Audre Lorde writes in “My Words Will Be There”:

My power as a person, as a poet, comes from who I am. I am a particular person. The relationships I have had, where people kept me alive, helped sustain me, people whom I’ve sustained give me particular identity which is the source of my energy. Not to deal with my life in my art is to cut out the fount of my strength.¹

As readers, we go to history, as to philosophy, to autobiography and poetry, to learn more not about other people and the past but about ourselves and the present. To be one of those few eyes, to see, to realize oneself in feeling, one must become a traveler on an autobiographical journey. James Olney aptly says, “what one seeks in reading autobiography is not a date, a name, or a place, but a characteristic way of perceiving, of organizing, and of understanding an individual way of feeling and expressing that one can somehow relate to oneself.”²

Although the genre of life writing in the West emerged in antiquity, the term autobiography is a post-enlightenment coinage.
The word *autobiography* was coined by Robert Southey in 1809, and the term did not appear in the titles of books published in the United States until the 1830's. Like most literary genres in the West, autobiography has a specific history of debatable origins, ambiguous parameters, and disputed subject matter. Recent discourse around autobiography centers on the problematic nature of generic definition. Autobiography has no explanation but it may have a meaning correlative of one's own being, a metaphor of one's own self.¹ Autobiography is one of the forms in which an autobiographer may give the verdict on oneself and one's life. In this knowledge of oneself, in this discovery is rediscovery in the nature of selfhood.

Autobiography is not just a reflection of the life but something added to it. It is not a picture but an action, which can neither stand still long enough to see the life whole, nor pursue its own movement to a point of certain rest. It is a process in which nothing is completed, but ever completing. As a genre, autobiography occupies an interesting position in relation to the expression or articulation of the subject. Deep embedded notions and expectations from life, as well as unconscious rules that constitute a good story shape an autobiography as much as the harsh facts of existence do.
In 1956, Georges Gusdorf described autobiography as a form of conscious communal discourse, a public act to preserve collective memory through time and to provide continuity between generations of a culture. More recently, Elizabeth Bruss placed autobiography within a speech-act context, declaring its ability to "reflect and give focus to some consistent need and sense of possibility in the community it serves." Thus, making autobiography a genre of universal reflection rather than confining it to subjective discourse. This places autobiography a step forward than its originally held position.

Autobiography's place in the panoply of forms and fashions has shifted from the margins of critical inquiry to what Domna Stanton claims to "the very center of modernist concerns." Wrenching autobiographical form to their own purposes, the autobiographers write "beyond the ending" of conventional narrative and its closures, to use a phrase from Rachel Blau Du Plesis. The angles of interpretation in autobiography not only provide different perspectives but also reveal multiple truths of a life. These truths are essential because they are specific, they are not abstract generalizations about life. Therefore, focus should be on the objective than subjective truth. It is precisely because of their subjectivity--their rootedness in time, place, and personal
experience, and their perspective-ridden character, that one values them.

Personal narratives can take many forms, including biography, autobiography, life history—a life story told to a second person who records it in the form of diaries, journals, and letters. The personal narratives are particularly rich sources because they illuminate both the logic of individual courses of action and the effects of system-level constraints within which these courses evolve. Personal narratives are marked by historical context, but they are also shaped by the available cultural models, which are adapted to the writer’s own experience and needs. These stories are complex, different from our own and a challenge to easy understanding. Yet, these stories are also familiar, as they reveal the complexities and paradoxes of human life.

To understand the configuration of the autobiography—what it emphasizes, what it omits, what it may exaggerate—the interpreter must be sensitive to the narrator’s purposes for telling the story. This sensitivity demands a profound respect for the narrator and what she/he writes. Rather than labeling any incident as true or untrue, interpreters need to look for the reasons why narrators tell their stories. Hence, the creation of an autobiography is perceived as an exchange—a dialogue between a narrator and an interpreter—
this dynamic extends to the actual production of the text itself. As the subject of autobiography is self-representation and not the autobiographer herself/himself, contemporary critics describe this self as fiction. Autobiography can be interpreted as a re-presentation, that is, a structuring of events, motives, and so on in an effort to position one's story within a discourse of truth and identity.

In this art of creation and in this effort to impose order, imagination is bound to walk hand in hand with the hard facts of life. The autobiographical memorization contains dreams and figures down the lane of history and while traversing this lane, the camouflage of fact and fiction is enmeshed to the superlative degree of life expression. An autobiographical expression may be considered fantasy or realism, but everything an autobiographer puts into her/his autobiography has a source somewhere in life.

As the number of people writing about autobiography has swelled, however, the boundaries of the genre have expanded proportionately. It was once a rather clearly demarcated territory, populated almost exclusively by such self-identifying texts as John Stuart Mill's Autobiography and Jonathan Edward's Personal Narrative, but today it has become an unbounded sprawl. Now, the poetry of T.S. Eliot and William Carlos Williams, the novels of
Stendhal and Proust, the plays of Tennesse Williams, and even Henry James' prefaces have found a place. The various poems, novels and plays that have recently been inserted into the genre are either modern or else particularly susceptible to modernist interpretation. They seem, despite their fictiveness, to address the same problems of self-definition that have taxed autobiographers ever since Augustine discovered that the self is a hard ground to plough.

Autobiography defined in any manner reveals a significant pattern, an increasing acceptance of the idea that autobiography may employ symbolic as well as biographical materials. Not that the idea itself is a recent development. Dilthey and Misch assumed a very catholic attitude toward the possible modes and forms in which the individual soul might reveal itself in different eras and E. Stuart Bates wanted to open the genre to poetry and fiction nearly fifty years ago. The genre as a whole now must be redefined every time someone writes an autobiography in a new way.

Insofar as the psychological interpretations of autobiography emphasized its deep structures and the autobiographer's unconscious self-revelations, they directed attention to the text and simultaneously, blurred the distinction between factual and fictive statements. As a result, an increasing number of critics came to
associate autobiography with fiction rather than with biography. The predominantly anecdotal character of the myriad autobiographies published during the first half of the nineteenth century and the historical bias of literary scholarship in the same period conspired to place autobiography in the general category of biographical literature, where it served mainly as a source of gossipy entertainment for the common reader and of documentary data for biographers and historians.

The language of autobiography has been allegorical from the beginning, it may be the biographical metaphors of Dante, Bunyan, and Franklin, no less than the fictive metaphors of De Quincey and Carlyle. It is perfectly true that in the allegorical tenor of autobiography, language becomes more noticeable when self becomes a mystery to memory. This self can only be imagined, and at this point, autobiography gives up trying to explain the self historically or to discover it philosophically. It attempts to reveal the self in fictive metaphors whose explicit referents are not events from the writer's own past life. Allegory becomes a way of making concrete something abstract and vice-versa, and a blend of realism and fantasy find an apt expression in it.

For the sake of coherence and continuity, autobiographers rearrange their stories (incidents). Each event is a link in the chain
that binds past to the present. An autobiographer cannot possibly include all his experiences, he must decide which ones are most important, the most telling, or the most interesting. As every incident is at least theoretically of equal consequence, any selection must appear somewhat arbitrary, a decision based as much upon personal or aesthetic criteria as upon the strict demands of truth.

Being a creator, an autobiographer is inevitably conscious while undergoing the process of creation that suddenly drops her/him in self-conscious surroundings--arming her/him with the weapon of concealment within revelation.

American autobiography has been the subject of major scholarship and criticism since the 1960s. At the opening of that decade, Louis Kaplan published his landmark *Bibliography of American Autobiographies* (1961), a work that beckons toward the fuller and more inclusive studies toward which the writers are still working. There followed in the 1960s two important book-length studies, Robert F. Sayre's *The Examined Self: Benjamin Franklin, Henry Adams, Henry James* (1964) and Daniel B. Shea's *Spiritual Autobiography in Early America* (1968). Robert F. Sayre noted a special relationship between the emergence of recognizing autobiography as a distinct genre and the establishment of the United States as a political entity. He observes:
The founding of autobiography as a designated and conscious genre fell within the early years of the Republic, and its growth, coinciding with the spread of the romantic movement, has also coincided with the growth of the United States.⁷

Later, in an important article, "Autobiography and America", James M. Cox expands on the idea, that there is an affinity between self-writing and America and reminds "that an astonishingly large proportion of the slender shelf of so-called American classics is occupied by autobiographies"⁸ Sayre traces a central aspect of the tie between autobiography and America to nonconformist religious traditions that predate the American Revolution, noting that "in accordance with the Puritan precept that literature be useful, [...] authentic personal experience had greater prestige than poetry or any variety of fiction". Basing his generalization about American autobiography on personal narratives of mostly elite men of Anglo-Saxon ancestry of the northeastern United States, Sayre found The Confessions of St. Augustine (1954) and The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin (1958) to be "the most important models for autobiography in America" (Sayre 35, 33).

The pattern/image of journey, central to the American experience, takes shape in the first major African American
autobiography, Gustavus Vassa's *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaukah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African* (1789), and continues in the autobiographies of Zora Neale Hurston, Malcolm X, Anne Moody, and Maya Angelou. Like the slave narrators who sought escape from bondage into a community that encouraged the development of self and fulfillment in a social role, the twentieth century autobiographers are also involved in a quest that will encourage the development of an authentic self. African American autobiography has its roots in the slave narratives that have helped to shape it. Works such as the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845); *The Life of Josiah Henson* (1849), on which Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1853) was based; Harriet Jacob's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861); Booker T. Washington's *Up From Slavery* (1900); Zora Neale Hurston's *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942); Richard Wright's *Black Boy* (1945); *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1964); *The Autobiography of W.E.B. Du Bois* (1968); and George Jackson's *Soledad Brothers* (1970), all testify to the strength, consistency, and importance of this genre in African American literature.

African Americans attempt to control their own lives, leading to a concern for the personal. The autobiography emphasizes the
public rather than the private gesture of the group. The African American autobiographers write with an unblinking vision of the world and their existence in it. Too often it has been a painful world. But, they have gleaned that pain, alienation, wrath and frustration, deep inside them to bring a new reading to its definitions through literature. It's not a wandering away from pain, from error, but taking a dip in them as part of living and imbibing them. This characteristic is particularly African and it is transposed into the best of African American literature.

The close grasp of the material facts of human social relationships, their caliber to bring power and clarity of thought to political issues has been the weapon of immense potentiality. And, to correlate self-collision, discomfort and quest for identity with the large streams of mass movements in human history, are precisely the greater strengths of Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. Du Bois, J. Saunders Redding, Richard Wright, and George Jackson, as authors. An effort to reinterpret African American life and character went in various directions following the just-like-white-folks philosophy. Some writers, for example, created works that emphasized the similarities between blacks and whites. Other writers, subscribing to the decadent white belief in the exotic Negro, asserted the so-called primitivism of black people. Writers
like Booker T. Washington defend the capacity of blacks to learn skilled trades, work hard, and achieve economic power. Du Bois and J. Saunders Redding assert their common humanity, pride, integrity and endurance. Claude McKay and Langston Hughes assert their warmth, aesthetic sense and responsiveness to poetry. These writers reflect an active engagement with America’s past and its legacy. They are committed to breaking the silence of the past in order to promote a new understanding and extend the hope of healing far into the future.

There were other writers whose aesthetic visions were broader. They realized that to draw out the souls of black folk, the artist has to divest himself of preconceived and false notions about black people. They create an art whose foundation is the ethos from which black life, history, culture, and traditions spring. In this concern, black writers attempted to rear a superstructure of conscious art upon the African American cultural background and their creative folk art. They made the systematic studies of certain aspects of the African American folk tradition. The group of *New Negro* writers—Langston Hughes (concentrated on urban black folk in *The Weary Blues*, 1926 and *Fine Clothes to the Jew*, 1927), Jean Toomer (in *Cane* 1923), Zora Neale Hurston, Sterling A. Brown, among them—who set out to reevaluate “African-American history
and folk culture," and made the systematic studies of certain aspects of the African American folk tradition. An effort to build a self-conscious art upon folk art (these writers pursued the path of their predecessors namely, Paul Laurence Dunbar and Charles W. Chesnutt), brought to African American literature a quality that became one of its main currents: the ethos of black folk.

Both the final accommodation of the African American self to its society and the radical breakthrough to personal freedom are achieved through the act of writing autobiography. Writing with the mental devils of self-doubt and despair and little by little, book by book, African Americans construct the framework of African American literature. Autobiography in their hands becomes so powerful, so convincing a testimony of human resource, intelligence, endurance, and love in the face of tyranny, that in a sense, it sets the tone for most subsequent African American writings.

The way the African American autobiographers construct their autobiographies is that they become historians and polemicists. Their personal careers merge so closely with the political movement that relating the story of their lives is a political act. Thus, autobiography and social, political analysis are inseparable, the individual has no meaning except through the group. The self
belongs to the people, and the people find a voice in the self. Their narratives compel a revisionary reading of the collective American experience, as specific situations and individual acts of memory and imagination yield to identifiable patterns within the larger cultural context. And, while the centrality and importance of the individual life initially motivates all autobiographical impulse, in African American autobiography this "act of consciousness" in the present bears the weight of transcending the history of race, caste, and gender oppression for an entire group. To correlate self-collision, discomfiture and quest for identity with the large streams of mass movements in human history, are precisely the greater strengths of African American autobiographers.

The spiritual narratives were written by ex-slaves as well as freeborn blacks and provide a valuable cross sectional view of nineteenth century intellectual thought. In their hands, the spiritual narrative turned the genre of autobiography into a forceful weapon to express and record another chapter in the history of liberation. The authors of these narratives wanted more than to create and recreate the self-in-experience in literature. In establishing their claims to full humanity, they wanted their words to change the hearts of the men and women whom they reached. For them, the escape from sinfulness and ignorance of a worthwhile self and the
achievement of salvation and knowledge of God's saving grace bestowed a fundamentally positive identity. Most of these narratives are strongly Christian. They are careful to distinguish between "true" Christianity and the religion used by their masters to justify the slave system and teach them obedience. They all followed the same pattern: the subjects feel divine intimations in childhood, passes through a phase of youthful frivolities, goes through a series of acute spiritual conflicts, is converted to Quakerism, surrenders her/his will to the inner light, and experiences a call to the ministry.\[11\]

In a span of approximately two hundred years, black women struggled to write, and the black woman writer struggled to be heard. During a century dominated by slavery, African American women came to articulate their existence in autobiography, fiction and poetry. When Zora Neale Hurston, whose fictional and factual accounts of African American heritage are unparalleled, died in poverty and obscurity in 1960 all her books were out of print. Today, her ground-breaking works suffused with the culture and traditions of African Americans and the poetry of black speech, have won her recognition as one of the most significant modern American writers. A new model of early African American writings must begin, with the awareness that African American writers
coming-to-text is a sign of social and political struggle, a struggle which involves the recognition of a continuum of relationships among writer, text; and her/his redefinition of the writerly self.

If a man is plagued and tormented by his own past and is unconscious, how can he expect to cope with his conscious mind and external reality? This is a perpetual question and the dilemma of an African American self's inability to achieve a place in society. The main burden of the African American writers, have been to repair the damage inflicted on them by white racism, rend the veil of white definitions that misrepresent them to themselves and the world, create a new identity, and turn the light of knowledge on the system that holds them down. What the writer struggles to achieve is self-definition and self-respect, a life where clean, positive tenderness, love, honor, loyalty, and coherent tradition are possible. A black writer conceives of a life where a free and equal human being belonging to a free social group exists and works for the destruction of the system of society that prevents her/him from realizing her/his dream. Addison Gayle, Jr. writes in the article "Gwendolyn Brooks: Poet of the Whirlwind":

There is indeed a new black today. He is different from any the world has known. He's a tall walker. Almost
firm. By many of his own brothers he is not understood.

And he is understood by no white. (Evans 81-82)

The nineteenth century African American writer, in telling her/his story had to be sufficiently imaginative to avoid the pitfall of boring facts even while she/he remained true to the personal history. The steps that autobiographies took to create a better and truer self, to reconcile being African with American, to break down the heady, brawling, lusty stream of African American (black) culture; was the acceptance of pride. "[...] blacks must stop searching for external answers and find strength and pride within themselves and each other."12 For, it is not the color of the skin that makes the man or woman, but the principle formed in the soul. For they are each perpetually aware of their inner fragmentation and self-alienation, and each is perpetually in pursuit of the 'true self' which changes and always eludes grasp. African American identity is a center of experience, an organizing principle for the autobiography. The assertion of black pride is a defense against racism and racial discrimination. Nikki Giovanni writes, "Can you kill the nigger in you?"13; and Du Bois questioned, "No. No. No! Will they never understand? To be black is to be beautiful and strong and proud" (qtd. in Kramer: 20).14
An African American writer may lie, use jargon, and intellectualize to avoid facing facts, but the quest for the true self brings African American writing as a whole on a collision course with what passes for truth in the American vision of the world. Laughter in African American autobiography is usually sardonic in intent, and directed at some aspect of racial oppression. To paraphrase a proverb by William Blake, it is often "excess of sorrow". For an African American it is a shared affection rather than a shared hostility, whose message is the irrepressible resilience and will to survive. The deeper the wound, the more touching will be the words and the autobiography. As, the wounds of an African American are delved deep down, so is the African American autobiography entrenched down the entails of a human being.

Two decades ago, Francis R. Hart identified "perspectival duplicity" as a source of creative tension in autobiography. Quoting Stephan Spender, he pointed out that the autobiographer necessarily negotiates "the story of two lives", "his life as it appears to himself, from his own position" and "his life as it appears from outside in the minds of others". Recently, theorizing from Giambattista Vico’s Autobiography, Sheila Kearns has argued that self-duplicity, the making of a "second self" through autobiographical discourse, is "an enabling practice", "both the proper and necessary ground of
self representation." The divided self mirrors the dimensions in the world at large, she/he cannot harmonize the self without becoming deeply involved in defining and changing its relations with other selves. Race and class divisions among other people are experienced internally by the African American writer, she/he can approach the task of understanding society in the modern imperial West with an added degree of insight.

Double identity enables the African American autobiographer to see the system from within and without at the same time. The dilemma of having two souls and two unreconciled strivings no longer consisted only of the contradiction between the black and American. She/he must somehow appropriate the literary traditions of the white mainstream beyond the veil without being separated from black experience and history. It is true that the African American audience that they tried to cultivate was confined too exclusively to the middle class for many years but the effort was made. It had to be made as an African American identity could only be sustained in relation to a black public. Certain African American autobiographers reason out for not wishing to overstress the black component of their identity as it could detract them from the main task of becoming human. W.E.B. Du Bois pointed out that split
identity wrought havoc with the artist, in particular, because he had to decide what audience to address.

African American narratives are accused of low aesthetic value and possess primary significance for the social historian. It is true to an extent but it was also the call of the day. Writers, put on paper, the wrongs with which they are surrounded. But, recently the emphasis of African American writings has shifted from giving information to giving pleasure. Their object is to capture the mixture of beauty, energy, poverty, exploitation and sordid industrial greed. Looseness and concrete language, while superficially part of a general trend in all American literature is distinguished from American (white) writing by its class perspective, politics, and social matrix. The value of the African American autobiography, as art, cannot be appreciated by reference only to the art object itself but must be taken in the social context where the author places it. The blackness of the work demands such consideration, because black is nothing less than its social context. A marked difference in context and purpose is noticed in subtle currents of tone, cadence, and word order that distinguish the African American (black) from the American (white). The difference ceases to be subtle in the sixties, as African American
writers veer sharply in the direction of ghetto speech rhythms for their models.

Alice Walker has said that what she finds most interesting about American literature is:

The way black writers and white writers seem [...] to be writing one immense story-with different parts of this immense story coming from a multitude of different perspectives. Until this is generally recognized, literature will always be broken into bits, black and white.\(^{18}\)

It is not that an African American or an American makes the atmosphere gloomy or sinister, it is the society that fails to look positively and behold the beauty of life. Hence, the aura of dilemma prevails. If one walks around with broader mind, sincere feelings, and open heart, then the world becomes a paradise. Langston Hughes writes, “In the great sense of the word, anytime, any place, good art transcends land, race, or nationality, and color drops away. If you are a good writer, in the end neither blackness or whiteness makes a difference to readers.”\(^ {19}\)

The condition of the African Americans before they witnessed a ray of hope in the form of a term called *renaissance* in the city named *Harlem* was a bit bleak. Due to a group of astute African
American real estate agents, an upper region of Manhattan became the largest black community in the world. It was known as Harlem from the early days of Dutch settlement. Black intellectuals, as well as artisans, came from all over the globe to gather there. It was a time of great excitement and change as African Americans built a new home and a new image. In the capital of the publishing and theoretical world of America, black people saw a bright and hopeful beginning and they called it the Harlem Renaissance. Many black people in New York in the twenties and to some extent black people in the entire nation, identified with the spirit that created Harlem.

While the Harlem Renaissance was part of a historical process which altered black life in America, the label has come to be a literary one, a convenient reference to the extraordinary number of books published by black writers during the decade. Black writers between 1919-1930 were published in great numbers, and received favorably by more publishers, than in any other single decade in American life, prior to the sixties. The abundance of titles give the literary orientation to generalizations about the Renaissance, but the titles themselves, apart from the literature they caption, were only symbols of the changing status. It was an opportunity of great importance for black actors and writers to examine their own
terrible history of experience. The race needed to gain “something of that leisure and detachment for artistic work which every artist must have.” Wise men believe, Du Bois concluded his article “W.E.B. Du Bois And The Theory of A Black Aesthetic”, “that the greatest gift of the Negro to the world is going to be a gift to Art”(Kramer 14).

“We want a black poem and a black world”, sang Baraka, “let the world be a black poem” (qtd. in Evans: 85-86). The Harlem Renaissance represents a phenomenal outpouring of art in all its forms like music, drama, poetry, fiction, dance, sculpture, painting by black Americans since Africans reached these shores in the 1600s. The portraits created by WPA writers\(^1\) promoted a lasting image of this still vibrant community and gave a glimpse of an American community that has seldom been seen by outsiders. Much of the art from that period still remains and much of what we find in contemporary African American literature, art or music, is not new

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\(^1\) Under the New Deal Programs, President F. Roosevelt and his government, created a job program commonly known as Works Progress Administration (WPA). Under WPA, a smaller controversial program called the Writers’ Project employed some 65,000 writers in twenty six states. They recorded more than 10,000 stories and were planning to publish them in a series of comprehensive anthologies. Most never made it into print. Yet, it was touted mainly as the most significant black cultural revival in black history and was promoted by a very small band of intellectuals who had migrated to Harlem along with thousand ordinary folks who flocked there too.
but a re-creation of themes, variations of dreams, first posited by black artists during the twenties. The Harlem Renaissance, like no other period before or after it, represents the pinnacle of artistic achievement for black Americans.

Always present everywhere but rarely heard, let alone recorded, women's voices have not been a dominant mode of expression or a legitimate and acceptable alternative to such dominant modes. The public space of discourse becomes a contested space as she violates the established boundaries between silence and speech which reflects her experience and gives shape and meaning to it. The African American woman writer realized that in order to be herself in the present, she had to recapture and re-define her past. The reinvention of the slave narrative by black women writers in the late twentieth century constitutes the rebirth or perhaps the proudest tradition in African American literature. A "rebirth" responsible for elevating the slave mother from "three-fold servitude" and from virtual obscurity to a heroic status uniquely her own. And thus they are able to recover a sense of wholeness both in themselves and their history, and are finally empowering themselves to choose the direction of their lives. Thus, testifying to be the true pioneers, giving voice to previously untold stories and in the process revising both historical assumptions about black women
during slavery and popular conception of black women today. Their oppression, and courage becomes more real through the pages of the slave narratives. One of the refreshing aspects of the revaluation is not only the reappraisal of Phillis Wheatley or the rediscovery of Zora Neale Hurston, but also a deepening realization of the role that black women, both known and unknown, have historically played in building the institution of Black literature.

Women's speaking out was itself a departure from the traditional restraints upon women's assertiveness and daring. Invisible, without a future, and only growing old, these factors define the context out of which women grew. Women of color were seen as the objects of inquiry rather than the active participants in the definition of themselves. They broke open the shackles and wrote, and the details produced revealed radicalism of their own. Women dealing with their socially and psychologically restricted role assignments have turned to the chronological analysis of self, an attempt to discover the logic of socialization and behavior within a set time span, by unfolding their lives through autobiography. They were/are describing much more than individual experiences, experiences of a community of women who found in the public exchange a validating support system and a basis for critical thinking. Everyday we are recovering voices from the past, to
remind: “If de first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone, dese women togedder ought to be able to turn it back, and get it right side up again!”20 These writers are creating new vocabulary, new expressions, and new literary images that would give voice and substance within the world of literature to the new consciousness of women. Besides, they have enriched and expanded the international corpus of black literature.

From Harriet Jacobs and Harriet Wilson onward, African American women’s autobiographies were written 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. Subsequent African American women autobiographers, many of whom have been writers or professional women, have also tended to write as much for American (white) readers, as for the African American (black) readers. Their focus has been changing recently with the explosion of African American women’s fiction in the works of Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Ntozake Shange, Gloria Naylor, and many others.

Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself* (1861) introduces to the world in part the special horrors of slavery for women. When she penned her account of being a
slave and a woman, her narrative was governed by her simple assertion, "slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women. Superadded to the burden common to all, they have wrongs, and sufferings, and mortifications peculiarly their own." She was the first to depict slavery in gender specific terms.

Harriet E. Wilson's *Our Nig* (1859) has been rediscovered. Her narrative voices the freedom of expression, portrays woman as the primary enemy of herself rather than of a man. Wilson's narrative remains even more problematical as autobiography than Jacobs' for it is cast as a fiction and it remains overall, far more disturbing.

Ida Well's, *Crusade for Justice* (1928), is a narrative in which she apologizes to nobody. She takes the position that slavery still exists therefore, it is still appropriate to combat it with the old abolitionist fervor. But, *Crusade for Justice* unlike the original slave narratives came on the scene long after the abolitionist era was dead and gone, long before the rebirth of militant spirit among the black masses. There is no mass movement, no companion file of slave narrators traveling by her side. Resistance must be its own reward.

Anne Moody's *Coming of Age in Mississippi* (1968) like most contemporary African American women writers, has little use for
the old-time religion. She had the ambivalent fortune of being pretty. If she resists the attention of the whites, she is insolent and snobbish; if she does not, she is trying to get out of her place by exploiting them. On the other hand, she never suffers the insecurities of Maya Angelou. Perhaps, for this reason, her style lacks Maya Angelou’s quality of gentleness and humorous compassion for people's weaknesses.

Margaret Walker began her first novel *Jubilee* (1966), partially autobiographical, when she was nineteen and spent thirty years in completing it. In this novel, she gives a perspective on Southern life in the nineteenth century. In a usurping tale for all African Americans struggling for freedom and equality, Walker incorporated historical events into the fictionalized characters from slavery to the fifties.

Gwendolyn Brooks in *Maud Martha* (1953), an autobiographical novella, wrote about the beauty and bewilderment of America’s post World War-II urban African Americans with compassion, poetic innovation and a sharp, sensitive eye. Her highly stylized work has always been concerned with plain black folks. Initially, using Western poetic traditions, she infused these forms with the sounds, colors, confusions, dilemmas and dreams of the city-dwelling African Americans.
Nikki Giovanni wrote an autobiography in 1971, *Gemini: An Extended Autobiographical Statement on My First Twenty-Five Years of Being a Black Poet*. She sustains in her works the conflict of the public, political self versus the private, artistic one. She recognizes the creative force that has enabled African American women to continue in a world set against their survival.

Gayl Jones' novel *Corregidora* (1975) is basically a slave narrative. For her, art of storytelling is of major importance, for she *hears* her writing, rather than *sees* it. She has figured among the best of contemporary African American writers who have used black speech as a major aesthetic device in their works. She insists that her task is to record her observations with compassion and understanding, but without judgment.

Audre Lorde wrote *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* in 1982, which is considered as *biomythography*. *The Cancer Journals* also contain her life story. Her writing deals with the pain of being a person of color in a white-dominated world, but it does not depend on racial protest for its survival. Her race-oriented poems present and explore a conflict. She has gathered the bitter threads and woven them into the precious fabric of truth and beauty.

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\[n\] Carriacou (a town in Ireland) name for women who work together as friends and lovers, commonly known as lesbians.
Toni Cade Bambara writes in the article “Salvation Is the Issue”, “Stories are important. They keep us alive. [...] That is what I work to do: to produce stories that save our lives” (Evans 41). Bambara appears less concerned with mirroring the African American (black) existence in America than in chronicling the movement intended to improve and change that existence. She is one of them who preserves the history of her people by reciting it. Bambara perpetuates the struggle of her people in her works like *The Salt Eaters* (1980) by literally recording it in their own voices.

Ntozake Shange’s novel *Betsy Brown* (1957) is considered to be autobiographical. Her work characterizes an intense rendering of emotional lives, frequently painful, sometimes ecstatic, but always ruthlessly honest. Shange works at the anger she feels at the roles forced upon African American women by American society. She also highlights the havoc caused by superficially imposed sexual attitudes upon all intimate relationships. With an unswerving eye and a jazz musician’s ear, Shange depicts the struggles that African American women still face today.

Zora Neale Hurston in her autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942), revealed her stance on race relations in America. She maintained that African American artists should celebrate the positive aspects of African American life instead of indulging in
what she termed “the sobbing school of Negrohood.” Yet, Zora Neale Hurston acknowledged racial prejudice and published essays on the problem in several journals and magazines. Her play *Color Struck* (1925) addresses bigotry within the African American community, specifically the favoring of light-skinned over dark-skinned African Americans. And, her sketches of the figures of her childhood in the *Eatonville Anthology* show her enormous sense of details, fine ear for language, and deep sympathy for human foibles. The essay, “How It Feels to be Colored Me” suggests how independent her views of life and race were. This independence eventually led to feuds, idiosyncratic personal and political positions and alienation from many of her fellow writers.

**Maya Angelou** has written a stream of six autobiographies beginning in 1969 and terminating it in 2002. The first being, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and the last being *A Song Flung up to Heaven*. The essence of Maya Angelou’s composite is that African American progress has been attained in this country not only because of the leadership of African American (black) men, but also because of the unsung spirit of noncompliant African American women. This is the revelation she intends to celebrate through the sensitive portrayals of major women in her life. And, if African
American women are to "paddle their own canoes" (Evans 310) in postindustrial society they must do it through force of intellect.

Toni Morrison's autobiographical novels *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Sula* (1973) and *Beloved* (1987) won her worldwide acclaim. Her novels are characterized by meticulously crafted prose, using ordinary words to produce lustrous, lyrical phrases and to portray precise emotional perceptions. Her extraordinary characters struggle to understand aspects of the human condition, good and evil, love, friendship, beauty, ugliness and death. While her stories seem to unfold with natural ease, the reader can discern the great care Toni Morrison has taken in constructing them.

Alice Walker breaks the rules by writing about "womanist" issues and she defines a womanist as a "black feminist" who employs a womanist process. For, many of her stories reflect the present. The process of confusion, resistance to the established order, and the discovery of a freeing order are all prerequisites for growth, especially for women. The term "womanist", credited to Alice Walker and introduced in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (1983), resonates with meaning for much of the work being written by African American women in the late twentieth century. Walker defines a person who subscribes to this philosophy as "[c]ommitted to survival and wholeness of [her] entire people, male and
female" (Walker Introduction xi). Few contemporary American
writers have examined so many facets of sex and race, love and
societal changes, as has Alice Walker in the autobiographical novel
The Color Purple (1982), without abandoning the personal grace
that distinguishes her voice.

Thus, there is produced a literature that is personally driven
and socially charged, literature that simultaneously honors tradition
and creates it. Through the genre of autobiography, these writers
not only celebrate the African American woman as she is today but
also articulate for their readers her rich and varied heritage, a
heritage deserving recognition and proud acknowledgement. Recent
writings by African American women seem to explore human
concerns somewhat in a different way. The women writers not only
treat issues and ideas that are important to African Americans, they
bring to their work insight, creative imagination, sensitive warmth--
the special gifts of the African American women artists. They use
the autobiography to document their differences in self-perception
as well as their concerns for themselves and others, their sense of
themselves as part of a distinct women's culture and racial
community. Today, womanist autobiographies challenge the
boundaries of conventional autobiographical form, indeed, play with
some of its conventions such as the autobiographical pact of
confessional truth-telling. A narrative that moves uni-directionally from birth/beginning to maturity/resolution, end and the insistence on a unitary self.

At the end of the twentieth century, we are witnessing the erosion of stresses of "women". It reveals the extent to which the feminist analyses have been limited by class and race bias and by gender. The subject of feminism and the subject of positions of women have been narrowed and unified in the name of political representation and social change. Transformation of individual consciousness, and ultimately of society, has always been the main agenda of feminism. Socialization works on consciousness to create what one experiences as gaps in the identity, between private and public, personal and political and feminist theory and practice have sought to reconcile these false separations. Contemporary black women's autobiographies have had a consciousness-jarring impact on the understanding of the social basis of identity formation and to propel the construction of individual identity along the path of least social resistance.

One such figure was Zora Neale Hurston. She had known firsthand, a culturally different aesthetic tradition. Her commitment to folklore as a field of study was an inchoate challenge to the cultural imperialism. Walking forward through thick and thin and
rough edges of life, Hurston could frequently hide behind masks, but could also express life's excitement genuinely. Today, she stands as a literary artist of sufficient talent, worthy of intensive study, both as an artist and as an intellect. She holds a significant place in American literary history. She is widely regarded as one of the collectors of black American folklore who have historical importance. The Modern Language Association (MLA), the professional arm of the academic literary establishment, held a special Hurston seminar during its national convention in 1975. Hurston is an autobiographer who committed her life's work to the celebration of African American culture.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


