story may often outsell conventional autobiographies; “Over One Million Copies Sold!” is the publisher’s boast printed directly beneath the two names responsible for *nigger*. However, collaboration can prove not merely amenable but, in fact, essential to powerful artistic narratives which possess great historical significance as well. It would be wrong to consign collaborative autobiographies exclusively to the realm of either popular or black culture.

Nevertheless, black autobiography offers a convenient and appropriate context for considering collaboration as a distinctive occasion of contemporary literary culture. Not only are there many examples to choose from, but also their imaginative range is surprisingly wide. Measured by historical significance as well as audience appeal, a great gap exists between merely topical successes like *Yes I Can, The Story of Sammy Davis, Jr.* (Sammy Davis, Jr., 1965) and the contemporary masterpiece *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (Malcolm X, 1965). That many recent life stories of black Americans are variations on the collaboration occasion suggests initially a look at signals at the intentions of makers and the expectations of consumers of this novel literary
product. These frequently converge, as one might expect, in the uncomplicated desire to share the story of a life in as simply vivid and appropriate language as possible. History, understood as the narratives unfolding of social relationships and temporal changes within an individual existence, remains basic to the intentions of most black autobiographers.

It is a historical fact that autobiographers have lived with all kinds of cultural tensions in the past and have managed to find new forms for expressing and containing them. Placing the self at the center of social chaos may indeed be more difficult in post-Hiroshima world than it was for Whitman or Alexander Berkman, but it is possible that the contrast between present and past is quantitative and not qualitative. Autobiographies in all their bewildering number and variety, offer the students in American studies a broader and more direct contact with American experience than any other kind of writing. They have been written in almost every part of the country by presidents and thieves, judges and professors, Indians and immigrants (of nearly every nationality), by ex-slaves and slave owners, by men and women in particularly every line of work, abolitionists to cook keepers, by adolescents and octogenarians, counterfeiters, captives, muggers, muckrakers,
preachers, and everybody else. The catalogue is innumerable. It is the true Song of Myself and Ourselves.
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