Book Chapters

2010

Autobiography and African American Women's Literature

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Black women’s autobiographical writing in the Americas has been shaped by a unique literary inheritance, by challenges faced, and by day-to-day experience. The inheritance is a rich one rooted not only in written literary models, but also in the African American oral tradition of spiritual narrative and bearing witness, in traditions of protest, in work song and blues, in Anglo-European aesthetic and linguistic models, and in rich and subtle variations of diverse and creolized origin. In Black Women Writing Autobiography (1989), I argued that black women autobiographers constitute a tradition within a tradition, operating within the dominant, familiar, and essentially masculinist modes of autobiography. Simultaneously, however, these same black women writers reshape and redefine their inherited formulae.

Defying every attempt to enslave or diminish them or their self-expression in any way, black women autobiographers liberate themselves from stereotyped views of black womanhood, and define their own experiences. In the parlance of Audre Lorde, black women writers attempt to dismantle the master’s cardboard house of false superiority, threatening not only the notion of “whiteness” but also patriarchy and with it the very idea that man is closer to God than woman. They construct instead a uniquely black and female autobiographical self, leaving a literary legacy and providing guidance, encouragement, and direction both for readers and for future literary trends. This chapter does not propose to cover every instance of black women’s autobiographical writing, but rather to pursue the relationship between letters and liberation in representative examples of black women’s writing as they develop in response to the challenges faced by successive generations.

The scarcity of written contributions by black women to the autobiographical genre in eighteenth-century America reflects their displacement and marginalization within the dominant society. While Ben Franklin sat comfortably at his desk writing The Autobiography, black women toiled in the fields and labored in the heat of colonial kitchens; few women of any race had more than minimal literacy. Black men were similarly challenged, though they were
more prolific (or at least more frequently published) than black women in the early years. While there is no eighteenth-century autobiographical work by a black woman to rival the eighteenth-century narratives of Quobna Ottobah Cugoano or Olaudah Equiano, surviving autobiographical fragments confirm black women's conscious effort to document life experiences and invoke positive change.

In the beginning, the memory of Africa and the Middle Passage was represented in the "as told to" stories of Yamba, born on the Gold Coast turned slave coast of West Africa, and of Belinda, a woman of probable Nigerian origin. Neither Belinda nor Yamba was able, in the terms established by critic William Andrews, "to tell a free story," as both were enslaved and neither was able to read or write. Belinda's *The Cruelty of Men Whose Faces Were Like the Moon* (1787) appears in the form of a petition to the state legislature of New York for reparations from the estate of her late master. Although she was dependent on someone else to give form and shape to her story, Belinda's petition conveys her memories of family and Africa, the shock of enslavement, the Middle Passage, and her attempts to grasp a new language and render it to service.3

*Yamba*, whose story was presented in first-person song form by a sympathetic listener (probably the English feminist, evangelist and antislavery writer, Hannah More), recounted experiences similar to those of Belinda. A bond servant who presumably learned English as an adult, she too relied on a sympathetic listener:

From the bush at even tide
Rush'd the fierce man-stealing Crew;
Seiz'd the Children by my side,
Seiz'd the wretched Yamba too.4

The usual questions persist: did Yamba really exist and is this her own story or the creation of a passionately antislavery ghostwriter? How much is a true and a faithful representation? Were there embellishments and/or exaggerations? What might have been altered or left out for the sake of an intended audience? Without being able to verify Yamba's existence, even the most basic of these questions cannot be answered, yet the first-person claim for truth value, even if fictive, remains haunting and pregnant with possibility.

Diverse African cultures were rich in oral literature, and, therefore, the inability to write did not mean that a bondswoman might not be able to express herself autobiographically in another form. Given the prevalence of poetic language and song in African culture, one imagines many Yambas and Belindas, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Billie Hollidays and Nina
Simones, singing their lives in their very own languages, unnoticed or dismissed as happy slaves, and, finally, erased.

Phillis Wheatley, a native of Senegambia often portrayed in the Americas and England as an apologist for slavery, wrote these anguished and angry words:

I, young in life, by seeming cruel fate,
Was snatch’d from Afric’s fancy’d happy seat:
What pangs excruciating must molest,
What sorrows labour in my parent’s breast?
Steel’d was that soul, and by no misery mov’d,
That from a father seized the babe belov’d.  

Freed, Wheatley was still not free; she did indeed make concessions to her imagined “white” reader on many occasions. Here, however, she subverts the traditional sonnet form to protest her kidnapping and enslavement. Operating both within and without dominant literary modes, Wheatley critiques the proffered patriarchal model by reminding the reader of her outraged and bereaved African father.

If I were writing a book on black women’s autobiography today, I would still begin by looking at the works of fugitive and former slave women, because however one looks at a tradition of black women writing autobiography, the slave narrative, or, if you prefer, the narrative of emancipation, is primary. William Andrews observes that “[t]he slave narrative evolved between 1830 and 1860 as a way of letting slaves themselves have a voice in their cause as both eyewitnesses to the horrors of slavery and I-witnesses to their own feelings as human beings caught up in such a monstrous system.” If this is an important distinction, for of the many who were “eyewitnesses,” only a few would seize the self-liberatory impulse and fasten it to literary “I-witnessing” in autobiography.

Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself* (1861), once devalued and now canonized with greater and lesser degrees of satisfaction, has been fully authenticated and reclaimed, thanks to the works of Jean Yellin, William Andrews, Frances Smith Foster, Hazel Carby, and others. In my earlier work, I posit the heroine Linda Brent (Jacobs) and her grandmother as primary examples of the outraged mother archetype and Linda Brent’s verbal use of “sass” as a weapon of self-defense used against her would-be rapist master. Meanwhile, entire volumes are now devoted to analysis and scrutiny of Jacobs’s narrative and its placement within the slave narrative genre and traditions of autobiography and women’s writing. I refer the reader to Yvonne Johnson’s *The Voices of African American Women* (1998), Angelyn Mitchell’s *The Freedom to Remember* (2002), and Harriet Jacobs
and “Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl”: New Critical Essays (1996), the volume edited by Rafia Zafar and Deborah H. Garfield. There is, in addition, a plethora of other books and articles which treat Jacobs’s autobiographical work, which remains at the center of any discussion of black women’s participation in the slave narrative genre. And the importance of the slave narrative, or the narrative of emancipation, to the larger tradition of African American letters has long been acknowledged.

Central to the early autobiographical writings by black women, as several scholars have argued, is a definition of black womanhood posed against conventional white notions of “true womanhood,” with their myriad pretensions. Unlike masculinist autobiographies where the author or protagonist is most frequently himself, the black and female slave narrator often sites or situates her mother or another celebrated black and female figure as the heroine of the text. Angelyn Mitchell argues that “[i]n African American culture, feminist individuality has little in common with the Anglo-American concept of rugged individualism. For mainstream Anglo-America, individuals refer to the efforts by which the isolated individual advances. In African American female culture, the individual’s efforts are part of and supported by the community.”

From a similar perspective, William Andrews notes “the slave mother or some comparable black and maternal figure, more than the female narrator herself, plays the hero’s role in most black women’s autobiographies.”

In Incidents, Linda Brent successfully subverts the enslaver’s language and letters and uses them as a means to her own liberation: “When Flint finds the beautiful slave girl teaching herself to write, he attempts to pervert her quest for literacy into a seduction.” Flint even forces Linda’s brother William to take her a sexually explicit note, degrading both brother and sister. However, Linda turns the tables. After she has secreted herself in her grandmother’s home, she deceives Flint into thinking that she has escaped to the North by having a friend mail her letters from New York and Boston; these are her letters of liberation. Her ultimate triumph, though, is her backtalking narrative, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. In many cases, autobiographies become the black woman’s letters of liberation, addressed first to herself, then to the community that surrounds and supports her, and, finally, to the hostile outside world.

Like Harriet Brent Jacobs, Susie King Taylor and Elizabeth Keckley are outraged mothers seeking brighter futures for their children; they also critique patriarchy, freedom, and the hypocritical but accepted notions of legitimacy and ideal womanhood. In Behind the Scenes; or, Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House (1868), Keckley, a mixed race woman, asks the question, “Why should my son be held in slavery?” Keckley believed that
all enslaved persons were entitled to freedom, but the fact that both her son’s father and her own were white, is clearly part of the irony that she probes. In *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp With the U.S. 33rd Colored Troops* (1902), Susie King Taylor details her experiences as a Union nurse behind the Confederate lines in South Carolina. After the war, she makes a dangerous trip deep into Louisiana to go to her son, who was urgently in need of medical care. Taylor concludes her narrative on a plaintive and ironic note: “It seemed very hard, when his father fought to protect the Union and our flag, and yet this boy was denied a berth to carry him home to die, because he was a Negro.” Even her husband’s military service in the Civil War fails to legitimize his son’s citizenship rights.

Other notable slave (and exslave) narratives by black women include: *The History of Mary Prince* (1831), *Memoir of Old Elizabeth, a Colored Woman* (1863), *The Story of Mattie J. Jackson* (1866), *From the Darkness Cometh the Light or Struggles for Freedom* (c.1891), Kate Drumgoold’s *A Slave Girl’s Story* (1898), and Annie L. Burton’s *Memories of Childhood’s Slavery Days* (1909). Conveniently published as *Six Women’s Slave Narratives* (1988) and with an introduction by William Andrews, these autobiographies continue in their celebration of the enslaved black women who mothered and mentored others. Andrews observes, “[A]s early as Prince’s story, female slave narrators portrayed the enslaved black woman as a person of near-indomitable dedication to the highest principles of human dignity and individual freedom.”

Even though these post-emancipation accounts do not focus on a quest for physical freedom, they reflect earlier works in the tradition:

Writing narratives of slavery offered women like Drumgoold and Burton, who had had little direct experience of bondage, the opportunity to celebrate their mothers as examples of genuine female heroism … the most dramatic scenes in the autobiographies of Jackson, Delaney and Burton are those that depict the herculean (and usually successful) efforts of slave mothers to keep their families together in slavery and to reunite them after emancipation.

This pattern of praising the maternal heroine repeats itself in the twentiethcentury autobiographies of Maya Angelou, Audre Lorde, and others. Narratives of vision and power constitute an important “type” among early spiritual autobiographies by black American women. These narratives combine a quest for personal power with the assertion of a literary self; the authors seek “power with God” and experience dreams, premonitions, and visions. Such works include *Productions of Mrs. Maria Stewart* (1835); *The Life and Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee; Giving an Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel* (1936); *Memoirs of the Life, Religious Experience and Travels of Mrs. Zilpha Elaw* (1846); *A Brand

Looking closely at nineteenth-century autobiographies by African American women, the student and the scholar must also acknowledge travel accounts, memoirs and texts that defy or straddle genres — works like Nellie Arnold Plummer’s Out of the Depths or The Triumph of the Cross, Plummer’s unique spiritual memoir and family history. Plummer, a school teacher and church leader, had few “leisure hours to devote to contemplation and study,” but her Out of the Depths (1927) is an intriguing volume that is rarely written about — a blend of history, memoir, and reminiscence. Plummer claimed to be inspired by the “Voice of God.” Her volume contains spiritual visions, revelations and biblical imagery which guide the author and her family and at the same time give form to the text. Telling the collected stories of her family in their movement from slavery to freedom was so important to Plummer that she mortgaged the family farm to self-publish the book.

Other nineteenth-century hybrids include A Narrative of the Life and Travels of Mrs. Nancy Prince (1850) and An Autobiography: The Story of the Lord’s Dealings With Mrs. Amanda Smith (1893), both the work of free black women. Prince’s evangelical travel narrative records her experiences in Russia and her work as a missionary in Jamaica. Like both the author of the slave narrative and the more traditional spiritual autobiographer, Prince relies on divine deliverance. In defining her autobiographical identity, Prince wrote about her clash with church officials about her appropriate role as a female missionary and also about her direct contributions to the education and uplift of the black race, especially women. Because her younger sister had become a prostitute, Prince’s “gospel temperance” preaching often targeted younger women. Amanda Berry Smith’s Autobiography is another work that defies or straddles genre. A gifted “Holiness” preacher, Smith incorporates a spiritual journey motif within her missionary travel narrative, which follows her to Liberia, India, England, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales. Meanwhile, “as told to” autobiographical accounts by Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth, while they do not qualify as “free stories,” nonetheless have a place in the tradition as they “‘radicalize’ the form of spiritual autobiography and recreate it as a tool for temporal liberation.”

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Inevitably, many, and perhaps most, autobiographers, journal keepers and authors of personal narratives die without seeing their works published. A few examples of important autobiographical writings published posthumously are worth mentioning here: *The Journal of Charlotte Forten* (1853, 1988), transcribed from Forten’s five 1854–92 diaries by Anna Julia Cooper and subsequently edited first by Ray Allen Billington and then Brenda Stevenson; *Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells* (1970), written for publication by Wells herself between 1928 and 1934, and edited and published by her daughter, Alfreda M. Duster; and Rebecca Cox Jackson’s *Gifts of Power* (1971), a collection of autobiographical documents written by the Shaker elders between 1833 and 1864, retrieved from Shaker archives and edited by Jean Humez. Of these three, only Wells prepared her autobiography for publication; working on her kitchen table from notes and papers, Wells died leaving her work in mid-sentence. Forten, who served behind Confederate lines as a teacher of black “contrabands” during the Civil War, published excerpts of her wartime diary in *The Atlantic Monthly*, but left the bulk of her journal behind as a series of handwritten diaries. Bringing each of these autobiographies to light required an extraordinary effort on the part of the individual editors, in essence an intergenerational collaboration between the living and the dead.

Ida B. Wells intended her life story, eventually published as *Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells*, a title supplied by the University of Chicago Press, “not only as her own but also as the story of her people and her times.” In a way, she chronicles the challenges black people faced during the era of Reconstruction:

> We have Frederick Douglass’s history of slavery as he knew and experienced it. But of the storm and stress immediately after the Civil War, of the Ku Klux Klan, of ballot stuffing, wholesale murders of Negroses who tried to exercise their newfound rights as free men and citizens, the carpetbag invasion about which the South published much that is false, and the Negroes’ political life in that era — our race has little of its own that is definite and authentic.

As she neared the end of her life, Wells wanted to leave behind a corrective legacy, something definite and authentic, and to offer her life as a symbol of the struggle for freedom and a black *voice*. As a journalist and antilynching activist, Wells lived a life in opposition to the enforced silencing and misrepresentation of the black voice. She faced the very real danger that she herself would be killed for debunking the myth that black men raped white women.

Wells also revealed the flip side of the sexual double standard, the fact that many a “respected” white leader of a southern lynch mob was himself the
father of a mixed-race child forced on a black woman. In any case, Wells, as a writer and editor for the *Memphis Free Speech*, refused to be silent, and she advanced a withering critique of race and gender relations. In her 1892 essay, “Southern Horrors, Lynch Law in All Its Phases,” Wells wrote: “The miscegenation laws of the South only operate against the legitimate union of the races; they leave the white man free to seduce all the colored girls he can, but it is death to the colored man who yields to the force and advances of a similar attraction in white women.” Words like these inspired an angry white mob to destroy the type of Wells’s press, put a price on her head, and force her into exile in the North.

A mother and a worker for universal suffrage, Wells often came into conflict with both black men and white suffragists who disagreed with her point of view and her right to speak and agitate for black and women’s causes. It is therefore no wonder that Wells felt compelled to tell her free story, which not only provides a view of her times but also justifies her unconventional and heroic life. Wells’s daughter, Alfreda Duster, understood the importance of the volume and submitted it to various publishers over a period of thirty-five years before it appeared in a series John Hope Franklin edited for the University of Chicago Press. Though Wells had completed *Crusade for Justice* thirty-five years earlier, it appears in print at the beginning of the 1970s, followed closely by the activist autobiographies of Angela Davis, Elaine Brown, and Assata Shakur. The retrieval of this work published almost four decades after it was written represents the recovery of part of the “lost ground” of black women’s autobiography.

Another part of this “lost ground” may be uncovered by taking a serious look at works of performers and entertainers often written in collaboration with a second party. Scholars often turn away from such works out of a concern for authenticity, although many aspects of these criteria are met. Music is one of the spheres of culture where the oral tradition and written literature collide and/or embrace. Surely, the voices of Ethel Waters, Marian Anderson, Nina Simone, and Tina Turner should be included in our collective thinking about what constitutes the autobiographical tradition of black women. Pushing the traditional boundaries of genre makes it possible to see fresh relationships between the artist, the material written or performed and the community.

It is significant that three of these collaborative autobiographies bear a song as title. Waters’s *His Eye is on the Sparrow* (with Charles Samuels, 1950), Anderson’s *My Lord, What a Morning* (with Howard Taubman, 1956), and Simone’s *I Put a Spell on You* (with Stephen Cleary, 1993) are more familiar to many readers as the names of songs than as titles of autobiographies, and when Tina Turner’s *I, Tina* (with Kurt Loder, 1986) was released as a movie,
it was called *What's Love Got to Do with It?* after her autobiographical song of the same title. Each evokes a sense of orality and a reminder of the influence of oral traditions, especially, in this case spirituals, gospel, and the blues. From this “insider–outsider” position, the subjects bring additional perspectives on the black and female experience.

Both Waters and Anderson grew up in Philadelphia, but whereas Anderson was protected and raised by a loving family, Waters’s experience, as represented in *His Eye is on the Sparrow*, was considerably more raw:

> I never was a child.  
> I never was coddled, or liked, or understood by my family.  
> I never felt I belonged.  
> I was born out of wedlock, but that had nothing to do with all this.  
> To people like mine a thing like that just didn’t mean much.  
> Nobody brought me up.18

Indeed, Waters’s book and the two by Simone and Turner have some “sensational” aspects. But the autobiographies of all three women reflect their experiences as survivors of abuse and neglect who emerge triumphant despite challenges in their home life and from the dominant culture.

“By the time I was seven,” Waters, the original star of *Shuffle Along*, writes, “I knew all about sex and life in the raw. I could outcurse any stevedore…” (p. 1). Waters was also a blues singer. Yet when she played the character of Hagar in Du Bose Heyward’s *Mamba’s Daughters*, she prayed for strength to tell what she saw as the story of her mother, who delivered Ethel at age thirteen after being raped by a neighborhood youth while Ethel’s grandmother was at work: “Momweeze was always as unhappy as Hagar, and as lonely. Playing that role gave me new insight into the depthless nature of her loneliness, and also the loneliness that I’ve known ever since I was born” (p. 253). Even after her Broadway successes, Waters was haunted by the very real problem of finding for her mother a mental health facility that would treat women of color. And like Marian Anderson and others of their generation, Waters suffered insults and needless inconvenience when traveling, especially when she performed on the segregated Theatre Owners Booking Agency (TOBA) circuit in the South. Her story offers a personal narrative of a vernacular performance landscape peopled by Florence Mills, Josephine Baker, Canada Lee, Bill Robinson, Darryl Zanuck, Carl Van Vechten, and others; it has *a voice*, and that voice has left a legacy, not only in writing autobiography, but also in documenting the history of black theatre and music history.

Anderson, of course, is popularly remembered for her publicly defiant act of singing on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial on Easter Sunday, April 10,
1939, after being denied access to the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) owned Constitution Hall in Washington, DC, but her life as portrayed in autobiography stands for so much more than that. Indeed, Anderson’s ascent is nothing short of phenomenal. From her early training in the choir of her church, through her family’s struggle for economic survival after the death of her father, and her increasing determination to acquire more formal training and eventually to perform opera and German Lieder, this too is the story of a forerunner. But the volumes have their differences. Whereas Ethel Waters represents primarily a connection with the blues and vernacular culture, Marian Anderson makes her mark in the rarified air of classical music. She did not sing the blues, and when she did sing African American spirituals, the very manner in which she performed them emphasized their universal appeal, “complex simplicity” and timeless elegance. The spiritual, emanating from the mouth of this woman who always sang with her eyes closed, as if praying, became visible as a true form of American classical music. But this triumph has its price. For an audition with one of her early teachers, a Mr. Giuseppe Boghetti, Anderson sang the spiritual “Deep River”:

At that first audition, I should add, Mr. Boghetti had given me a scale to sing after I had finished “Deep River.” Once I began to appear regularly at his studio I found out why. He had discovered unequal tones in that scale, and he set to work to iron out the unevenness. It gradually dawned on me that, although I had worked with two teachers, I had not yet reached the point where I had relinquished my wholly natural and spontaneous manner of singing for a consistently controlled method. 19

Whereas Waters’s autobiography has those qualities of naturalness and spontaneity, Anderson’s has the same evenness of tone and the same “consistently controlled method” throughout, partly perhaps, because of the collaborator, but also, perhaps, because of what Anderson herself chose as a dignified self-defining persona. While still a deeply intriguing read, it comes off “stiff” in comparison to most other autobiographies by black women performers.

Nina Simone’s I Put a Spell on You crosses over into the subgenre of political autobiography; like its author, the book defies categorization. Simone, also known as “the High Priestess of Soul,” played “popular songs in a classical style with classical technique.” 20 Like the precolonial African griot-troubadour-poets, who went in front unafraid to lead warriors into battle with their words, Simone contributed inspired protest songs to the civil rights struggle of the 1960s. In addition, many of Simone’s autobiographical songs transcend her individual perspective and become vehicles for the collective consciousness of the civil rights movement as well as rituals of remembrance.
for fallen heroes, black and white, and often black and female. As such, the collected body of Simone’s work, with written autobiography and songs taken together, offers an unusual opportunity to view the autobiographer as performer, both on the stage and on the page, in the context of her larger community.

Like Marian Anderson, Simone, née Eunice Kathleen Waymon, who grew up in Tryon, North Carolina, got her first musical training in the church. Her father, a barber, worked many different jobs, depending upon the state of his health. Eunice often took care of her father, making him milkshakes when he could consume nothing else; the two had a special relationship. Meanwhile, her mother worked as a maid outside the home and Eunice was largely raised by her older sister, Lucille, and Eunice’s relationship with her mother faltered because she scarcely saw her.

Even though Tryon was a segregated community, Eunice gained support for her talents from both blacks and whites. In fact, Mrs. Miller, the woman for whom her mother worked, paid for the entire first year of Eunice’s music lessons with Mrs. Massinovitch, her first piano teacher. After the end of that first year, Mrs. Massinovitch arranged a scholarship fund for Eunice, and, when the time came, she helped her find a more advanced teacher to prepare Eunice for conservatory and raised enough money to send her to Juilliard for a year. Eunice Kathleen Waymon was classically trained and hoped to enter the Curtis Conservatory in Philadelphia as a scholarship student after her year at Juilliard, but she was turned down by the school, which had no black students but which had auditioned her, because it was reluctant to take on a girl who was black, poor, and unknown.

Marian Anderson had earlier been turned down by a prestigious conservatory in the same city, but she dismisses the incident in her autobiography, saying that the school no longer exists and that its name does not matter. Simone mentions Anderson in describing her own situation, but does not directly allude to Anderson’s earlier rejection. What kind of an institution calling itself a conservatory of music could dismiss Marian Anderson or Nina Simone? In both cases, the undeserved rejection was devastating – the worst part was Eunice’s loss of self-esteem. Eventually, the answer trickled down from the circle of Anderson’s friends, and Eunice felt for the first time, the sting of discrimination. This discrimination was different from being forced to eat her melted cheese sandwich on the steps of the Tryon Country Store on the way to her music lessons with “Miz Mazzy” while whites sat at the counter; Eunice had accepted that. Turned away by the Curtis Conservatory, Eunice had the idea of playing the Midtown Bar in Atlantic City, but knew her mother, now a Methodist preacher, would sanction her for being “in the world,” so she presented herself under the stage name “Nina Simone” and
immediately developed a following. She saved her money and continued her Juilliard studies. In time, she would marry Don Ross, described as "a white boy, a good looking man with a slow smile and charm" and move to New York City. Don, a salesman, preferred hanging out with beatnik poets to working, and, predictably, the marriage failed. A second marriage, to Andy Stroud, a black former police detective described as a jealous and abusive husband, would also fail. Simone moved out of the tiny apartment she had shared with Don, got her own place, and eventually attracted the mentorship of Langston Hughes, James Baldwin, Lorraine Hansberry, and others who educated her on the nascent black protest movement.

Of her friendship with Hansberry, Simone writes, "we never talked about men or clothes or other such inconsequential things when we got together. It was always Marx, Lenin and revolution – real girls’ talk" (p. 87). Real girls’ talk, for real black women like Nina Simone and Lorraine Hansberry, includes topics both political and pressing, far removed from the usual beauty shop connotations. Simone would later commemorate Hansberry’s life and work by writing and performing the song “To Be Young, Gifted and Black” taken from the title of Hansberry’s last and unfinished play. In this song, Simone sings about being “haunted” by her youth, a possible reference to her Curtis Conservatory experience.

In “To Be Young, Gifted and Black,” the High Priestess of Soul not only praises her lost friend, she reaches out to another generation to provide the same sort of encouragement and direction offered in much of black women’s writing. A griot, troubadour and poet for the children of the civil rights era, she lifted our spirits and girded our armor as we faced fire hoses, police dogs, bombings, and assassinations. Ultimately, Simone’s autobiography *I Put a Spell on You* is not only the record of a life but also a challenge to transcend the madness and the trauma of the American racial nightmare in acceptance of one’s gifts – a call to lead and to serve.

These same images, the beloved patriarchs of non-violence lying dead in pools of their own blood and photographs of peaceful marchers beset by fire hoses and German shepherd police dogs, determined new directions for the black liberation in America including a political and cultural identification with Africa and with black liberation struggles around the globe. Coining a phrase first used by Richard Wright to interrogate the global “color curtain” and later to celebrate independence in Ghana, West Africa, the “Black Power” movement was born, like a phoenix rising from the ashes of the martyred dead.

“Black Power” was committed to freedom from oppression, especially capitalism and racism, yet ironically the struggle for freedom from sexual oppression and gender bias took a back seat. Within this arena, black women
activists were challenged by threats of death, beatings, rape, mutilation, and separation from their children and families. Sometimes the challenges came from outside, from the police, the FBI, and jailers, but, ironically, at other times, the violence, both sexual and otherwise, came from within the organizations they served and from the men they loved. It is not surprising, therefore, that there are, to date, only three book-length autobiographies by women Black Power activists in print; these are *Angela Davis: An Autobiography* (1974), Assata Shakur's *Assata* (1987), and Elaine Brown's *A Taste of Power: A Black Woman's Story* (1992). In her prize-winning monograph, *Autobiography as Activism: Three Black Women of the Sixties*, Margo Perkins reads these works as “extensions of the writers’ political activism” (cover):

Angela Davis, Assata Shakur, and Elaine Brown exemplify a radical current in African American political resistance. Their individual and collective commitment to revolutionary activism is evident in the kind of autobiography each produces. Like other leftist radicals, Davis, Shakur and Brown seek through their work (as both activists and writers) to alter mass consciousness by disrupting the status quo in a way they believe will lead to progressive social transformation.22

In the tradition of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, these modern captivity narratives express a transcendent liberatory impulse and brave defiance; however, these authors inherit more the stuff and substance of a continuing struggle than a particular autobiographical form. Perkins observes that “[t]hemes and motifs traceable from the emancipation narratives” of fugitive slaves, especially “the struggle for literacy and the commitment to self-education it necessarily entails,” run through the life stories of these women whose immersion in organized resistance movements led them to become fugitives. However, she notes, “even had Davis, Shakur and Brown not read these or other such texts, their experiences under racist oppression, as well as their participation in African American collective consciousness, would have been sufficient to create noteworthy parallels between their texts and those of their forebears.”23

Angela Davis, the target of a national “manhunt” in a murder case in which she was finally found not guilty, felt that her real crime was being an intellectual and a Communist allied with black liberation struggles. Assata Shakur was pursued on the New Jersey Turnpike, shot, and later beaten by police. “They kept me under those blinding lights for days,” writes Shakur, today living in exile in Cuba. “I felt I was going blind. I was seeing everything in doubles and triples. When Evelyn, my lawyer, came to see me, I complained. Finally, after Evelyn accused them of torture, they turned the lights off at
eleven. But every fifteen minutes or so they would shine a huge floodlight into the cell.”24 She also reminds the reader that under the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution, slavery is still legal in prisons: “Well, that explained a lot of things. That explained why jails and prisons all over the country are filled to the brim with Black and Third World People, why so many Black people can’t find a job on the streets and are forced to survive the best way they know how. Once you’re in prison, there are plenty of jobs…” (p. 64). Enslaved in New Jersey jails in the twentieth century, Shakur conceives her daughter while locked down with Kamau, a brother member of the Black Liberation Army, after they were barred from the courtroom during trial. Weary from the isolation of solitary confinement, they enjoy each other’s company and take advantage of the privacy, even though Shakur is facing a possible life sentence. Shakur defiantly refuses to identify the father: “I’ll tell them that this baby was sent by the Black creator to liberate Black people. I’ll tell them this baby is the new Black messiah, conceived in a holy way, come to lead our people to freedom and justice and to create a new black nation” (p. 123).

Elaine Brown, the first woman to lead the Black Panther Party, tells the story of a different experience. Brown details her beating and sexual abuse by Huey P. Newton, her lover and supposed comrade, and the violent “discipline” forced upon sister Panthers by men who resented the presence of women in leadership roles. She began to fight back:

There would be no further impositions on me by men, including black men, including Black Panther men. I would support every assertion of human rights by women – from the right to abortion to the right of equality with men as laborers and leaders. I would declare that the agenda of the Black Panther Party and our revolution to free black people from oppression specifically included black women.

I would denounce loudly the philosophies of the Karengas, who raised the name of Africa to justify the suppression of black women. I would lambaste the civil-rights men who had dismissed the importance of women like Fannie Lou Hammer and Ella Baker and Daisy Bates and even Kathleen Cleaver. I would not tolerate any raised fists in my face or any Black Power handshakes, or even the phrase “Black Power,” for all of it now symbolized to me the denial of the black woman in favor of the freedom of “the black man.”

I would reclaim my womanhood and my place.25

Reclaiming her womanhood and her place was a dangerous proposition. Eventually, she fled with her daughter Erika into the night, traveling light, seeking sanctuary with her mother in Los Angeles. Though she lived in Oakland, she flew from San Francisco, employing multiple strategies of disguise and concealment reminiscent of the escape of a Frederick Douglass or a Harriet Jacobs. The ironic difference is that she is fleeing her own
“comrades,” her own “brothers and sisters.” “Freedom,” writes Brown, “That was all I could think about in those first seconds away from the Black Panther Party” (p. 449). On the final page of her modern day narrative of liberation, Brown dreams the dream of the outraged mother, the dream of a better life for her child: “One night just before bed / She shocked me when she said / What would happen if I died / 'Cause no one cared / When black girls cried – / Oh, Erika, my little baby, / Erika, my little child, / Erika, there is no maybe / I'll change the world for you / In just a little while ...” (p. 456).

These black women activists publicly theorize their lives in an attempt to reach others and to win them to liberation causes; autobiography becomes a political tool in their hands. Angela Davis, for example, “had come to envision” her effort as a “political autobiography that emphasized the people, the events and the forces in my life that propelled me to my present commitment.” She hoped to inspire “more people – Black, Brown, Red, Yellow and white ... to join our growing community of struggle” (p. xvi). But Perkins astutely notes another purpose, as the publication of autobiography also becomes a form of protection:

Not only does the ability to read and write facilitate individual physical and psychic liberation, it also opens up the possibility of amassing an audience. During a period when both Davis and Shakur were extremely vulnerable to political neutralization and/or detention stemming from their activities, for example, their writing of an autobiography was a useful means of protecting themselves from renewed harassment and persecution ... In making the public aware of their predicament, they endeavored to amass potential support and also to undermine the ability of the state to retaliate against them in secrecy. The same is potentially true for Elaine Brown, who ultimately comes to fear the Black Panther Party almost as much as “the state.” The black women activists and political autobiographers are, as Perkins observes, not only “writing their lives,” but “writing for their lives.” Thus, autobiography, and political autobiography in particular, becomes both sword and shield for these black women activists. Indeed, Angela Davis, Assata Shakur, and Elaine Brown inscribe their lives in the symbolic language of autobiography to advance the cause of black liberation, to bear witness, to offer analysis, provide direction, to help create a better world, and, ultimately, to save their own lives. They are the survivors amidst many who were lost along the way, and their twentieth-century narratives of emancipation chart the psychic course of a latter-day underground railroad.

Autobiographies and memoirs that are primarily literary in their form and intent confront still a different set of challenges. Such works include Katherine Dunham's *A Touch of Innocence* (1959), *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*
(1970) by Maya Angelou, Generations (1976) by Lucille Clifton, Audre Lorde’s Zami: A New Spelling of My Name (1982), and Soldier: A Poet’s Childhood (2000) by June Jordan. Though almost all of these writers are involved in activist struggles, the emphasis here is primarily on the developmental aspects of coming to consciousness of self as black women and artists.

Those looking to Katherine Dunham’s A Touch of Innocence (1959), a forerunner in this genre, for a glimpse of her life as dancer, choreographer, and anthropologist will be disappointed, for this is not the story of this eminent woman’s public life but rather a poignant and personal story written in a form that dares analysis and defies genre. Unlike most autobiographers who write in the first person and who promise to write the truth, Dunham writes in the third person and says that her book is not an autobiography:

This book is not an autobiography. It is the story of a world that has vanished, as it was for one child who grew up in it—the Middle West in the boom years after the First World War, and in the early years of the Depression. And it is the story of a family that I knew very well, and especially of a girl and a young woman whom I rediscovered while writing about the members of this family. Perhaps from their confused lives may come something that will serve as guidance to someone else, or something that will at least hold attention for a while as a story.

Perhaps these anomalies account for the fact that A Touch of Innocence has been written about so infrequently. After all, it is difficult to include a work in the genre of autobiography when the author specifically says that it is a work of fiction, a story about someone else, and when she writes in the third person, as if to prove it. The Katherine Dunham of the “novel” still has mother and father and siblings and nieces and nephews named just like those in the author’s real life, but meanwhile the writing reflects the trauma Dunham suffered in being tormented and beaten by her father, who kept the boys away and then touched his daughter in inappropriate ways: “These same hands now stroked the flesh above her thigh, seeking farther: hands of a lover in first caress” (p. 282).

Writing at the time of publication, critic J. Saunders Redding called A Touch of Innocence “a harrowing book” (book jacket). Judging from the readers’ responses to the rape in I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings a decade later, it is probably fair to say that the book’s odd form as well as the portrayal of her father and the threat of sexual violation contribute to the book’s failure to receive more critical attention. A Touch of Innocence does, in fact, presage the coming of Angelou’s autobiographical volumes. In addition to sharing the theme of sexual abuse, both A Touch of Innocence and I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings display the same intense involvement with nature that
characterizes the autobiographies of Zora Neale Hurston, Era Bell Thompson, and many other gifted autobiographers. Also, either book could be read as a work of fiction; if the reader is not aware that the work is the portrait of a life, both Marguerite and Katherine could be looked at as fictional characters. The most important difference is that Angelou, the Marguerite of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, overcomes her troubles and rises above them. Katherine, in *A Touch of Innocence*, remains a tragic figure, unlike the Katherine Dunham who emerges to make major contributions to anthropology, dance, and other performance genres. Perhaps, it is the meaningful work, following the theory of psychiatrist Viktor Frankl,\(^3\) that keeps both autobiographers sane; writing itself might also be viewed as part of the healing process.

Autobiographers Lucille Clifton and June Jordan also suffered at the hands of abusive fathers. Clifton’s biographer, M. J. Lupton, writes that Clifton was sexually abused but not raped by her father, Samuel Sayles. Jordan was not molested sexually but she was beaten by both parents, often pummeled by her father’s fists. Jordan portrays the violence in her home as capricious and sporadic. Granville Ivanhoe Jordan and Samuel Sayles were also physically and psychologically abusive to their wives. According to Lupton:

Clifton claims that her mother had burned her poems because her husband Samuel didn’t want her to publish them; “a lot of people now might not understand that, but then a wife obeyed.” She remembered her father saying, “Ain’t no wife of mine going to be no poetry writer.” His prohibition, which had a tremendous effect on the young Lucille, is perhaps the reason she kept on writing. Supposedly Sam’s “favorite,” she resented the way he treated Thelma. Clifton said, “I can forgive my father for driving us crazy. He was driven crazy, you know. But I cannot forgive him for driving my mother mad. And she was probably always on the edge.”\(^3\)

Jordan’s mother, Mildred Fisher Jordan, eventually goes over that edge and commits suicide, though not in the pages of *Soldier*.

This is the first generation of black women autobiographers to address suicide, always a taboo subject in the black community. Lorde, like Jordan, the child of West Indian immigrant parents, was also routinely beaten in the family home by both parents. While Lorde herself is not sexually abused in the home, she recounts the story of her friend, Gennie, who committed suicide after being repeatedly sexually abused by her father, who had appeared after a long absence. “What kind of a jackabat woman ... and to let her go off with that good-for-nothing call himself father,” intones Lorde’s Grenadian born mother.\(^3\)

Jordan and Lorde also write about the process of becoming poets. Jordan’s book is subtitled *A Poet’s Childhood*, and Lorde writes “How I Became a
Poet” in Zami: A New Spelling of My Name, which she calls her “biomythography.” The brutal beatings by her father notwithstanding, in becoming a poet, Jordan acknowledges the role of her father, who treated June like a son and subjected his “soldier” to the discipline of memorizing and reciting long poems as well as military training.33 Lorde, on the other hand, praises and identifies with her mother, “When the strongest words for what I have to offer come out of me sounding like words from my mother’s mouth, then I either have to reassess the meaning of everything I have to say now, or re-examine the worth of her old words” (p. 30). She also wrote, “I am a reflection of my mother’s secret poetry as well as her hidden angers” (p. 32). In contrast, Jordan’s identification with her father presents itself as a tragic dislocation, especially when we know that he had virtually removed his wife Mildred, June’s mother, from the parenting process. The specter of Mildred Maude Fisher’s suicide looms large.

Both Jordan and Lorde become activists around such human rights issues as police violence, open education, health care and women’s rights; each poet uses her art to raise the conscience of an audience, especially with regard to black identity, human rights, women’s issues, and gender preference: both women are bi-sexual, mothers, and lovers of women as well as men, each will eventually succumb to breast cancer after a valiant struggle for survival.

But this is not that story; these volumes represent voyages of discovery in uncharted waters and for each a recognition, a coming to consciousness of self in a world that does not treasure, nurture, or protect black women. Interestingly enough, Jordan and Lorde both fall in love with young women of similar descriptions, each is named Kitty. Jordan describes her summer camp counselor, the one she awakened to find lying on top of her one morning:

Pretty Miss Kitty was dark-skinned like my Uncle Teddy:

Dark chocolate like you could just about drink it thick and smooth and sweet and not quite steaming from a cup you’d want to hold and smell and stare at and nobody bother you about that. I followed her around. (Soldier, p. 240)

And Lorde’s description:

Kitty was still trim and fast-lined, but with an easier looseness about her smile and a lot less make-up. Without its camouflage, her chocolate skin and deep, sculptured mouth reminded me of a Benin bronze. (Zami, p. 244)

Since all three of these women were relative contemporaries living in and around New York City, it is conceivable that the two Kittys are one and the same person, but with both Lorde and Jordan gone, now only Kitty herself can solve that mystery. (Kitty, please come forth!) Either way, Kitty was so sublime in every aspect that Lorde transformed her into a goddess:
And I remember Afrekete, who came out of a dream to me always being hard and real as the fine hairs along the under-edge of my navel. She brought me live things from the bush, and from her farm set out in cocoyams and cassava. (Zami, p. 249)

But if Lorde’s childhood ends with the discovery of her lesbianism in the arms of Afrekete, Jordan’s ends when she is sent off to prep school by train, without either mother or father to support her:

My mother didn’t see me off.
My father brought me to the railroad station by himself.
Just outside Track 22, we faced each other:
“Okay! Little Soldier! G’wan! G’wan!
You gwine made me proud!”
And I could hear nothing else.
And I wondered who would meet my train. (Soldier, p. 261)

Who would cheer the weary traveler, who would meet June Jordan’s train? Ironically, Soldier: A Poet’s Childhood, comes very near the end of Jordan’s life, and as the young woman of the memoir begins her journey into adulthood, Jordan, then dying after a long struggle with breast cancer, contemplates another journey into the unknown: “And I wondered who would meet my train.” Even if there is some sacred meeting place at the end of the line, some big campground or bush arbor on the other side of the river, we can each only anticipate our ending, which remains unknowable. Challenged by the knowledge of her impending death, Jordan becomes one of the first black women autobiographers to contemplate the impermanence of life. Powerful, eerie, and evocative, the final words of Jordan’s narrative go some distance in suggesting the problematic nature of the final journey as well as the anxiety of not knowing who will meet our train.

The expanding generations of black women writers push the limits of autobiography and life writing; anticipating their radiance is almost as problematic as anticipating the final journey, but we have intimations of the greatness of an evolving tradition of black women’s autobiography and life writing in the works of Lorene Cary, Meri Nana-Ama Danquah, Rosemary L. Bray, Rebecca Walker, Deborah McDowell, and others whose work exemplifies finding and or recreating oneself in moments where one is challenged by race or gender, sexuality, intimate family relations, and motherhood, including, at times, the decision not to become a mother. Interracial parents, preparatory schools, interracial dating, abortion, and depression become new themes. At other times, the black woman autobiographer looks back to look forward and to provide encouragement, direction and guidance, as in Rosemary L. Bray’s Unafraid of the Dark: A Memoir:
Autobiography and African American women’s literature

I know who I am. More important, I know who I was and who I became; I understand the journey from there to here. I am the great-great-granddaughter of slaves and the granddaughter of sharecroppers and the daughter of poor, proud angry people determined to make more of me than they could of themselves.

I understand that there is a world of people determined to make me ashamed, make me embarrassed, make me forget what I know to be true. I understand that such people never go away. But I have been given priceless gifts I have no right to squander; a family, a once-committed nation, the luxuries of education and political awareness, opportunity and time. Most of all, I understand that these things were mine for a reason: to secure for others what was secured for me.³⁴

Reading, writing, marching, singing, dancing, loving, daring, black women autobiographers exchange their letters for liberation.

NOTES

5. Phillis Wheatley, “On Imagination,” from Poems (1773) www.4literature.net/Phillis_Wheatley/Poems/
12. Ibid., p. xxxi.
13. Sue E. Houchins, Introduction, Spiritual Narratives (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988). Houchins establishes the literary kinship of these “sisters” with an earlier tradition of “visionary sister autobiographers who wrote during the Middle Ages and the Counter-Reformation – e.g., Christina Markyate.
(twelfth century), Julian of Norwich (1342–c. 1420), Margery Kempe (c. 1375–1438), and Teresa of Avila (1515–1582)." She cites the allegedly “unlettered” Maria Stewart in affirming this connection:

In the 15th century, the general spirit of this period is worthy of observation. We might have then seen women preaching and mixing themselves in controversies. Women occupying the chairs of Philosophy and Justice; women haranguing in Latin before the Pope; women writing in Greek and studying Hebrew; Nuns were Poetesses, and women of quality Divines; and young girls who studied Eloquence, would with sweetest countenances, and most plaintive voices exhort the Pope and the Christian Princes ... Women in those days devoted their leisure hours to contemplation and study. (p. xxxvi)

14. Braxton, Black Women Writing, p. 73.
15. Ibid., p. 109.
21. Simone mentions Anderson at another time – ironically she remembered Anderson's 1939 Constitution Hall protest concert as being on Independence Day – in a sense, it was Independence Day for Anderson and for many Americans, especially black Americans, who celebrated her defiance and her artistry on that day.
23. Ibid., p. 27.
27. Perkins, Autobiography as Activism, p. 27.
28. Ibid., p. 27.
30. Viktor Frankl, a Jewish physician-psychiatrist and psychotherapist who lived in Vienna, Austria, escaped the Holocaust by resisting identification with the will of the master (and the master class), by doing deeds, creating work, and defining his own attitude toward unavoidable suffering – by maintaining a spiritual or inner life.
