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Weaving the Textual Self: Autobiographical Narratives of Contemporary African American Women

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Orientadora: Professora Doutora Teresa Botelho

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Tese apresentada para cumprimento dos requisitos necessários à obtenção do grau de Doutor em Literaturas e Culturas Modernas, Especialidade em Estudos Culturais, realizada sob a orientação científica da Professora Doutora Teresa Botelho.

[DECLARAÇÕES]

Declaro que esta tese/ Dissertação /Relatório /Trabalho de Projecto é o resultado da minha investigação pessoal e independente. O seu conteúdo é original e todas as fontes consultadas estão devidamente mencionadas no texto, nas notas e na bibliografia.

O candidato,

Natália Tdeya - Soares

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O(A) orientador(a),

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The process of writing a doctoral Thesis can be compared to filling a Jar with various elements. At the beginning the Jar is empty and we are confronted with it like an author is confronted with a white, empty page. As ideas come and go, the research and the writing start to take shape and the Jar begins to be less empty. As we write each new page of the chapter and the Thesis develops visibly, the Jar starts to represent many emotions we experience during the process. And so let us imagine a transparent Jar where we put positive and more difficult experiences, emotions, and feelings. The Jar is slowly filled with hope, excitement, and light but then, in some moments, come doubt, tiredness, and questions. Darkness at times. At the end of the process come satisfaction, happiness, and gratitude. This is the right moment to express the most prevailing feeling in the Jar: gratitude.

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For those of us who live at the shoreline
standing upon the constant edges of decision
crucial and alone
for those of us who cannot indulge
the passing dreams of choice
who love in doorways coming and going
in the hours between dawns
looking inward and outward
at once before and after
seeking a now that can breed
futures
like bread in our children's mouths
so their dreams will not reflect
the death of ours;

For those of us
who were imprinted with fear
like a faint line in the center of our foreheads
learning to be afraid with our mother's milk
for by this weapon
this illusion of some safety to be found
the heavy-footed hoped to silence us
For all of us
this instant and this triumph
We were never meant to survive.

And when the sun rises we are afraid
it might not remain
when the sun sets we are afraid
it might not rise in the morning
when our stomachs are full we are afraid
of indigestion
when our stomachs are empty we are afraid
we may never eat again
when we are loved we are afraid
love will vanish
when we are alone we are afraid
love will never return
and when we speak we are afraid
our words will not be heard
nor welcomed

but when we are silent
we are still afraid

So it is better to speak
remembering
we were never meant to survive.

Audre Lorde. “A Litany for Survival”, 1978.

Weaving the Textual Self: Autobiographical Narratives of Contemporary African American Women.

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ABSTRACT

The main focus of this doctoral Thesis is the construction of the Self through autobiographical narratives written by four contemporary African American women. The following autobiographies have been selected for the purpose: Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982), Nina Simone's *I Put a Spell on You. The Autobiography of Nina Simone* (1991), Faith Ringgold's *We Flew Over the Bridge. Memoirs of Faith Ringgold* (1995) and Rebecca Walker's *Black, White and Jewish. An Autobiography of a Shifting Self* (2001).

At the heart of this academic investigation lies a study of the Self subjectively seen, imagined, and constructed in the narrative of autobiographies selected for the doctoral Thesis. The principal research question is: "How is the textual self constructed in the four autobiographies under examination?" The doctoral dissertation is supported by three axes, each of which constitutes the Thesis research sub-question and which is treated separately in dedicated chapter. Because the autobiographical narrative is a complex phenomenon which should be analysed from different angles, it has been decided that the three following axes will help understand better the four narratives proposed for this Thesis.

The first axis focuses upon the individual "I" – the purpose of the research is to examine how four African American authors included in the corpus of the Thesis saw and wove their textual, individual self in the light of the Black community's demands. It is analysed whether the autonomy of each woman must be negotiated against the communitarian rules and expectations and whether the authors display any critical stance in their narrative regarding their brethren.

The second axis concentrates on the body. According to the feminist critique, any writing must be, obligatorily, embodied because human beings are and have bodies. They do experience the world through the body. The body can become a vessel for memory, it can become a text and the text can become a body. The present doctoral Thesis discusses

the autobiographies in the corpus looking at how four women weave their textual bodies, if and how they negotiate the dignity and cultural relevance of their Black bodies in the world which still belittles and undervalues Black skin.

The third axis is related to questions of affective relationships. Contrary to earlier theories of autobiography, self-narratives are not written in cultural and social vacuum. Autobiographies do mirror family and social relations and the Thesis examines how complex and complicated voices of Other(s) enter the four autobiographies and how significant Other(s) impact the way the autobiographers see themselves as individuals but also as part of the society.

Collectively, these axes provide conclusive answers to the primary research question. The Thesis references recent autobiographical studies, standards, and findings. Within this context, the expected contribution of this research to current knowledge of the female autobiography is discussed.

Key-words: autobiography, narrative, self, African American women, memory, body.

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RESUMO

O objetivo principal desta Tese de Doutoramento é a construção do "Eu" através de narrativas autobiográficas escritas por quatro mulheres afro-americanas contemporâneas. As seguintes autobiografias foram selecionadas para esse propósito: *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982) de Audre Lorde, *I Put a Spell on You. The Autobiography of Nina Simone* de Nina Simone (1991), *We Flew Over the Bridge. Memoirs of Faith Ringgold* da autoria de Faith Ringgold's (1995) e autobiografia de Rebecca Walker *Black, White and Jewish. An Autobiography of a Shifting Self* (2001).

No centro desta investigação académica está um estudo do "Eu" visto, imaginado e construído subjetivamente na narrativa das autobiografias selecionadas para a presente Tese. A principal questão de pesquisa é: "Como é construído o eu textual nas quatro autobiografias em análise?" A dissertação de doutoramento é sustentada por três eixos, cada um dos quais constitui a sub questão de investigação da Tese e que é tratado separadamente em Capítulo dedicado. Sendo a narrativa autobiográfica um fenómeno complexo que deve ser analisado sob diferentes ângulos, decidiu-se que os três eixos seguintes ajudarão a compreender melhor as quatro narrativas propostas para esta Tese.

O primeiro eixo centra-se no "eu" individual – o objetivo da pesquisa é examinar como as quatro autoras afro-americanos incluídas no corpus da Tese viam e teciam o seu eu textual e individual à luz das exigências da comunidade negra. É analisado se a autonomia de cada mulher deve ser negociada contra as regras e expectativas comunitárias e se as autoras apresentam alguma postura crítica na sua narrativa em relação à comunidade/sororidade.

O segundo eixo concentra-se no corpo. Segundo a crítica feminista, qualquer escrita deve ser, obrigatoriamente, corporificada porque os seres humanos são e têm corpos. Eles experimentam o mundo através do corpo. O corpo pode tornar-se um recipiente para a memória, pode tornar-se um texto e o texto pode tornar-se um corpo. A

presente Tese de Doutoramento discute as autobiografias incluídas no Corpus examinando como quatro mulheres tecem os seus corpos textuais, se e como negoceiam a dignidade e a relevância cultural de seus corpos negros num mundo que ainda menospreza e subvaloriza a pele negra.

O terceiro eixo está relacionado com as questões das relações afetivas. Ao contrário das teorias "tradicionais" da autobiografia, as narrativas do "eu" não são escritas no vácuo cultural e social. As autobiografias refletem as relações familiares e sociais e a Tese examina como as vozes complexas e complicadas do(s) Outro(s) entram nas quatro autobiografias e como o(s) Outro(s) significativo(s) impactam a maneira como as autobiógrafas se veem como indivíduos, mas também como parte da sociedade.

Em conjunto, estes eixos fornecem respostas conclusivas à questão principal da pesquisa. A Tese faz referência a estudos, padrões e descobertas autobiográficas recentes. Nesse contexto, discute-se a contribuição esperada desta pesquisa para o conhecimento atual da autobiografia feminina.

Palavras-chave: autobiografia, narrativa, eu, mulheres afro-americanas, memória, corpo.

CONTENTS

Introduction..... 1

Chapter I - Autobiographical Narratives: Theoretical Framework and Discussion of the Concepts 22

Introduction. 22

1.1. The Self. 26

1.2. Autobiography. 37

1.3. Memoir..... 67

1.4. Autofiction. 74

Chapter II - Feminist, American and African American perspectives on Autobiography. 80

Introduction..... 80

2.1. Feminine/Feminist self-writing – is the subject different? 83

2.2. Early American Autobiography: historical and cultural contextualisation.....101

2.3. The Unfree in the Land of the Free: African American attempts at gaining humanity and freedom through Letters.....109

2.4. Review of Literature on Autobiography, Feminist and African American autobiography and the authors from the Thesis Corpus. 121

Chapter III - Black women autobiographers (torn) between their individual and communitarian self 146

Introduction: Roots or Routes? 146

3.1. The Black and Lesbian Self mythically constructed in Audre Lorde's *Zami*.....153

3.2. Nina Simone's *I Put A Spell on You*: an uncompromising, gifted Black Self. 170

3.3. Faith Ringgold's *We Flew Over the Bridge* and the quiet certainty that her Self is hers to create. 191

3.4. Rebecca Walker's hybrid Self and performing racial identity in *Black, White and Jewish. Autobiography of a Shifting Self*. 211

Chapter IV - Writing the Autobiographical Body 230

Introduction: The Stereotyped Black Body and Controlling Images 230

4.1. Queering the Black Body: Audre Lorde's *Zami*. 237

4.2. The Restless Body in Transit: Nina Simone's (in)visible body. 251

4.3. The Storyteller's Account of the Sexual and Maternal Body: Faith Ringgold's *We Flew Over the Bridge*. 265

4.4. Insecure Body in No-Man's Land: Rebecca Walker's *Black, White and Jewish*....281

Chapter V - Relational aspects of the Black female autobiography: between reverence and cry for acceptance 296

Introduction: the autobiographer as a lonely island? 296

5.1. "I am a reflection of my mother's secret poetry": Audre Lorde's mythical portrait of the Mother. 302

5.2. Nina Simone's troubled relationship with the mother and affective emphasis on the father. 316

5.3. Crafted lives: artistic inspiration and matrilineal heritage in Faith Ringgold's portrayal of her mother.....330

5.4. Rebecca Walker's affective nomadism between maternal and paternal topography: the memoir as an homage to maternal roots. 342

CONCLUSIONS 352

PRIMARY BIBLIOGRAPHY..... 366

SECONDARY BIBLIOGRAPHY..... 367

ELECTRONIC REFERENCES..... 435

ANNEXES 437

Introduction

This Doctoral Thesis has as its purpose to examine autobiographies written by selected African American women writers, artists, and activists of the 20th Century, namely Audre Lorde's *Zami. A New Spelling of My Name* (1982), Nina Simone's *I Put a Spell on You* (1991), Faith Ringgold's *We Flew Over the Bridge* (1995) and Rebecca Walker's *Black, White and Jewish: Autobiography of a Shifting Self* (2001). The main research question that guides the proposed study is defined as follows: how do the authors construct and portray their sense of self in their autobiographies? If language can be compared to cloth and cloth to language, an act of composing a text thus can be compared to an act of weaving a fabric. The term "text" is etymologically related to the Latin *texere* which means to weave or to plait. A written text becomes then a complex net, a fabric woven with words, sentences, and thoughts. This idea is confirmed by Roland Barthes who wrote in his essay "From Work to Text" included in *Image, Music, Text* that "all text is a tissue, a woven fabric" (Barthes, 1977: 159). Following this line of thought, the Thesis' main investigative question can be paraphrased thusly: how is the narrative woven and how does it establish a link with the (narrative) self in every autobiography included in the corpus of the Thesis? In what manner are the four African American women's textual selves rendered visible and how do the authors weave the fabric of their selfhood? This study is expected to undertake an important intellectual exercise which is to address a still common tendency to collectivise and depersonalise Black women's experiences and voices. The research has been influenced by Albert Memmi's further mentioned phenomenon known as "the mark of the plural" (Memmi, 2016:129). Hence, bearing the concept of "the mark of the plural" in mind, it is first and foremost the effort of this Thesis to avoid approaching African American autobiographers as "typical" representatives of their people and search in their autobiographical work for any attempts to emphasise their individuality, autonomy and human uniqueness, even if in many instances they do feel affinity (emotional, political or other) with and dependence on their Black community. Therefore, the analysis centres on the narrative self-representations of the authors as this allows to scrutinise and understand their own views on their experiences as Black women. Of course, as will be discussed, any autobiography is not only about the "narrated and narrating I"; it is also about significant Others who populate the pages of any selected work.

The primary endeavour is to determine how each of the autobiographers shapes her story, how she weaves the narrative, what themes she chooses to reminisce about, and, finally, whether she feels obliged to negotiate her self and her identity resisting and subverting her community's cultural and political expectations and demands. The narratives are not only examined from a literary standpoint, although Literary Studies constitute one of the Thesis' most relevant perspectives, as shall be observed further in the Introduction. Because this dissertation pertains to the field of Cultural Studies, the texts under scrutiny are also viewed as cultural and political acts of self-construction and self-expression. The complex relationship between the text and the political and cultural context will be considered throughout the analysis of the chosen autobiographies.

Even though there is a rich panoply of academic works (articles, book-length monographies, dissertations, and so forth) written about Black women's autobiography, the proposed research is justified and pertinent because the selected authors ensure diverse narratives all examined in one study. As far as the investigation allowed to determine, to date, no Doctoral Dissertation has been published that analyses comparatively the autobiographies composed by Audre Lorde (1934–1992), Nina Simone (1933–2003), Faith Ringgold (1930) and Rebecca Walker (1969). Thus, the choice of corpus authors ensures the originality of this study. From the four authors carefully selected for the purpose of the Thesis, three of them belonged to the same generation (Faith Ringgold, Nina Simone and Audre Lorde) but all the three display relevant differences in the way they saw themselves as Black women, intellectuals, activists, and individual selves. Each of them wrote a unique self-narrative which, when analysed in detail throughout the Thesis, guarantees that this research furthers the academic knowledge about contemporary Black women's autobiography. The fourth author, Rebecca Walker, the Movement Child, the social experiment as she used to call herself, belongs to another, post-Civil Rights generation and hence, represents a different approach towards the Black female self and the Black community. Her textual weaving of her complex self belongs to a post-modern era, displaying a fragmented and torn identity which stands in an interesting contrast to the three above-mentioned authors' way of textual (re)presentation of the self.

As has been observed, the authors represent two different generations and there are important divergences among them in what concerns the way they perceive themselves as

embodied selves immersed within the Black milieu. It is relevant to note that between the eldest and the youngest author (Faith Ringgold and Rebecca Walker) there are 39 years of age difference, which greatly impacts their attitudes toward many different aspects of Black life. Dissimilarities in economical, geographical, and societal backgrounds imply different historical and political experiences and approaches to various issues such as a sense of belonging, identity construction, matters of the body and sexuality, attitude toward male violence, views on being a woman, and so forth. Each of the authors offers her own, distinct perspective on race and gender, as well as the contribution she felt she had made to society. Finally, each of them approaches her autobiography in her own unique way in terms of language. It will be demonstrated that such aspects as sensuality, sexuality, erotic encounters, and depictions of significant Others (mothers, fathers, lovers, etc.) vary greatly from one author to another but also, within each autobiography, gender of Others will impact the way the language is employed.

The goal is to find parallels and divergences in their autobiographical narratives, which constitutes a new contribution to the area of contemporary Black autobiography. Hence, it is expected that the present Thesis, although dedicated to the topic of Black and female selfhood which has been amply analysed by other researchers, brings with it originality and freshness as it focuses on authors who do not tend to be examined together. In addition, prior to deciding on the final shape of the corpus of the Thesis it had been observed that many academic works put an accent only on certain aspects of the authors' *oeuvre* selected for this study while omitting others. Audre Lorde is a case in point: most of the academic works published about her tend to concentrate either on the activist dimension of her life or on her sexual orientation and poetry. Many academic studies draw on multiple identities Audre Lorde had forged for herself, such as woman, lesbian, poet, and warrior and examine the contribution Audre Lorde had made to feminism, LGBTQI+ visibility, lesbian identity and also, very importantly, intersectionality. Nonetheless, the present Thesis tries to emphasise issues less studied and analysed in Audre Lorde's biomythography. The proposed research does not include any poems authored by Lorde but focuses exclusively on her biomythography *Zami*, supporting certain ideas drawing on her insightful essays and mentioning *The Cancer Journals* (1980). The stress is put on how Lorde builds her self and identity resorting to imagination, myth-making, her particular approach to her body and the ever-present maternal figure. This study does discuss, of course, Lorde's near obsession with other women (in political and sexual terms) but it also pays particular attention to, for

example, the concept of home (closely related to body and her mother) and how it impacted the developing self and identity of the autobiographer.

Furthermore, the originality of this research stems from the fact that public figures such as Faith Ringgold and Nina Simone have been largely overlooked as autobiographers, with their self-writings remaining mostly unexplored. Most of the academic research on them concentrates on their roles as artists (painter and composer/singer respectively), rather than authors of autobiographies. Faith Ringgold is frequently discussed in the context of African American female art (Botelho, 2013), whereas Nina Simone is closely associated with the study of Black music in the United States and the impact her songs had on the Civil Rights Movement (Feldstein, 2005; Brooks, 2011). She is studied in relation to Jazz and Black musical production, as well as her involvement in the Civil Rights Movement which she claims in her autobiography was only a passing moment of her life. As a result, it can be argued that this Doctoral Thesis clearly contributes to further knowledge about these specific authors' narratives, how they envisioned themselves in society, and how they wove the fabric of their private and public selves. At a certain stage, the Thesis draws parallels between the ways all the corpus authors use language as a tool of self-construction and critique of their communities. The linguistic differences observed among the authors shall help draw distinctions between them and, consequently, counter the tendency to collectivise Black people. Drawing on the academic works which have already been developed about all four authors, this study attempts to open new space for interpretation and suggests new directions in the scholarship on the authors proposing to widen the research and include analysis which might have been previously omitted.

In a time when African Americans continue to face deep injustices, economic deprivation, and mass incarceration, and when movements such as Black Lives Matter emerge in the twenty-first century, the question of how they shape their selves, how they control their own image, and what stories they tell continues to prove of extreme relevance. When "controlling images" related to Black bodies (Hill Collins, 2000:72) are still fully operational, research into African American selfhood and self-narratives is required. For this reason, the present Thesis insists on portraying the four autobiographers as stand-alone and autonomous women though not all of them seem to be fully conscious of their worth as human beings, citizens, and contributors to changes within their societies.

As will be analysed in the following chapters, particularly in the theoretical part of this Thesis, the genre of autobiography proves to be a valuable tool for (re)presenting one's self. It will be examined how important the genre has been to feminist and post-colonial theories of selfhood. Nonetheless, self-narratives must be viewed as cultural, political, and historical texts written in a specific time and place by individuals exposed to specific social and cultural forces. Even though those narratives are primarily about the autobiographers' private and intimate experiences, they are set in particular social contexts, mirroring the outside world and how it affects the self and the author of the narrative. It should be also remembered that the personal is political, which is especially important to politically marginalised groups such as women of colour. For them, who have traditionally been denied the right to express their concerns and display their selfhood, autobiography is a compelling tool for self-knowledge and self-construction, even if it teeters on the line between fact and fiction (or even mythmaking). The role of memory in self-narratives will be also discussed because memories and autobiography are inextricably linked, and it is impossible to imagine any autobiography without the significant role of memory.

The autobiographical texts under analysis are also viewed as tools for culturally oppressed people to gain a voice and resist or subvert normative discourses maintained and disseminated by hegemonic culture. So, even though this study insists on the individual traits of each of the authors and examines those aspects in the selected autobiographies, it must be taken into consideration that although private voice is essential to autobiography, it may also serve public purposes turning the text into a matter of public interest. Notwithstanding the relevance of both dimensions (private and public) of the autobiographies, it must be remembered that the African Americans' intellectual production has been frequently used as an example of collective voices, which diminishes their uniqueness as individuals. The proposed task is to investigate the interaction between autobiography as a tool for self-expression and as an act of self-emancipation from the dictates of dominant, white culture, as well as from the constraints imposed upon female members of African American communities by the very same communities. It will be discussed that it is not only white society that thrusts and projects its expectations, fantasies, and fears onto Blacks in America. As the authors analysed in the corpus demonstrate in their autobiographies, Black communities too developed their strategies to keep their members disciplined and under control, deciding who belongs and who does not, what "racial authenticity" means in practice and determining the "rites of passage".

This investigation is supported by three axes, the first of which focuses on the individual "I" in frequent or constant tension with the collective, the second one examines the questions related to the body, while the third axis places emphasis on affective relationships. Together, they will provide conclusive answers to the primary research question: how do the authors construct and portray their sense of self in their autobiographies? It is important to note, however, that the three axes do not constitute separate and unrelated problems to study. They do intersect, impact each other and if analysed together, allow to develop a more complete picture of the problematics scrutinised in the autobiographies. In other words, these axes can be understood as perspectives or angles from which the autobiographical texts are examined, and textual selves explored. This undertaking is complex as the contemporary theories of self and subjectivity often comprehend the self as a fragmentary, non-unitary and constantly shifting entity. Following this line of thought, the Thesis endeavours to locate the textual selves through examination of the narrative strategies used by each of the autobiographers and the way each author conveys her self-image.

In the first axis, the study analyses the tension between the individual aspect of the self (I) and its communitarian dimension. This dimension has always been emphasised by feminist theorists who claim that women's narratives differ from men's in terms of relational aspects. Nancy Chodorow (1978), through her long-term research on (white) women's identity and psychoanalysis, argued that women in general are socialised to relate themselves to others since childhood, in contrast with men who seek individual autonomy and detachment from others. In the case of African American women, the situation is even more complicated because historically, Black women have been seen by their community and by feminist critics as a solid part of the extended African American community. As the research demonstrates (Brown-Guillory, 1996) many critical works on literature, including autobiographies, by African American women focused on their collective selves, commitment to the group, political goals, racial solidarity and racial uplift. It has been observed that when reading autobiographies written by Black women, the general tendency is to interpret them as representatives of their race, a collective voice expressing communitarian, racial, and social ills rather than individual women asserting their uniqueness. Selwyn Cudjoe states the following: "[African American autobiography] tends to be bereft of any excessive subjectivism and mindless egotism. (…) Superficial concerns about individual subject usually give way to the collective subjection of the group" (Cudjoe,

1984: 9). Bell hooks reminiscing on the process of writing her own autobiography admitted that, to her, autobiography had had a therapeutic effect, but it had also been a way to capture memories, experiences, and the rich culture of the segregated South (hooks, 1998). It is, of course, understandable that the African American traumatic experience of slavery followed by long decades of institutional racism gave rise to a deep sense of racial and collective solidarity. Recent studies continue to underline the fact that post-racial America is still a myth upheld by the white fraction of society (Dawson and Bobo, 2009; Kaplan, 2011). There are still vicious attacks against Black communities across the US, Police violence such that the unjust treatment of the Black population became the topic of the 2016 Ava DuVernay film 13th[1]. Black men and women in the US continue to be targeted for marginalisation and silencing or, the opposite, being portrayed in the media as criminals, rapists, or "welfare queens. However, the tendency to totalise all Black voices as representative of (grim) Black experience and arguments claiming that all Black people are victims strips individuals of their uniqueness and effaces their originality. It also denies them agency and power to decide over their own lives. Thus, this part of the research tries to explain how autobiographers react to cultural dictates which attempt to totalise and appropriate their individual selves, how they respond to the pressures of racial solidarity, and how women construct their individual selves apart from/in opposition to the demands of their communities, to rampant sexism directed at them from their own groups and to violence perpetrated by their Black partners or family members. It is also analysed how they deal with the tension and conflict that exists between the individual and collective identity, and if the autobiographers consider the possibility of rejecting their communities by not conforming to the dictates of their in-group. Lastly, it is examined how much space their personal plans and professional motivations take up in their narratives, if there are any signs of direct or indirect criticism toward their communities, whether they address the concepts and implications of race and racial responsibility, and how lonely and alienated they present themselves in their autobiographies. Also, how do they describe (non)belonging and exile (both physically and emotionally)? As will be seen in further chapters, particularly in chapter III, the ideal of racial authenticity is addressed by all four autobiographers and they take

[1] A documentary directed by North American film director Ava DuVernay was launched on October 7, 2016. The title of the film refers to the 13th Amendment of the Constitution of the United States whose goal was to make slavery illegal. Nevertheless, Ava DuVernay's main argument is that slavery is perpetuated in the US, although under the guise of other phenomena, such as mass incarceration of African American citizens.

pains to assert their individuality to a greater or lesser extent, depending on each author. However, it is worth mentioning that none of the authors treat her community without a dose of criticism. In some cases, the critique is more severe than in others, but no autobiography glosses over the tensions and suffocating expectations from Black communities.

The more specific questions under this axis that the Thesis poses are: how do women autobiographers negotiate their place within their communities? How do they deal with community demands placed on them as Black women, artists, and activists? How do they see their budding Black selves? When does the realisation of belonging (or not) to the Black community dawn on them? Are they confronted with alienation, loneliness, and separation? What strategies, if any, do they devise to counter or mitigate those feelings?

In continuation, the second axis of the investigation is based on the premise that, in narrative, the body and the sense of self are inextricably linked. Keeping this in mind, it becomes necessary to investigate how autobiographers construct their relationships with their own bodies through narrative, and how autobiographies, as texts, can become a *locus* of bodily identity paired with a sense of self. According to Paul John Eakin (2008), human stories and narratives are embodied, and it is no longer possible to approach the narrative as disembodied, neutral discourse. António Damásio's (1999) decades-long research on questions of neurology, body and the self concluded that the self can be pre-linguistic and is deeply rooted in our body. It is our body and the feeling of what is happening around and within us that constitutes the basis of our most inner self. Even when the body is absent from a discourse, as in several male (and some female) autobiographies, this absence has significance. Furthermore, it must be affirmed that the body has always been considered a feminine domain. As shall be discussed in this Dissertation, in the Western cultures, women have been defined by their bodies. They are frequently reduced to biological functions such as reproduction and motherhood. Human beings have and are bodies, and all experiences are inextricably linked to human skin which serves as the first barrier between them and the outside world. The problem is further complicated in the case of African American women because, due to their gender and colour, they have been culturally relegated to the margins of society and denied their humanity and status as women. As has been proven by the research, Black people were historically considered subhuman. Because they had no written language, in the minds of white conquerors and slaveholders they were thought to have no past or history. To prove its near-animal status, the Black body was subjected to humiliation,

pseudo-medical analysis, and discourse; inhumane experiments and measurements meant to demonstrate its pathologies. It was examined and violated in epistemological terms to demonstrate that it was never fully human. In his study, Sander Gilman (1985) confirms that the white body was regarded as the norm, whereas Black bodies were regarded as illicit, sexually excessive, and pathological. This was especially true for African American women's bodies, and as several feminist scholars assert, Black bodies are still policed, judged, and devalued even today (Carby, 1985; Collins, 2000; Nunnally, 2018). The purpose of the link established between chaste white women and sexual promiscuity associated with Black women's bodies was to contrast both groups of women demonstrating the pathological condition of the sexually promiscuous Black body. This derogatory image is still in use today and bears an impact on the popular imagination and stereotypes attached to Black women within the contemporary American society. The research questions grouped under this axis are: when and where do the autobiographers' bodies appear in the narrative? What does their visibility imply? If, in turn, the body becomes invisible, in what situation(s) and for what purpose? How does the body help create a sense of gendered and racial identity? Additionally, the Thesis analyses whether the narrators (re)claim their bodies and how much space they dedicate to their biological femaleness within the narrative. Do their bodies become an instrument of self-assertion or source of alienation and suffering? Are their bodies presented as strongholds of resistance to political and cultural erasure? Or do they become the cause of anxiety? Other interesting questions also arise, such as: does skin colour carry emotions? What language is employed when white and black bodies are described? How does the skin colour impact the feelings expressed through language? Is it always the case that the white colour is associated with lack of love and insecurity? Is the black colour always related to all things positive? The analysis under this axis will also focus on the issues of sexual orientation. At least two of the four autobiographers included in this work were openly homosexual or bisexual, and the goal is to examine how they negotiate their sexual orientation in their narratives, as well as how much attention they devote to this aspect of their selves or whether they silence this aspect in their narratives.

Lastly, the third research axis is strictly related to the analysis of affective relationships that have emerged in autobiographical narratives. As scholars mentioned in this Thesis have pointed out, the self is relational and is, therefore, constructed through interaction with others. According to feminist theorists of women's literary production, women's autobiographical narratives are more other-oriented than men's. Many women

who write their lives tend to focus on their relationships, family attachments, female bonding, and so on. This does not, however, imply that the self loses its autonomy and individuality. The goal of this section of the research is to investigate African American women's autobiographies and narratives that centre on affective links established in the texts. The primary focus of this section of the Thesis is to scrutinise how the autobiographers portray their close relationships with their mothers, fathers, daughters, female and male friends. It is worth noting that each author is a daughter, and her story becomes a daughterly story too. Furthermore, in two cases (Faith Ringgold and Nina Simone), the narratives are those of mothers so the authors speak from multiple positionalities, and these aspects will be explored in the study as well.

It will be discussed that, while mother-daughter bonds may dominate narratives in some cases, father-narrator bonds may take precedence in others. This problem is partly linked to the second pillar of the research because in some instances the authors (Audre Lorde and Rebecca Walker) portray their mothers in the context of the Black body and how the motherly bodies offer them a sense of security and self-affirmation. The following are the specific questions answered throughout the research: how do the autobiographies depict affective relationships and how much space is granted to significant others? What are the dominant relationships in the narratives? How constant is the presence of familial figures throughout? Where do mothers and female friendships fit in? How do daughters portray their mothers and fathers? What role does each affective relationship play in the narrator's construction of herself as a (dis)valued Black woman? What sort of memories do the narrators cherish and include in their narratives and which are dismissed? How much space do mothers-narrators dedicate to their children? What language is used when the authors refer to their mothers and fathers? To their female and male lovers?

The present Thesis is a fruit of different methodological approaches. At the most general level, it has been written in the scope of Literary Studies, with particular attention to Cultural Studies. However, an interdisciplinary methodology employed in this work has been determined with the goal of enriching the academic research and not to curb it solely to Literary Studies which, in themselves, are a rich area of epistemology. It is firmly believed that such complex texts as autobiographies should be approached from various angles. Drawing on different sciences and areas of knowledge (presented further in the Introduction) when examining self-narratives guarantees deeper understanding of the autobiographies proposed for this research.

Given that the methodology relates to the field of Cultural Studies, the understanding of and approach to the texts included in the corpus is naturally influenced by cultural, social, and historical factors. Cultural Studies perceive cultures, broadly speaking, not as fixed and stable entities but as constantly shifting and changing ones, and as a fruit of always new practices and perspectives. This implies that autobiographies are regarded not only as literary texts, though this viewpoint cannot be dismissed when self-narratives are considered, but also as the result of cultural production and new outlooks on societies, questions of gender, political ideologies and so on. It must be remembered that no text, especially an autobiography, is created in a social vacuum. In many instances, autobiographies were penned for certain audiences (for example, the white American North in order to fight slavery in Southern States), having specific goals in mind. Autobiographies whose objective, apart from weaving a textual self, is to take heed to political or social problems, rely heavily on external factors such as social relations of power or geographical location of the narrator, and so, interact with the external world trying to impact it. This is especially true in the case of self-narratives composed by African American women, who have traditionally been viewed as both victims of racist and patriarchal society and as victors in a battle against the oppressive system. Cultural Studies and related methodologies approach texts and narratives not only as products of a specific culture, time, and geography, but also as a way of reading the world. Texts, in other words, are produced by and within the world, but they also shape it. Autobiographies are a particularly adequate tool to achieve this goal because the link between the autobiographical text and its readers is a special one and entails certain expectations on the part of readers. Literary and Cultural Studies pay particular attention to the fact that readers perceive autobiographies differently than other literary genres; as shall be discussed, readers of autobiographies expect, first and foremost, truth from any autobiographical account. Otherwise, trust can be breached and consequences might follow under the form of discrediting the autobiography and its author and the causes she/he might defend in the text. Thus, the cultural, historical, and political dimensions are all important in the examination of the four autobiographies.

Of course, when tracing the self through narrative, it is impossible to ignore the legacy and contribution of Literary Studies which have traditionally taken a keen interest in autobiographical narratives. Thus, the threads of main autobiographical theories and various approaches are intertwined into the Thesis, which was particularly illuminating and useful while carrying out the research. Work developed by scholars such as Elizabeth Bruss

(1976), James Olney (1980), Paul John Eakin (1985, 1991, 1992, 1999, 2001), and Leigh Gilmore (1994, 2001, 2017) contributed to theories of autobiography as a literary and cultural genre and has proven to be very useful to the analysis. These theories have helped understand the complexity of the genre, but also the difficulty literary scholars confronted when trying to delineate boundaries of autobiography. It has taken some decades for literary scholars to see that the genre of autobiography displays a hybrid nature. Although the initial approach towards autobiography has been somewhat problematic (autobiography has been initially seen as a historical, purely factual genre), the second part of the 20th Century saw a turn in Literary Studies which started to approach the genre as more complex and less obvious. Drawing on Literary Studies, this Thesis presents the discussion not only of the autobiography but other, related genres such as memoir and autofiction. The three concepts discussed in the Thesis, although overlapping at times, further complicate the concept of autobiography and narratives of the self. Literary Studies contributed to some challenging and fascinating debates on used terms and definitions, problems related to fiction in autobiography, the question of factuality, and authorial freedom to use imagination. The term coined by Gilmore, "autobiographics", also illuminates the investigation as a way of writing and interpreting autobiographical narratives. In addition, Eakin's recent research on the relationship between narrative, memory, and the embodied self was a source of inspiration and is examined throughout the Thesis. After all, his concept of "narrative identity/self" is central to this study.

This Doctoral Thesis makes extensive use of theories developed by Women's and Feminist Studies applied to autobiography, women's literary production in general, the concept of female selfhood, *écriture féminine*, subjectivity, gendered aspects of the self, and the problem of experience and its relevance to women's life-stories. Throughout the research, works by Hélène Cixous (1976), Nancy Chodorow (1978), Sidonie Smith (1992, 1998, 2002, 2011) and Julia Watson (2001), as well as Black feminist theorists such as bell hooks (1977, 1982, 1998, 2000), Angela Davis (1974, 1988), and Patricia Hill Collins (2000) are used. These scholars have profoundly influenced attitudes toward autobiographies written by women, raising issues that were previously unacknowledged or completely ignored by the traditional approach to women's autobiographies. As will be explained in the initial part of the Thesis (namely chapter II), the feminist perspective revolutionised the way self-narratives have been approached. What until the second half of the 20th Century had been ignored and belittled, with the advent of Feminist and Postcolonial theories gained

visibility and credibility. Feminist and Postcolonial scholars took pains to question the white, male, and Eurocentric literary canon and opened the way for non-normative genres and subjects to emerge. They also contributed to a lively discussion of issues such as intersectionality, Black women's multiple oppressions, subjecthood, and subversive techniques used in African American women's texts. In addition, studies on the body and corporeal experiences of individuals conducted by Judith Butler (1990 / 2010) and Michel Foucault (1977 / 1991; 1978 / 1998) are mentioned in the work. This Thesis, thus, draws heavily on authors who questioned the mainstream approach towards texts written by women of colour giving them space and voice. Feminist and Postcolonial views enriched greatly the present research allowing for it to examine the texts in the corpus from different angles.

While conducting this research, the field of Black Studies, a vibrant area of knowledge, proved to be of great relevance. African American literary and cultural production, particularly autobiographical texts, has a long and rich tradition and generates a large body of critical work. The research on racial and cultural identity developed by Henry Louis Gates Jr. (1983), Stuart Hill (1996), Paul Gilroy (2000), and Linda Alcoff (2006) proved extremely useful in debating the complexities of racial identity, its limitations, and potentialities. Identity and self-construction frequently follow racial lines, and as this Doctoral Thesis will show, almost none of the selected autobiographers are able to completely separate themselves from their racial/ethnic background. Thus, it is beneficial to the research to draw on theories that challenge the concept of race and demonstrate how racism affects individuals and groups. However, drawing on Gilroy's insightful theories which went against the grain of mainstream approach towards racial relations, which favoured separatism and antagonism rather than openness and acceptance of the Other, this Thesis gained considerably in reflecting on the problems of so-called racial authenticity, racial belonging and ghettoizing intra-racial relations. Gilroy's concept of "routes" instead of "roots" discussed in the following chapters is of particular importance when discussing the first of the research axes: the tension between the narrator's individual "I" and the Black community. Inspiration taken from the area of Black Studies and its contributions helped to conduct a detailed analysis of each autobiography, paying special attention to linguistic aspects, narrative techniques, and use of vernacular language. The focus is placed on the thematic nature of the autobiographies as well as on their cultural, social, and historical dimensions. Attempting to examine the autobiographers' textual selves also implies

establishing links and parallels to other autobiographies written by contemporary African American women to try and locate similarities, differences, and continuities.

Any serious discussion of autobiography and other life narratives must, necessarily include an analysis of the question of memory. Here the Thesis draws heavily not only on Literary Studies and the area's understanding of memory, but it goes a step further: contemporary research in cognitive and brain sciences helped greatly to elucidate what they have to say about memory formation and creation. Decades ago, the act of remembering was seen in a very different way than it is today. Neurosciences such as neurology, with help of the most modern imaging techniques and analyses contributed to the current understanding of how the brain works when it engages in memory-making. Nowadays, as will be discussed further in the Thesis, the act of remembering is seen as an active process of creation, it is not passive as had been previously imagined. Memory does not simply sit somewhere in the brain ready to be retrieved. It is worked and reworked by the brain anew with each act of remembering and every time the memory is different.

Research conducted for the purpose of this Thesis resorted to diverse sciences such as sociology, psychology, and psychiatry to throw insight into the question of self and narrative. These are the areas of knowledge not linked directly to Literary and Cultural or even Feminist Studies but proved of the utmost relevance to this research. Some of the recent academic studies in psychology, psychiatry and neurology mentioned in the Thesis helped to better understand the link between self and narrative. When discussing this link, psychiatry was of use given that the so-called fragmentary self, very often the product of trauma, social discrimination, and lack of adaptation to societal norms, is not always a desirable element. On the other hand, studies conducted in clinical psychology demonstrated that even in the case of patients with severe brain damage or psychiatric disorders, there is hope for a coherent and self-healing narrative which lies at the heart of a coherent and logical self: an "entity", or a process-in-the-making which seems to be the basis of a healthy individual. The fragmented and torn self can give rise to reconstructed and new self. As shall be seen on the basis of Rebecca Walker's autobiography, the painful process of healing and building anew the troubled self can end in success and reconciliation.

When it comes to the examination of primary sources, as has been mentioned, this Thesis focuses on the four autobiographies written by Audre Lorde, Nina Simone, Faith Ringgold, and Rebecca Walker. Their autobiographies constitute, thus, the most important

source texts selected for the purpose of this research. Subsequently, scholarly publications on the four authors and selected various academic articles have been thoroughly researched, as well as monographs and book-length works which discuss the literary and artistic production of each of the authors. The most recent studies on the four autobiographers have been carefully examined to understand the current state of the art regarding the authors as well as any existing *lacunae*. Apart from the articles and books mentioned throughout chapters I-V, existing biographies on the autobiographers (Audre Lorde and Nina Simone) have been consulted. Also, some Master's and PhD dissertations where the autobiographers are discussed have been consulted, mainly in North American and British universities. These sources helped to better understand the authors themselves, their work and what is being done in academic terms with their work. The research in online libraries and university repositories allowed to determine that there are plenty of academic materials on some of them and a little less on others (Audre Lorde is very well studied while, for example, Faith Ringgold and Rebecca Walker as autobiographers lack adequate attention, as has been noted before). To better understand each of the authors, additional sources have been reviewed, such as poems, essays and a diary written by Audre Lorde (*The Cancer Journals,*1980) and Rebecca Walker's debut novella *Adé: A Love Story* (2013), along with short texts that Faith Ringgold published in different journals, mainly on her art. Although it is probably hard to include it in methodology, Nina Simone's songs and lyrics turned out to be a source for inspiration and understanding of this complex figure.

Concludingly, an interdisciplinary Methodology used throughout this Thesis trespassed different areas, from Literary Studies, through Cultural, Feminist and Women's Studies to Social and Cognitive Sciences. Postcolonial scholars' works, especially from non-Western areas, have been quoted and mentioned to enrich the Thesis with different points of view and illustrate various arguments mentioned when examining the four autobiographies. Finally, as has been observed, medical areas of expertise such as neurology, psychology and psychiatry were of significant aid as they allowed to go beyond purely literary theories to reflect on the complex concept of autobiography, life-narratives, memories, facts vs. fiction and a sense of self (re)claimed and (re)constructed through writing and its therapeutic effect.

The present Thesis is divided into five chapters of which the first two are of a more theoretical nature discussing the academic tendencies, concepts, and terms, and the following three are dedicated to the close reading of the autobiographies penned by four

African American autobiographers, drawing on the studies examined in the previous chapters as well as on the recent research conducted on the corpus authors. Chapters III, IV and V are dedicated to the scrutiny of the three investigation axes discussed before. Below follows the brief presentation of each of the chapters so that the structure of the Thesis becomes clear. The chapters are, thus, as follows:

Chapter I is entirely devoted to the theoretical discussion of the terms and definitions of autobiography, memoir and autofiction as genres. It starts with the discussion of the concept of the self and how it has evolved over the decades and how it has been understood by such sciences as sociology, psychology, and anthropology. Then a presentation of the problem of narrative self follows as the genre of autobiography cannot be discussed without understanding first the complex link between the self, the narrative, and the autobiography. Thus, the initial section of the chapter I deals with the concept of narrative self and its importance in the act of self-creation. Further part of the chapter I focuses on the general presentation of the concept of autobiography and then examines different schools of thought that contributed to the development of critical studies on the genre. In this chapter, presentation of the autobiography is based on the theories developed within the scope of Literary and Cultural studies. Then the complex concept of memoir is presented and discussed. Chapter I ends with the presentation of the relatively recent concept of autofiction.

While it is true that the postmodern self is frequently depicted in literature as fragmentary, discontinuous, and incoherent, such claims can be harmful to certain groups of people, such as postcolonial subjects, African Americans, or women, who have traditionally been defined as non-subjects with no freedom to shape their selves and narratives. It is strongly advisable to consider the research of cognitive scientists, psychologists, psychiatrists, neurologists, and neurobiologists who have found that a coherent narrative and a continuous sense of self are required conditions for an individual to create a logical autobiographical story. Fragmentation of the self, subject splitting, and a lack of anchorage in one's self, body, and life may not always be desirable outcomes of postmodern and poststructuralist theories. The chapter also discusses the fact that memoir had an informal nature and was claimed to be practised by passive people (women in particular), merely observers of the world and events. There are still lingering questions about whether "witch-hunting" for slips of memory or tongue, as well as nearly statistical and mathematical approaches do the memoir genre and authors a disservice.

Autofiction, on the other hand, as a term and concept, attempted to make room for writing in which the author, narrator, and character were all the same person and the information provided was not obligatorily factual and verifiable. The relationship between self and fiction is redistributed, and fiction is no longer labelled as "false" or "lie". In fact, it plays an important role in people's lives and the stories they tell. Chapter I ends thus with an examination of the concept of autofiction and its link to the genre of autobiography.

Chapter II pertains to the theoretical part of the Thesis and for the sake of logical organisation its initial section deals with what could not have been omitted or ignored: female self-narratives. It also offers a necessary discussion of the link between gender and writing based on the research in the area of Women's and Feminist Studies. This chapter examines the origins of the American autobiography as well, discussing Puritan notions of the self, the most classical autobiographies written by iconic authors such as Benjamin Franklin and then proceeds to the analysis of African American autobiography, paying particular attention to autobiographies penned by African American women, very much ignored in academic works well into the second half of the 20th Century.

Until the 1980s, the autobiography criticism was mainly the area of male scholars. This undoubtedly influenced how autobiography as a genre was perceived, read, and disseminated. There were few critical anthologies and academic articles that included analysis of autobiographies and memoirs written by women. Classical canon decided and disseminated as normative was created by white male scholars who took little or no interest in writing by white women, women of colour or, even less, by sexual minorities.

The issues of self-writing, autobiography as a primary tool for self-expression, subjectivity, experience, and the elusiveness of definitions are what illuminate feminist theories applied to autobiography and, without a doubt, feminist perspectives helped raise questions and uncertainties that had not been considered before by proponents of traditional approaches to autobiography who omitted, ignored, and dismissed the female vision of self and everything the female-centred perspectives imply.

Narratives of the enslaved people, as a genre, set the tone for future Black letters because they were so compelling, resistant, and ready to (re)claim Black humanity through letters. Thus the "I was born" sentence is the anchor of the self and identity and a sign of resistance against cultural marginalisation and erasure.

The section on the rise of African American personal narratives served to contextualise Black self-writing and helped understand where Black literary roots are

grounded. Black women in the twentieth century had some precedents to draw on, and what began in the nineteenth century as a Black female literary tradition has continued to the present day, drawing inspiration from "Black Mothers and Sisters" and their contribution to Black autobiography (Reagon, 1982). Black female writers were frequently underrepresented, underestimated, and dismissed. If academic essays on women's autobiographies were included in major feminist anthologies, most of them were devoted to white women rather than Black. This situation was redressed in the last decades of the 20th Century and there is still plenty of academic interest in Black female cultural production.

The last section of chapter II is devoted to the review of literature on autobiography. The internal structure of this sub-chapter is as follows: the general state of the art of autobiography is presented followed by a discussion on the recent studies in the area of Feminist Theory regarding autobiography, especially that written by women. The third section refers to review of the literature published on African American autobiography, including what has been published in recent decades on autobiographies written by Black women. The last section of this chapter is dedicated to the review of academic articles and monographs as well as PhD dissertations on the authors selected for this research.

Chapter III is devoted to the first axis of the research: the tension, conflict, and negotiation between the individual "I" of the autobiographers and Black communities (which, of course includes members of both sexes). Here, the study proceeds to examining in detail Black female autobiographers dealing with their personal and public selves and analyses in depth all four writers and how they construct their selves in their texts in relation to their Black social environment.

As will be discussed in this chapter, the Black autobiographers chosen for the purpose of this work deal in various ways with the question of how Blackness and community impact their lives and how, if at all, they resist the tendencies imposed on Black women to demonstrate loyalty to their community.

Chapter IV focuses on the problem of writing the autobiographical body and how each author approaches physique in the text. Because people have and are bodies at the same time, their experiences are embodied: memory and feelings are rooted in the body. The body, in turn, paraphrasing French feminist theorists, becomes a text in the process of self-writing and the text becomes the body. Following the lead of Paul John Eakin and António Damásio in the area of neurosciences, human selves are deeply embodied and so any autobiography, whether it deals with bodily issues directly or silences them for specific

reasons, must reflect the bodily experiences. According to the research developed in the area of Women's Studies, women's autobiographies have tended to address many aspects of being a female (body), and corporeality has remained at the centre of many women's autobiographical narratives.

The chapter will analyse further the fact that the derogatory images of Black bodies persist in contemporary American society, and they bear the stamp of historical racism. It is thus more than justified to examine the analysed autobiographers' works to comprehend how they all, intellectuals, and artists, perceived their own bodies in a world that has attempted to marginalise them as ugly and pathological. Each autobiography is viewed through the lens of the material body, with the aforementioned aspects of the treatment of Black bodies in America in mind. It is especially interesting to investigate how each autobiographer treats her own body textually, how she weaves her autobiographical narrative around her body, and whether it is prominently visible or hidden in her text. Particular attention is paid to how the body is described and remembered, in what situations and contexts, and whether it is a source of pride (including racial and female pride) or a source of anxiety and low self-esteem.

Chapter V delves into the relational aspects of the Black female autobiography and the authors' construction of self through the (mainly) maternal / paternal relationships. That topic constitutes the third, and last, axis of the proposed research: affective relations and significant Others through which the authors weave their textual selves. As previously explained, none of the autobiographers is a solitary island. Affective relations do impact greatly the way their selves are constructed.

This chapter attempts to demonstrate that no autobiography is ever written in an affective (and social) vacuum, and relationships with one's closest relatives, such as parents, deeply influenced each of the autobiographers and constituted a source of strong identification, also in regard to the racial self. An autobiography can also be a biography in the sense that it does not focus solely on the autobiographer and instead tells the story of the Other. This is also a risk an author takes when speaking for others in their autobiography. They must be careful so as not to diminish the figure of the Other and render them inadequately. In the four autobiographies examined in the Thesis, the autobiographers speak from the position of daughters but, in some cases, they speak as mothers. They occupy double (or multiple) positionality, which further complicates the narrative.

The Thesis ends with the Conclusions where the outcome of the undertaken research is presented in general terms, discussing each author's weaving of their textual selves. The main research question of how these four African American autobiographers weave the fabric of their selfhood is answered, although each of the chapters already allows for the answers to questions posed in the main research axes. Because chapters III-V are dedicated to each of the three axes, they already include the conclusions which will be, however, presented in a more structured way at the end of the Thesis. The Conclusions present the general results of the research while more specific findings are included at the end of chapters III-V.

At the end of this Introduction which aims to present the purpose and relevance of this research, its main questions, the methodology used as well as a summary of each of the chapters, it makes sense to emphasise that the present Thesis is a part and continuation of the research into life-narratives written by Black American women. Although some of the selected authors are very well known and studied by the academic community working in the field of Literary, Cultural and Black Studies, some of the autobiographers still require further attention. It is believed that the present study has filled the existing void in what concerns Nina Simone, Faith Ringgold, and Rebecca Walker as autobiographers (and not "only" artists and an activist respectively) and as the Conclusions demonstrate, this research aims to deepen the scholarly understanding of Audre Lorde, Faith Ringgold, Nina Simone, and Rebecca Walker as authors of their own stories.

Further research into Black subjectivities, both male and female, expressed through text and other media is desperately needed also because any literary text can be approached from different angles and every reader will have new and fresh ideas and ways to interpret texts and other forms of cultural production. Additionally, because the current situation of many African Americans is still far from being stable and safe, the myth of so-called post-racial America should be debunked. Today when extremists denying rights to whom they consider Other(s) are on the rise, in times when democracy and pluralism are considered in many circles as superfluous if not outright dangerous to "good old" values (both in the US and other countries across the globe), and when immigrants and refugees (frequently seen as Others) are considered a threat to the current order in the US and Europe (and also across the globe), it is even more pressing to examine how African Americans negotiate their humanity, rights and equality in both white and Black communities. Dissenting voices must

be analysed and made heard through scholarly work dedicated to current literary and cultural trends in America.

Chapter I

Autobiographical Narratives: Theoretical Framework and Discussion of the Concepts

Introduction.

Literature of the Self - texts which seek to answer the questions regarding the ontological status of an individual - has been with humanity for a very long time. Although under different names, autobiography was already practiced in the 1st and 2nd Century A.D., even if their authors were not aware of the genre and would never term their writing "autobiography", as in the examples discussed further in this chapter. Nowadays, it seems that the self-in-writing is even more present and conspicuous than ever, with what can be denominated as the democratisation of autobiography, memoir, and other forms of life-writing. The increasing demand for writing and sharing one's memories, life stories and the process of constructing one's identity led to the point where bookshelves are filled with various kinds of memoirs, autobiographies, journals, diaries, and collected letters. The same applies to the virtual space of the Internet where there seems to be no limit to publishing online stories about one's life, incidents, memories, history of one's illnesses (e.g., cancer survival), recoveries (addiction recovery), traumatic events, such as rape or domestic violence. Technological solutions, such as blogs, vlogs (video blogs or logs), different online open-source content management system (CMS) sites and applications such as WordPress tempt actual and would-be autobiographers/bloggers/vloggers to unveil their lives, lay bare their secrets and share their stories instantly with thousands of readers. Social media such as Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn, Instagram, or a new trendsetter very popular with younger generation TikTok[1] allow their users to weave self-narratives in various forms such as prose, photographs/images, videos, or music, or even through shared articles and links which reveal one's interests, emotional responses to current political and cultural events and the self whose existence wishes to be acknowledged. As Wang (2013:173) claims: "(…) posts on Facebook are often characterized by self-expression, self-promotion and self-disclosure". They serve,

[1] According to social media networks and apps analysis, TikTok, a video-sharing app, is immensely popular among Generation Z which refers to users born after 1996. The study shows that over 60% of the TikTok users pertain to the Generation Z although other generations do consume and create the content of TikTok. Bradian Muliadi, "What The Rise of TikTok Says About Generation Z". July 7, 2020: https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbestechcouncil/2020/07/07/what-the-rise-of-tiktok-says-about-generation-z/?sh=1ed316016549

like autobiography or memoir do, to create a self-image one wants to display in public and negotiate one's identity exposed to, and often censured by, international and multicultural community. At the same time, it should be noted that selves and identities forged on the Internet might perhaps reveal their volatile or temporary nature in the sense that they might vanish or transform themselves as quickly as they appeared, deleted or altered by their authors. Social networks with their digital ecosystems where self-presentation and self-disclosure of the individual are of paramount importance became a source of self-validation but also an area where it is as easy to disappear or alter one's self as it is easy to create a new one (Bozkurt and Chih-Hsiung, 2016).

The contemporary near-obsession with one's self, with life-story and narrative through which authors re-create their subjectivities has allowed for different people to re-invent their lives and their selves after traumas, war-experiences, experiences of abuse and violence, life-altering events of most diverse kinds, self-imposed ordeals, etc. It has become possible for regular people to voice their concerns, denounce different kinds of injustices (racial, gender, sexual, religious, financial, and political) and create new identities or fight for a cause. In many cases, traumatised authors rise like a Phoenix from the ashes through the act of self-writing which turns out to possess healing, therapeutic power for authors themselves but also for audiences who share similar fates or beliefs.

For the sake of categorisation (although attempts at categorisation of literary definitions and genres always seem slippery and, in some instances, impose limits on the very genres), terms such as "autobiography", "memoir", "self-writing" and "life-writing" will be employed with certain frequency throughout this chapter and the rest of the Thesis. It should be clear that although the vast part of the following discussion will focus on the concept of autobiography, the term "life-writing", used quite often today and even preferred by some of the researchers and authors themselves, remains an umbrella term to cover many forms of writing not only about the self but also about Other(s), or where the self and Other(s) coexist or even merge, for instance in biography or memoirs.

The aim of this chapter is to discuss the concept of autobiography and related genres, such as memoir and autofiction. However, before the three concepts are scrutinised in some details through the lens of Literary and Cultural Studies, it is important to take a closer look at the concept of the self – the key term that will appear throughout the entire Thesis. The discussion of the "self" as seen by different sciences such as sociology or psychology shall

prepare the ground for further examination of the different concepts of autobiography, memoir and autofiction. Several areas of expertise shall be brought to the analysis of the self in order to examine its complex nature. Also, it is of relevance to discuss the important link between the self and the narrative as that link is the key dimension of the present study. Only after this discussion will this chapter concentrate on the examination of the three life-narrative modes. Although in many aspects distinct from each other but sharing common traits at the same time, the terms "autobiography", "memoir" and "autofiction" will be explored with the aim of drawing parallels and determining differences between them. Each of this chapter's subsections will be devoted to the discussion of theoretical approaches towards autobiography, memoir and autofiction. In the following analysis some examples of definitions of autobiography will be provided and main developments of critical approaches and different discussions regarding the nature of autobiography, its limits, its hybrid and multidimensional nature, related problems and conditions shall be traced. The matter of memory, so intrinsic to autobiography will be discussed along with the thresholds between the genres of autobiography, memoir and autofiction. Each act of exercising memory in life-writing involves, at the same time, an act of forgetting (conscious or not), falling prey to memory lapses, being pressed by cultural or political constraints not to tell one's version of the story. However, it is of paramount importance to observe at this point the question of author's freedom to tell those aspects of one's story which one is willing to divulge. Thus, when memory is intimately linked to the act of self-narration, it must be emphasised that silencing certain events and memories, choosing what to tell and what to keep secret is an unalienable right of every autobiography/memoir author. Behind such silence and resolve not to reveal all of one's truth are innumerable reasons, ranging from ethical questions of keeping other people's identity intact to emotional or reputational price telling all might entail and, ultimately, the authorial power to choose how to construct one's narrative self. The issue of truth will also be approached because fiction is an inseparable aspect of autobiography, albeit in some cases outright lies and intentional manipulation on the part of the author do take place. The price for any form of manipulation is high, though, because then not only is the author discredited, but the cause they defended in the autobiography may lose its

credibility in case of human rights witnessing[2] (trauma, denouncing human rights violation, struggle for the political cause, etc.) and be used by political opponents to re-write the story.

The matter of memoir, nowadays an immensely popular genre, will be discussed right after the autobiography. Quite often memoir gets conflated with autobiography, although as it will be argued, both genres do differ significantly. Sometimes, though, it seems that the choice between two terms depends entirely on a memoir's author's intention and whether he/she wishes to highlight his/her distance from traditional form of autobiography and shift towards more "friendly" forms of life-writing. As a matter of fact, as will be discussed, the term "memoir" has been in use for much longer than "autobiography" and that, perhaps, is one of the reasons why these two related genres are, at times, confused.

The next section of this chapter will be devoted to analysis of a relatively new concept in the area of literary studies: autofiction. Although the term has been coined within the context of French literary studies, it has found many proponents across cultures and nowadays is well studied and discussed in the Anglo-American literary and cultural fields. Undoubtedly related to the genre of autobiography and memoir, autofiction marks a terrain as a genre which stands somewhere in the middle between autobiography and novel blurring lines between these two literary genres. As it will be argued, the term refers to the phenomenon of crossing literary frontiers between fiction and non-fiction, factual and imaginative text where the protagonist is, at the same time, author of the work, is not new and has been practiced for a long time. However, it must be made clear that of all three concepts discussed in this chapter, the concept of "autofiction" is, perhaps, more distanced from traditional autobiography, also because it has been frequently seen as a sign of disapproval of autobiography which has often been seen as a Eurocentric tool for producing culturally normative and prescribed selves.

[2] According to Sidonie Smith, in her 2011 insightful article "Narrating Lives and Contemporary Imaginaries", life narratives whose aim is to denounce political violence, sexual abuse and rape, brutal events during the Balkan War, are read and consumed often to discredit the authors and diminish the impact of their narratives. Those texts-testimonials become a contested terrain where unintended or conscious lies serve to undermine the truth-telling nature of the testimonial. Any facts that might have gotten distorted in the memory of a witness serve as an excuse to deny the whole story or at least its part, as it happened, for example in case of conservatives in Japan who challenged their denouncers' accuracy and affirmations claiming that that so-called "comfort-women" acted as prostitutes out of their free will (Smith, *ibid*, p. 569).

1.1. The Self.

The question of self/identity has proven to be a thorny issue for many scholars from different scientific areas. As shall be demonstrated briefly, the concept of the "self" has been scrutinised, defined, and explained by various sciences, from philosophy, through social sciences, psychology, sociology, and anthropology. Academics have grappled with the term trying to systematise it and understand it. As a result, different definitions of the term have been proposed, some of which bear similarities and allow to trace common characteristics.

Back in 1910, in the essay under the title "The Self" the philosopher Frank Thilly[3] mused over the concept of the self and concluded that mental processes must be a result of some entity's self-knowledge or self-awareness. Thoughts, feelings, or impulses must be "authored" by individual persons aware of themselves and of the fact they call themselves owners of such mental and cognitive processes. Thilly recognised that thoughts, feelings, emotions, etc. are temporary states – they come and go, they never return (not in the same form at least) but the "owners" of those states do recognise them and realise they pertain to them. People usually, under normal circumstances, remember them, identify them, and embrace them. (Thilly, 1910: 3). The following excerpt illustrates well Thilly's understanding of the self, its mental workings and awareness of its own existence:

> There is, then, something in consciousness, an ego, a self, a subject, whatever we choose to call it, that appropriates, recognizes, identifies, compares, looks before and after, remembers, anticipates, apprehends meaning, conceives, judges, affirms and denies, infers, attends, assumes attitudes, prefers, selects, decides, learns, grows, develops, is capable of being educated. Of this self or ego we can become aware: we can attend to ourselves as the subject of consciousness; in this sense we may be said to experience the self. But, it must not be forgotten, we do not become aware of a pure ego as a state-less ego; we never experience it alone as a separate entity. (Thilly, *ibid.,* p. 6).

Thilly goes on to explain that consciousness of the self is not yet knowledge of self because the latter requires certain distance from consciousness – temporal, spatial or causal (*ibid.,* p. 6). Certain conclusion becomes clear here which will be of great use during the further discussion of autobiography: for a text to be born, there must be first a thinking,

[3] Frank Thilly was born in the second half of the 19th Century in the United States and is best known for his 1951 *A History of Philosophy*.

reflective self which ponders upon its life, experience and, through words, weaves its textual self (based, in many instances, on lived or imagined life).

Several decades later, in 1960s, psychoanalyst Erik Erikson did further investigation into the self and identity. His work namely *Identity and the life cycle: Selected papers, with a historical introduction by David Rapport* (1959), *Childhood and Society* (1963) or *Identity, youth, and crisis* (1968) triggered other studies on the self, approached from the psychological point of view and contributed to particularly rich debates among scientists about what constitutes the self, how it is formed and expressed. According to Erikson, the definition of self spans the entire life of a person – a sense of the past in relation to oneself, of how we see others and how others perceive us. Erikson drew heavily on Piaget[4] who had advanced that human life composed of four stages that developed well into adulthood[5]. According to Erikson, everyone, from a tender age, goes through eight[6] life cycles which end, if everything goes according to expectations, with a solution to the identity crisis[7]. If that does not happen, if a teenager or an adult fails to solve the crisis, they get stuck at a certain stage of self / identity construction or, alternatively, they opt for a negative identity[8]. Erikson, thus, identified eight stages of crises solution and each one permits an individual to pass swiftly to the following stage of identity construction and development. Teenage years have been considered by

[4] Jean Piaget published a number of works dedicated to the cognitive development in children and various stages of such development. Some examples of his most important works include: *The moral judgement of the child* (1932), *Origins of intelligence in the child* (1936), *Play, dreams and imitation in childhood* (1945), *Construction of reality in the child* (1957).

[5] The four stages in the child's development are the following: sensimotor (from birth to 21 months), preoperational (2 to 7 years old), concrete operational (7 to 11 years old) and formal operational (adolescence to adulthood).

[6] Erick Erikson's eight life stages are the following: *Stage 1: Trust vs Mistrust* (from birth to 18 months); *Stage 2: Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt* (toddler years from 18 months to 3 years); *Stage 3: Initiative vs. Guilt* (preschool years from 3 to 5); *Stage 4: Industry vs. Inferiority* (from 6 to 11 years); *Stage 5: Identity vs. Confusion* (12 to 18 years); *Stage 6: Intimacy vs. Isolation* (from 18 to 40 years); *Stage 7: Generativity vs. Stagnation* (middle age from 40 to 65 years old) and the final *Stage 8: Integrity vs. Despair* (from 65 to death).

[7] Identity crisis according to Erikson is one of the eight stages in human life when a person is undergoing a period of intensive self-analysis and questioning one's understanding of oneself. During that period a person seeks to comprehend his/her existence, aims in life, values, importance to one's social circles, etc. (Baumeister and Shapiro, 1985). The identity crisis is strongly linked, thus, to emotional upheaval, often experienced in adolescence, when young people are obliged to answer a set of questions regarding their future role in the society, their values, etc.

[8] Negative identity is, according to psychology, a result of failure to solve the identity crisis. It is demonstrated by adopting a socially disproved of role confusion or turn to the delinquent behaviour. Personality: Human behaviour - Adolescence Identity Crisis, Sex Roles, and Age-Related Decline | Britannica

Erikson the most relevant because it is when persons gain strength, get to know themselves as well as realise their limitations and strong points.

Complementing these views, Peter Weinreich and Wendy Saunders (2003), propose a theory where people develop their Selves through interaction with others. The factors which influence this development are multiple: biological, historical circumstances, cultural norms, personal and collective experiences. The self is the fruit of different aspects where the personal meets the social, the collective. These factors have an important impact on the way the construction of the self and identity is forged. The authors propose the following definition where the past, the present and the future bear an indelible imprint on the self:

> A person's identity is defined as the totality of one's self-construal, in which how one construes oneself in the present expresses the continuity between how one construes oneself in the past and how one construes oneself as one aspires to be in the future. (Weinreich and Saunders, 2003: 26).

On the other hand, Sheila Marshal, researcher in the area of psychology of development presents her own definition as well where she highlights the importance of the link between the self and the Others:

> Identity is a social-psychological construct that reflects social influences through imitation and identification processes and active self-construction in the creation of what is important to self and others. (Marshal, 2005: 433).

Other essential elements which need to be considered when the concept of self/identity are examined are the following: gender, ethic provenience, profession, religion and, other cultural factors. It is, however, of utmost importance to highlight here that the self is a rich mix of all elements and none of the aspects mentioned before can impact solely or exclusively the way the self is created. For example, it would be counterproductive to focus on the factor of gender or ethnicity alone because every individual is much more than "just" their gender or ethnic provenience. If only gender is highlighted in human development of the self, then other equally important dimensions of the self are at risk of being obscured. Stripping an individual person of their many psychological, social, and cultural layers is a form of epistemological violence that reduces said person into shreds and fragmented particles of their self. It is equally relevant to bear in mind that identity-related categories such as race are mere social constructs which are not based on scientific biological evidence but which still, even today, impact human relations, dictate the politics of the entire

communities or states and may serve as a pretext to discriminate against specific groups and minorities.

Returning to different academic attempts at understanding and defining the self, the work carried out by David Hume[9] should be mentioned. According to Kupperman (1984), Hume proposed that the self is made up of a person's memories, personality traits, and a collection of impressions, self and subjecthood-related issues are pertinent in a variety of disciplines, including law, medicine, religion, and psychology. Philosophers, psychologists, psychoanalysts, sociologists, and literary critics have all studied the self as an entity. By conceptualising human beings as a hub of experience, including experience of that human's own "someoneness", Harris (1989) claims that "working with a concept of self" is essential. The idea of the self is somewhat dualistic, however. It is seen as both a subject and an agent with the ability to affect the world on the one hand, and as the topic of its own reflection and story on the other. The base for a person's self-identity that will evolve throughout the course of their life is a thinking, self-reflective "I".

However, according to social scientists, the self is mainly a product of social forces, the result of interaction with others, and is undoubtedly shaped by the outside world. Margaret Mead, a renowned anthropologist, in her insightful *Coming of Age in Samoa* published originally in 1928 when the author was 23 years old, emphasised the significance of individuals who play the role of the other in social interaction and the relevance of socialisation. She concluded after years of research that people largely perceive themselves as they are perceived by others. The gaze of others shapes our sense of self and who we are (Mead *apud* Rosenberg, 1989: 38). We see ourselves through the eyes of others, and we form our sense of self and identity based on their gaze and how they perceive us. We understand ourselves as individuals embedded in society, obligated to follow its rules, or face social and cultural consequences such as ostracism. The concept of gaze, however, is not deprived of its own problems. Postcolonial academics and feminists have pointed out how what they termed as "Western gaze", the way Western scholars looked at the Other (namely the so-called Third World women) either marginalising them by silence (in the case of Black subjects in the United States or Africa), stripping them of their individuality, or highlighting their sensual/sexual/romantic aspects in what Edward Said termed "Orientalism" (Said,

[9] David Hume included his main ideas on the human self and understanding in his major works, i.e. *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739-40) and its revision published in English in 1874 *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*.

1979).[10] The gaze of others directed towards us is never innocent or deprived of its cultural heritage; the way we look at Other(s) is burdened with *a priori* formed expectations, conclusions, our fears, etc. It is a complex psychological and cultural act in which we create Other(s) and so when we are gazed at, our self and subjectivity is impacted, whether we like it or not, by the same factors.

Without any doubt, each of the sciences that engaged with the concept of self, revealed significant aspects of the problem. The self is complex and full of rich internal life, but it is not an island. It has a strong referential basis, and affective/group relationships have a significant impact on how it perceives and develops throughout its lifetime. The theories of racial construction, roots, identity, and racial authenticity are of primary relevance to this Thesis. The theoretical part of the Thesis, the short contextual introduction to each chapter and chapters III, IV and V shall draw on works developed by renowned scholars in the field of Cultural Studies who dedicated years and decades of their work to various aspects of racial construction. Paul Gilroy's body of work (2002) will be particularly relevant because he questions the somewhat fossilised idea of racial roots and identity proposing, instead enveloping in the concept of racial roots and belonging the notion of routes, i.e., transition, fluidity, trans-Atlantic migrations which contribute to cultural enrichment of the concept of "race". Particularly in his work dated 2002 *Against Race*, Gilroy calls for the total rejection of the concept of race so that racial relations, tensions, expectations and conflicts can be rethought and re-built, especially in racially-imbued social relations in the United States. According to Gilroy, it is counterproductive to focus obsessively on the idea of racial separation and celebration of Blackness because this path leads to the widening of an already wide gap between white and Black people in the American continent (as well as in Europe). Proponents of such an approach state that emphasising Blackness and its uniqueness essentialises Black people and contributes to the creation of the idea of "race" as a monolith which unrecognizes differences between people, also within Black communities. Other scholars who corroborated such approaches to racial authenticity and importance were Henry Luis Gates Jr. (1983) for whom the very concept of race is dangerous, Anthony Appiah (1992, 1996, 2005) and Michel Wieviorka (1995) who took pains to strip the concept

[10] There are other scholars who have analysed the problem of sexualizing the post-colonial subject, romanticising it or portraying as a passive victim deprived of its own volition, awareness of its situation and totally dependent on Western aid. Some of the examples are: Chandra Talpade Mohanty, 1984; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 1999; Trinh Minh-ha, 1989; Oyèrònkè Oyewùmí, 1997.

of race of its essentialist dimensions and open it to other formulations and interpretations. Albert Memmi's concept of "the mark of the plural" (where the colonised is never seen as an individual person but representative of the collective) will be referred to as well in further parts of the Thesis.

When discussing the concept of self, so essential to this research, it cannot be forgotten that postmodern thought took the concept of the self as one of its primary subjects of reflection and presented it in a completely new light. As is explained in Stuart Hall's insightful 1992 article "Who needs "Identity"? included in the volume of collected essays on identity and culture, the postmodern self will never more be seen as a coherent, stable entity, fixed and atemporal. While the discussion about the self presented above highlighted the importance of solving the identity crisis so that the individual can proceed with his/her life, postmodernism questioned the existence of the solid self altogether. The Cartesian subject aware of its power and self-knowledge has so far been an example to follow in its universality and wobbly omnipotence. This same exemplary subject has also come to represent a white, male, Eurocentric subject. Furthermore, the white exemplary man has stumbled under the weight of feminist and postcolonial thought and critique. Social alterations, globalisation, and processes of decolonisation in different parts of the world contributed to the questioning of that which had never been questioned before. What ensued was a crisis of solid and fixed (if not fossilised) identity. The current tendencies underline the fact that self and identity have become understood as the result of an individual's effort to (re)create themselves. The outcome of such construction and re-creation is often believed to be fragmentary, unstable, and incoherent. The postmodern and poststructuralist self can be a ghost, shattered into a million little pieces. Thus, the postmodern thought, contributions from postcolonial and feminist studies have caused that the figure of white man of middle class (and European origin) will not be taken any more as an unquestionable example for others to follow. This is, certainly, a reaction to long decades of portraying the white, middle-class European man as an obligatory example of the self to follow, a universal pattern to recreate in different geographical locations, cultures, and times. It must be remembered, however, that at the time it was the only example available to follow, the only prescribed role model. The postmodern thought discovered a human being with cracked soul, unsure of his/her destiny and without a sense of control over his/her life. The fragmented self penned, of course, fragmented narrative.

Such an approach towards the self is not without problems in what concerns not only autobiography but also subjects who, historically, have been seen as inconsistent, fragmentary, incoherent, and worthy of little if any interest: women and other marginalised subjects (Blacks, the colonised, LGBTQI+, etc.). It will be further discussed throughout this study that for historically marginalised subjects such as women, silenced and deleted from the mainstream culture, an attempt to adhere to the poststructuralist theories of the self whose very existence is questioned, especially in the text where it, theoretically dissolves into a million little pieces, might entail further marginalisation and discrimination. This Thesis shall examine that, in some instances, fragmented selves creating fragmented and cracked texts strive to reach some kind of (emotional and textual) stability, seeking to find (or create) a coherent self. The act of writing will become, in some cases, a way to cure the fragmentation which causes pain and insecurity.

As can be seen, the concept of the self is a complex one, subject to analysis performed by academics from different areas, such as psychology, sociology, psychanalysis, anthropology. What is common among the areas of knowledge is that all the sciences highlight the collective and the social aspects of the self. Erik Erikson, drawing on theories developed by Piaget, Margaret Mead, Weinreich and Saunders, etc. emphasised that the self is, among other things, a fruit of the individual's interaction with others. We are all embedded in the society and the way we are looked upon, contributes to the individual's development of the sense of self. Although a highly private and intimate process because it involves the memories, feelings and emotions, the act of creating the self and identity never occurs in a social and emotional vacuum. Although there are different theories trying to define the fleeting sense of the self, scientists seem to agree that the self needs to exist in the first place to be able to look at one's life and experience and close it in an experiential and textual frame.

Despite the alternative approaches to the concept of self and the insightful contributions from the various academic fields mentioned above, the approach taken in this study is to focus on the self as constituted through narrative. Although self and narrative-related questions have a long intellectual tradition, as Jens Brockmeier and Donal Carbaugh (2001) argue, the links established between identity/self and narrative and cultural discourse still pose interesting and challenging questions worthy of academic research. Those links have been well established and examined, as demonstrated in the fields of medicine and psychology/psychiatry. Numerous studies demonstrate how trauma, for example, might be

cured or mitigated through the narrative/writing process. David Bell (2017) mentions Plato's conception of *pharmakon* where an act of writing can be interpreted as poison and cure to a malady. Drawing on other scholars, Bell concludes that the writing process is an act of engagement with the self and others and that "writing works as a medium through which we manipulate, perfect, and perform our socially constructed selves" (*ibid.*, p. 2). Thus, as will be further demonstrated, the self can be expressed or created textually through writing. Writing can be a powerful tool through which a self can heal, redefine itself (if it has been defined by others as is often the case with women, Blacks, etc.) and render its own image to serve its cultural, political, and psychological aims.

Narrative is a universal mode of communication that begins in infancy. From a young age, humans are socialised and trained to use narrative to express their personal experiences. Stories, novels, letters, and memoirs are examples of narratives, as are gossip, eulogy, medical talk, jokes, songs, opera, dance, and so on (Ochs and Capps, 1996). Personal narrative is the result of personal experience, but it also shapes the experience to look the way we want it to look. Narrative validates the self in the world, retrieves and relies heavily on memories, and constructs a sense of past, present, and future. It is through narrative that we learn about ourselves, our experiences, and our surroundings. We also "shape how we attend to and feel about events" as a result of narrative" (*ibid*, p. 21). In 1994 Margaret Somers, working in the area of social sciences, published an article "The narrative constitution of identity: a relational and network approach" where she suggested that scholars pay more heed to this possible link between self and narrative. The author argued that it is through narratives that we construct in our daily lives our understanding of who we are as individuals within society. The self-narrative is a task which helps us interpret the world surrounding us; it helps us understand ourselves and others who cross our paths. Similarly, Anthony Paul Kerby affirms that the sense of life can only be grasped through narrative: "Our talk of the self is self-constituting rather than referential to an ontologically prior subject. The meaning of a life can be adequately grasped only in a narrative or story-like framework" (Kerby, 1991: 31).

In this context, it is impossible to separate narrative and self; both are intimately linked giving shape to human understanding of life, past and experience. Human narratives often concentrate on the past, nevertheless, stories of "what happened" also have the potential to impact present and future. However, two facts must be kept in mind: first, stories about human experiences are based on human memories and the ability to remember frequently

fails people. Second, the method and context of narratives may differ between cultures. Cultural factors heavily influence how stories are told. The stories are intended not only to help individuals (and entire groups) develop their narrative identities, but also to embed people within society. They are about establishing who individuals believe they are. "The self comes to terms with society through narrative identity," claims Dan McAdams (2008: 243). Not only do our personal narratives shape our external world and experiences, but they also contribute to our shifting and ever-changing sense of who we are throughout our lives.

Paul John Eakin (1999, 2008) whose work on autobiography and storied selves is often referred to in this research, corroborates the view that life can be comprehended through narrative. As he admits in *How Our Lives Become Stories* (1999), decades after his work on autobiography began, he came to understand that there is a strong link between narrative and the self. This link is so close that Eakin came up with the concept of narrative identity – identity we construct while we tell/write stories of our lives. He has drawn on research carried out by Ulrich Neisser (*Cognitive Psychology* 1967; *Cognition and Reality*, 1976 and *Intelligence: Knowns and Unknowns*, 1996) who had identified five types of subjectivities[11], one specific type among them: the "extended self"[12], a term linked to the purpose of autobiographical narrative. However, for Eakin the term "subjectivity" is more general and ambiguous while "identity" is narrower and subject to constant alteration. In addition, he says that he is unwilling to perceive the self as an entity but rather as a process in which self-awareness is constantly shifting. To him, narrative cannot be limited only to a literary form but should be approached as the "fabric of our lived experience" (Eakin, 2008, *ibid.*, p. 2).

According to McAdams and McLean (2013: 233), "narrative identity is a person's internalized and evolving life story, integrating the reconstructed past and imagined future to provide life with some degree of unity and purpose". According to the authors, people are natural storytellers. Narrative identity has as its aim to reconstruct the narrator's autobiographical past and project the future creating, thus, a coherent image of identity in

[11] The five proposed types of subjectivities, according to Ulrich Neisser, are: the ecological self, the interpersonal self, the extended self, the private self, and the conceptual self. The first two concepts are ways of perceiving the self while the remaining three refer to a metacognitive knowledge about the self. The ecological self and the interpersonal self are forms of introspective ways of knowing oneself available to a child in the first stages of life.

[12] The concept of the "extended self" as developed by Neisser refers to the idea of life as a story that has a continuous character, starts with birth, extends through the present and continues into the future.

time (*ibid.*, p. 236). It is worth noting that in their article McAdams and McLean speak of "coherent" narrative identity, not a fragmented and shattered one which would imply that the proposal advanced by postmodernism and poststructuralism where the self is incoherent and fragmentary sounds intellectually attractive and challenging (and is very often true for many subjects who do display and relish in their fragmented selves) but is, psychologically speaking, slightly problematic.

Psychological sciences emphasise the importance of a stable and coherent self as the basis of psychological health and stability. Any deviation from the norm is seen as pathology as has been demonstrated by neurological and psychological sciences.[13] Thus, although it can be perceived as attractive and guaranteeing certain dynamism in intellectual and literary terms, the theory of the shattered postmodern self or no self possible at all is countered by neurosciences that prove that in cases of brain injuries, psychiatric conditions and psychological disorders, what is strived at is return, if at all possible, to a healthy, coherent self (which will create a coherent narrative). Stasis and equilibrium are two pillars of the desired state as in mental and psychological context it is the proof of health and thus, possibility of creating a coherent text. This, however, does not mean that patients with linguistic impairments due to brain damage or people suffering from autism, clinical depression, bipolar disorder or even schizophrenia are unable to tell stories or even write autobiographies. Although the dominant, clinical view is that psychiatric patients do experience disruptions in their sense of self and are, frequently, unable to create what could be termed as a standard, coherent narrative, there is some evidence in the field of neurosciences that it is not always the case. Roe and Davidson in their 2005 article published in *Journal of Medical Ethics; Medical Humanities* under the title "Self and narrative in schizophrenia*"* discuss the characteristics of the illness, its social and cultural implications for patients and then focus on the path to recovery in some cases, arguing that people with schizophrenia still need to find a way to deal with the situation and make the best of their lives. Curiously, interviews with patients revealed that those most aware of their situation

[13] Gallagher and Cole (2011) dedicate an article called *Dissociation in self-narrative* to the matter of psychopathological conditions which severely impact self-narrative. They claim that certain conditions do influence the range of narratives possible. They provide some examples of patients with autism who use language differently than others. In pure aphasia it is possible to witness overall curtailment of language and gesture. Drawing on studies carried out by Junghaenel, Smyth, and Santner (2008) it has been noted that narratives produced by psychiatric patients have lower number of cognitive words. They also quote the study implemented by Raffard *et al*. (2010) where analysed narratives by schizophrenic patients were, indeed, less coherent, and sophisticated than in the control group.

were able to distinguish the "healthy" self from the "ill" self and thus their narrative included two subjects: "myself" when the illness receded and "myself when I am ill" (Roe and Davidson, 2005, *ibid.*, p. 94). In some cases, the process of recovery from the illness (between 45% and 65% of cases) implies the reconstruction of the self through recovery narrations. Research conducted with this population demonstrates that "an effective sense of self as a social agent and a restored life narrative are not only among the results of recovery, but also appear to play a crucial role in processes of recovery as well" (*ibid.*, p. 92). The medical examples taken from neurosciences and psychiatry demonstrate that a healthy narrative mirrors a healthy, whole self. Oliver Sacks (1985 / 2015: xxii) speaks of "neurology of identity" when he refers to the science of neurology and the long-forgotten art of listening to a patient and their story. However, a question emerges: what about people who are, for different reasons, unable to produce any narrative, either coherent or incoherent? Do they have a self as well, even though they do not express it or construct it through narrative? Would it be ethical to conclude that the self is forged exclusively through narrative, leaving thus aside all people suffering from dementia or Alzheimer's? Is it only through narrative that people can be considered persons at all? These are the questions that do not pertain directly to the scope of the Thesis but emerge, nevertheless, during the discussion of self and narrative and the close, intimate link between them. Although the main goal of this Thesis is to examine in detail this link in the four autobiographies selected and see how each of the authors weaves their textual self, it must be kept in mind that there might be other cases, other stories where not everything is clearly obvious and one-dimensional; the theory of narrative self by which this Thesis abides might prove problematic in other, more complex cases. Not mentioning such possibility and such complexity would mean glossing over cases of people whose self cannot be denied even if no narrative exists, for very different reasons (either because some cognitive or emotional impairment exists or because the person has no wish to tell, write or publish his/her life story).

Autobiographical narrative focuses on private and intimate life experiences, and as such, it is a tool through which the self is constructed and revealed. Eakin reiterates that when we write/talk about ourselves, we perform an act of self-invention. In some sense then, autobiographical narrative, the core of this research, is a work of performance and/or staging. When writing an autobiography, we play who we think we are. Our selves are storied, i.e., fully developed through stories and memories that serve to re-create ourselves every time we tell our tale. Thus, writing an autobiography means recreating our

subjecthood through the text. In a way, the autobiography is directed toward the future, to preserve ourselves and the way we will be remembered. It is a game where our selves transit constantly between what we want them to have been, what we believe they are, and how we wish to shape them in the future.

1.2. Autobiography.

When it comes to studying rich critical literature produced from the second half of the 20th Century, what strikes scholars specialised in the field of life-writing, is precisely the profusion of attempts at arriving at a clear and coherent definition of the genre of autobiography. Although scholars seem to have arrived at some consensus regarding the nature of autobiography, when details are under consideration, such as what kind of narratives can be defined as autobiography or what kind of texts are denied its status remains a bone of contention even today. The second half of the 20th Century and the first decades of the 21st Century brought to the fore the fact that autobiography has become not only a form contested by critics from various fields such as literary and cultural studies, autobiographers themselves, neurological and psychological scientists but has been primarily, turned into a hybrid form whose frontier, as it will be argued and presented, has become blurred. It could be even argued that there are as many autobiographical forms as autobiographers practising autobiographical writing.

One of the reasons behind the fervent discussions among scholars is that autobiography cannot be seen any more as a purely non-fiction form. Initially, when autobiography was seen as a strictly referential, factual, and historical form of writing, it was also undervalued and considered a lesser genre. With time, however, deepened awareness on the part of the critics and more diverse forms practised by different authors emerged and made it clear that autobiography carries necessarily elements of fiction and the amount of it depends not only on authors who write autobiographies, but on the epoch in which the autobiography was penned and on the cultural modes of self culturally available and prescribed.

Etymologically, the term autobiography comes from three Greek words: ***autos*** (self) + ***bios*** (life) + ***graphe*** (writing). These three words already help the readers form the first idea of what autobiography is: self/life/writing – writing about one's own life from one's own perspective. In his 1982 *The Forms of Autobiography*, William Spengemann termed such a form of writing as "self-written biography" (Watson *in* Folkenflik, 1993). In other words,

autobiography is a narrative act concerning one's life and in the process of autobiographical writing the author occupies the *locus* of the writing subject (person writing or observing) and the object (person written about or observed) at the same time. Theoretically, this simple definition should not pose any problems but as many critics affirm, nothing should be viewed as certain, unproblematic, and taken for granted when autobiography is written or read.

According to James Olney (1980a), it is not easy to ascertain precisely when the first autobiography was written/published in the Western world. He suggests such a possibility with an example of a text, *The Autobiography of a Dissenting Minister*, published in 1834 by William Pitt Scargill, a Unitarian minister and author born in London. Olney later poses an important question about whether St. Augustine's *Confessions* dating back to the fourth century or Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions* of 1782 should not also be considered autobiographies, although the very term "autobiography" never appears in those texts. What are the criteria to call a text an autobiography? Is it the word "autobiography" employed in the title? If so, then Scargill's narrative would be considered the first example of autobiography.

On the other hand, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (2010) argue that the term "autobiography" first appeared in the English language in an article reviewing Isaac D'Israeli's *Miscellanies* written by William Taylor and published in the *Monthly Review* in 1797. Thus, Olney and Smith and Watson agree that the very term appeared in the English language only at the end of the 18th Century. It is claimed that it appeared in the German language sooner, even though until the 20th Century the term "self-biography" was used more frequently (Folkenflik, *ibid.*, 1993). This does not mean that the self-referential forms were not practised before that time. In fact, they had been widely practised; however, they were defined rather as "memoirs" and "confessions". Other authors used different terms to signal self-referential writing. For example, *Meditations* written by Marcus Aurelius serves to suggest that self-referential writing occurred early in Western history (although this form is obviously not limited to Western culture). Marcus Aurelius was a Roman Emperor between 161 and 180 A.D., and as the first English translator of the text, Gregory Hays, writes in his preface to *Meditations*, Marcus Aurelius composed his notes at the final stage (last decade) of his life and would probably never think of his entries as meditations, memoirs or let alone autobiography. As a matter of fact, the English title "*Meditations*" is not even an exact translation of the original title which, in Greek, the language in which Aurelius composed his text, meant "*To Himself*" (*Eis heauton*) (Hays, *Introduction*, 2002: 44). Additionally, out of 12

Books only Book 1 presents typical autobiographical reflections where Aurelius dwells on the memories of people who had a lasting influence on his life, Stoic philosophy and understanding of himself. The style of Book 1 is concise and written in short entries format, which could constitute remarks addressed to Marcus Aurelius himself. Book 1 includes short entries on Aurelius' grandfather, father, mother, his first teacher, his brother Severus, among others. The remaining 11 Books contain entries on life and Stoic philosophy, so important in Roman intellectual life of the time.

Among other known memoirists, Teresa de Ávila chose in 1565 to use the title *The Life of Teresa of Jesus* to chronicle her spiritual development and story of attaining the highest level of community with God. As it has been revealed by critics, St. Teresa was unwilling to write her autobiography and did so only at the clear order of her confessor. She herself lacked belief in her capacities as a writer considering herself ignorant. The book, composed of 40 chapters, traces back her spiritual story from childhood into her entry into Convent and focuses entirely on her spiritual quest and inner development through experiences of mysticism and asceticism, mediations on prayers and attaining the Lord's grace. Teresa's translator, Edgar Allison Peers, leaves an informative note on her style and personality which marked *Life* indelibly:

> Then there are the thousand touches which reveal the temperamentally great writer who never became, or wanted to become, a professional one – the genius born, not made. This trait in herself St. Teresa never allows us to forget – which is just as well for the translator who might otherwise conventionalize her. She is 'stupid', 'incompetent' and always busy with really 'important' things like her spinning-wheel. She has 'no learning', suffers from 'noises' in the head, a bad memory, and a 'rough' and 'heavy' style. It is useless for her to write anything on mystical theology, for 'I am unable to use the proper terms'. She cannot prevent herself from digressing if she feels like it: otherwise, her writing 'worries her'. (Peers, Edgar Allison, 1943 / 1995: 11).

In addition, Peers claims that although not all of Teresa's work is of autobiographical nature, parts of the text which he does not deem to be so, bear indelible imprint of her strong and vivid personality and unique sense of humour.

While Marcus Aurelius wrote *To Himself* (translated as *Meditations*) and St. Teresa penned *Life*, Girolamo Cardano (known in the English-speaking world as Jerome Cardan), astrologer, physician and philosopher penned *The Book of My Life* (*De Vita Propria Liber*), originally written in Latin in 1575. This work, in turn, was the first of its kind as it was written from a purely scientific point of view. The study of the embodied self, carried out by the Italian physician, was a groundbreaking one, never practised before because Cardano used himself as the object of his own scientific study, paying particular attention to his brain and nervous system, his own bodily anomalies, psychology, and the poverty he experienced during his early years. His obsessive concern with his physicality and corporeality decries claims made by some of the feminist critics who later in the 20th Century argued that male autobiography was usually deprived of bodily concerns and that masculine autobiographical discourse was dis-embodied, as opposed to women's.

Also, before the advent of the term "autobiography", Montaigne wrote *The Essays* which was published in 1580 and where he attempted to render his most inward intuitions and private self. Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions* were published posthumously in 1782; there the author claimed:

> Myself alone! I know the feelings of my heart, and I know men. I am not made like any of those I have seen; I venture to believe that I am not made like any of those in existence. If I am not better, at least I am different. Whether Nature has acted rightly or wrongly in destroying the mould in which she cast me, can only be decided after I have been read. Let the trumpet of the Day of Judgement sound when it will, I will present myself before the Sovereign Judge with this book in my hand. I will say boldly: 'This is what I have done, what I have thought, what I was. I have told the good and the bad with equal frankness. I have neither omitted anything bad, nor interpolated anything good. If I have occasionally made use of some immaterial embellishments, this has only been in order to fill a gap caused by lack of memory. I may have assumed the truth of that which I knew might have been true, never of that which I knew to be false. I have shown myself as I was: mean and contemptible, good, high-minded and sublime, according as I was one or the other.' (Rousseau, *Book I*, 1782/1996: 3).

The above citation is extensive, but it serves to point out important issues that critics of autobiography would grapple with for decades: the subject's authority over one's own knowledge and agency and the matter of memory and truth. In this excerpt Rousseau himself

claims not only that his life is an open book to himself, and he knows his own soul but also that he is aware of the way human memory works and fails, rendering the autobiographical account unreliable. At the same time, he takes great caution to convince his readers that he spoke only truth and did not withhold any sensitive information. Textually, he renders himself (or believes to do so) transparent. Jean-Jacques Rousseau's secular *Confessions* will be deemed an exemplary autobiography, as St. Augustine's spiritual *Confessions* (4th Century) has been, but with the advent of feminist and postcolonial critique of the autobiography, it will be severely criticised for constructing an all-knowing, white, Eurocentric male seen as the universal model for generations to come.

As Smith and Watson (2010, *op. cit.*) insightfully explain, life narratives written before the Enlightenment[14] had a different nature and role, since they usually focused on the spiritual and internal tribulations of an individual whose point of reference was, normally, God. Until the 18th Century, the focus in memoirs and other life narratives was on the God-oriented self whose main purpose was conversion and explanation of his/her life to readers so that they could follow a similar path in their lives. The objective of such texts was clearly pedagogical. Without any doubt, a classic example of such narrative is St. Augustine's *Confessions*, one of the canonical texts, frequently anthologised and analysed in most relevant critical volumes on autobiographies. Scholars of autobiography observed a shift in self-narratives from the 18th Century onwards. With the advent of Cartesian philosophy and emphasis on the rational individual, the concept of the self-made man was born imbued with a logical mind and uninfluenced by divine entity. Consequently, memoirs written from the 18th Century on stressed exemplary lives of the narrating "I". Unwavering self-knowledge and self-consciousness became the characteristic features of new autobiographical texts. Traditional autobiography often modelled on Rousseau's *Confessions* is born as a result of the Renaissance awareness of human uniqueness and individuality. What will follow are canonical texts by Goethe, Gide or Sartre. Karl Weintraub (1975) observed that the genre gained its most developed form "when Western Man acquired a thoroughly historical understanding of his existence" (Weintraub, 1975: 821). It is important, thus, to note that the autobiography shape

[14] The philosophical and intellectual movement also known as The Age of Reason. Its main intellectual representatives were: Francis Bacon, René Descartes, Denis Diderot, David Hume, Immanuel Kant, John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Voltaire. The movement rejected the main principles and dominance of the Catholic Church and monarchy calling for the centeredness of human happiness, the pursuit of knowledge, importance of reason and of values such as natural law, progress, fraternity, toleration and separation of church and state. (Warman, C. *et al.*, 2006).

and subjectivities it proposes to construct (or reveal) are always a product of the cultural and historical circumstances of its time. As both Karl Joachim Weintraub and Georges Gusdorf[15] have argued, autobiography coincides with some kind of crisis in a person's life. This crisis has a life-changing value – "it is as if scales fall off the eyes which now begin to see purposes only seen confusedly before" (Weintraub, *ibid.,* p. 825). In many awakening narratives, authors split the self between "past" and "present" and, by extension, between autobiographical periods. It leads the reader to believe that they also split their self between "before" and "after" the awakening. They describe pre-awakening and post-awakening life where the former is bad and the latter good. Thomas DeGloma, in his 2010 article "Awakenings: Autobiography, Memory and the Social Logic of Personal Discovery", analyses structure and function of "awakening" narratives and proposes a concept of "cognitive migration" (2010: 532), out of one community and into another (religious, clinical, political, sexual, or otherwise). Time is used by autobiographers to distance themselves from the community of darkness. Now, the period of light commences, and the subjects achieve a solid cognitive, ethical, and moral footing. This has been certainly the case with spiritual narratives by St. Augustine, St. Teresa de Àvila; it has also been the case with the epistolary production of St. Paul, particularly letters to Galatians which scholars defined as bearing autobiographical traces (Gaventa, 1986).

Autobiographical studies developed most vibrantly in the second half of the 20th Century, when academic interest in the genre flourished contributing to the development of important critical analysis of self-narrative form. The history of criticism of autobiography has always focused on the question of subjectivity, individuality, the collective and creation of the self. James Olney was the scholar who noticed that the three elements in the term autobiography (*autos/bios/graphia*) reflect, in a way, the path or direction theoretical study of autobiography took. The focus on *bios* started at the end of the 19th Century with works on referentiality of autobiography, its importance to the discipline of History; this phase lasted until approximately mid-20th Century[16]. It gave particular value to the historicity of an

[15] As shall be examined, Georges Gusdorf's contribution to the area of autobiography cannot be underestimated. His seminal essay on autobiography "The Conditions and Limits of Autobiography" (published originally in the French language in 1956) shall be discussed in some detail further in this chapter.

[16]Tracing the History of the Autobiography study Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (2002/2010) note that at the beginning of scholarly interest in the genre, critics focused more on life of autobiographers, the bios. The first generation of academicians who undertook the study of autobiography, such as Misch or Dilthey (whose ideas are presented further in the chapter) concentrated more on the description of an individual's life, especially if the author was a famous personality. Public life was the highest aim. Smith and Watson claim,

autobiographer, facticity and direct relation between one's life and history, as the life described helped comprehend the historical period in which it was grounded.

From mid-20th Century on a new turn took place where the focus on *autos* came to the forefront. This shift also denotes an awareness that there is a link between life/person and the text. It becomes clearer that a purely factual account of one's life is impossible due to the way memory works and how the self/subjectivity is seen. Seeing a mirror-like relation between the self and the text it produces began to be more problematic. With the advent of psychoanalysis, exact sciences on cognitive memory and behaviour, neurology and psychology, the self, produced or revealed in the text, was interpreted as not bearing a direct relation to the exterior life. The third phase (*graphia*) generated many pertinent questions which challenged the very role of language, its opacity, and the impossibility of rendering the real true self through the act of writing. Each of these stages is represented by important critics who published trailblazing works in the area of autobiography and life-writing and who helped enrich the scholarly debate on questions related to memory, truth, identity, and self-in-writing (Smith and Watson, 2010).

The field owes much to Belgian scholar Georges Gusdorf, one of the pioneers of the academic study of autobiography whose work influenced next generations of critics and scholars. Gusdorf himself was inspired by Wilhelm Dilthey, German historian and philosopher, who placed autobiography at the heart of his research seeing the genre as a direct link between life and history. Gusdorf was also influenced by Dilthey's son-in-law, Georg Misch who had worked all his life on the *History of Autobiography – an oeuvre*[17], which was brought to a sudden halt by his death and later continued by his students who managed to add another volume to the three existing ones contained in six toms. Georg Misch and his disciples produced altogether eight toms of *A History of Autobiography*, nearly 4,000 pages. Both Georg Misch and Wilhelm Dilthey saw autobiography as a coherent interpretation and creation of one's self through his/her experiences. The life story/line was understood to be a logical and meaningful whole. The life, the self and the story were all coherent.

thus, that the first generation of critics were mainly preoccupied with an exemplary *bios*, and autobiography was seen as a subcategory of biography which served, primarily, its historical purpose. (Smith and Watson, *ibid*, p. 200)

[17] The first tome of Georg Misch's A *History of Autobiography in Antiquity* was published in 1950 and dedicated its first part to autobiographical narratives produced in non-Western world.

Georges Gusdorf's "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography", a seminal essay on the genre, was originally published as "Conditions et Limites de l'Autobiographie" in 1956. The translation appeared in James Olney's pioneering anthology of critical essays on autobiography in 1980[18] (*Autobiography. Essays Theoretical and Critical*) which, in itself, is considered as one of the most important anthologies in this academic field. However, it must be acknowledged from a contemporary perspective and further studies analysing the genre that Gusdorf's essay reveals some problematic aspects. At the time the text provoked an explosion of academic research and contributed to the production of works which still establish dialogue with Gusdorf's ideas. Gusdorf claims that autobiography is an exclusive product of Western civilisation and thought permeated with a sense of individuality and a unique sense of self, denying other civilisations their right to autobiographical forms. According to him, if autobiography appeared in other cultures, it happened by appropriation of the Western model. By adopting Western self-referential forms, Gusdorf implied that other cultures demonstrated colonised mentality using other's tools to express their ideas. It is quite a troubling approach which, in time, came under strong attack from postcolonial and feminist critics who correctly observed that autobiography, whose main (and normative) hero is a white conquering man of exemplary life, cannot be an adequate instrument for self-expression for women, other minority groups, the oppressed, the colonised and the voiceless.

It should be noted that Gusdorf (intentionally or not) either omitted or had no access to or perhaps failed to consider non-Western autobiographical accounts in his work on autobiography. This omission becomes particularly clear when Misch's work on autobiography, dated 6 years prior to Gusdorf's seminal essay, is referenced. In the aforementioned *A History of Autobiography* published in 1950, Misch argued that the civilized people of the Middle East have already produced texts of autobiographical nature. The following quotation demonstrates the point:

> Unexpectedly numerous are the autobiographical documents which we find among the ancient civilized peoples of the Middle East, particularly those of the Egyptian and Babylonian-Assyrian civilizations. So numerous are they that if we could review them in their entirety they would be scarcely fewer than the fruits of this branch of literature among the classical and later peoples, down to the beginning of the massive

[18] In this chapter, the English translation of the original article by James Olney will be referenced henceforth.

> autobiographical production of the late Renaissance – a roughly comparable period of some two thousand years. (Misch, 1950/2002: 19).

Misch further argues that the passion for autobiography, immortalizing one's deeds and life is shared by humanity and is not only the fruit of Western mind, although he argues, as did other theorists after him, that the true, classical autobiography as we know it today, developed in Christian, Western world where an acute feeling of individual sense became particularly conspicuous from the Enlightenment onwards.

To illustrate the argument that there existed autobiographical writings produced in the non-Western world it is advisable to present examples of texts written by Asiatic and Arabic people respectively. Sima Qian[19] and his *Letter to Ren An* penned *circa* 93-91 BCE (Emmerich, 2019) is a case in point. The letter was written to Qian's imprisoned friend, Ren An and is composed of 77 lines, being thus as extensive as his previous autobiographical writings where he muses on his family, particularly male tradition of history writing cherished by his father and grandfather. He mixed, thus, autobiography and biography in his intellectual writings. In the letter, Sima Qian discusses various matters, but most of the text is devoted to public humiliation Qian suffered when he was castrated and how it condemned him to social and political ostracism as an emasculated man. Castration was a punishment for having stood for a military strategist, Li Ling, who had lost a battle and had been captured. As Sima Qian was a man who recommended Li Ling to lead the military campaign which ended in disaster and afterwards tried to defend him, he fell into disgrace and was sentenced to death by the Emperor. The death sentence was transmuted to an order of castration and Sima Qian explains why he chooses to finish his work on history of China instead of opting for suicide as a result of public humiliation (Emmerich, *ibid*. p. 1318).

The concept of pictorial autobiography was known in Asia, particularly China, already in the 18th Century – pictures were drawn and texts, longer chunks of prose or poetry were written to transmit stories and experiences people had. Hong Liangji[20] (1746-1809) had a collection of sixteen drawings made by his visiting friend Lu Bocai, and he wrote

[19] Sima Qian was China's earliest and best-known historian and his *Letter to Ren An* is considered one of the most famous letters in Chinese history.

[20] Hong Liangji was a Chinese renowned scholar, official and a poet who towards the end of his life penned a memoir focussing on his mother's home (Fong, 2006).

explanations to those pictures. The texts convey Hong's memories and imagination which transit from his maternal home, landscapes he visited and other important events from his life (De Weerdt, 2011).

Following the tradition of Asian self-narratives, Lady Hyegyong's memoirs (*The Memoirs of Lady Hyegyong*), translated from the vernacular Korean script by scholar Ja Haboush, is another example and serves two purposes: the four memoirs published in English in 1996 but composed in 1795, 1801 1802 and 1805 illustrate the fact that there existed memoirs and autobiographies in pre-modern times and that they were written by women, another fact that Gusdorf's essay seemed to gloss over. Closer to the contemporary times, non-Western intellectuals penned their memoirs and autobiographies, even if they are still relatively little studied. A relevant example is autobiography composed by Hu Shi (1891-1962), a Chinese intellectual born into a family of judges and literati in 1933 and another one published in 1981 (Hong, 2019). According to Hong, two memorable autobiographies by Hu Shi contributed greatly to Chinese letters and historicization of autobiography.

Arabic[21] autobiographical tradition, although largely ignored by Western scholarship, offers a rich panoply of interesting self and life narratives (Reynolds, 2001). Dwight Reynolds, editor of the thoroughly researched work on Arabic autobiography entitled *Interpreting the Self. Autobiography in the Arabic Literary Tradition* published in 2001, claims that autobiographical discourses in Arabic had been present already in pre-Islamic times and developed fully until the 15th Century – a fact generally ignored by mainstream academia. However, his book discusses thirteen male autobiographical narratives never mentioning any female texts. There are, nonetheless, autobiographies written by Arabic women. Emille Ruete (1844-1924), also known as Princes Sayyida of Zanzibar and Oman, was the daughter of sultan of Zanzibar and Oman, Said bin Sultan. In 1867 she married a German merchant, moved to Germany

[21] According to Al-Hassan Golley (2003:7), when speaking about "Arabic culture" we must be exceptionally careful as the term "Arabic" in itself is politically, socially, religiously, and ethnically complex. Of course, in terms of biology, we cannot speak of a race as there are no different biological races. Then, ethnically-politically speaking, Western world has tendency to jump to facile conclusions when speaking about the Arab world. The term, in Western eyes, seems to cover homogeneous peoples, with no or little differences between them, either in cultural, political or religious terms. As the scholar claims, the term Arab is used and abused for various political reasons and aims. Similar claims regarding the Orient were aired by Edward Said in his seminal work *Orientalism* (1995) which became one of the iconic books in the area of Cultural Studies. Postcolonial theorists, among them Gayatri Spivak, Chandra Talpade Mohanty or Oyeronke Oyewumi accused the Western intellectual/feminist thought of seeing non-Western and non-Christian peoples as a homogenous group, where women were silent and submissive victims of patriarchal order, totally deprived of their own agency, and in many cases, in need of Western protection and guidance.

and penned her memoir (*Memoirs of an Arabian Princess. An Autobiography* originally published in German) in 1886. The book focuses on her early life in her mother country and traces the path of coming-of-age from girlhood to adulthood. The memoirs were initially meant for her children only as a souvenir from their mother who did not expect to live long enough to tell them about her life, anxieties and difficulties. Upon insistent requests from her friends, Emille Ruete resolved to publish her memoirs and leave a powerful message that Arab women were not hapless victims living subdued lives, as is often thought in the Western world.

Another example of Arabic women writing is Huda Sha'raawi's *Harem Years: The Memoirs of an Egyptian Feminist* (1879-1947) which was published posthumously. Sha'raawi belonged to the last generation of Egyptian women to have lived in the segregated world of harem. Linked to the nationalist Egyptian movement, the memoirist expressed strong feminist views and, in her autobiography, she depicted her youthful years in the upper-class Egyptian family, her marriage at the age of thirteen, the ensuing divorce and emancipation brought not only by divorce but by extensive education and participation in political changes in her country which led her, in the end, to disavow her veil as a symbol of oppression.

Although produced in a different form to what Gusdorf would expect as classical and academically relevant, such examples of autobiographical writing serve to argue that autobiographical narratives were indeed produced in other cultures and civilisations and were penned by both men and women. They might not have displayed typical, Western self as many theorists would like to see, still these are powerful accounts of lives lived in other cultures, other preoccupations, memories, and emotions which, in spite of many differences, belong to human intellectual heritage.

However, it would be short-sighted to dismiss Gusdorf's essay as completely inadequate and the fruit of hegemonic thinking. There are certain points he discusses which are convincing and, taking into consideration the fact that people are products of their times and mirror, very often, what they live, see and believe, the limitations of Gusdorf's approach are redressed by his insightful observations. Trying to define the autobiography as a "solidly established literary genre" (Gusdorf, *ibid.*, p.28), he gives value to the form which, previously, tended to be dismissed as simple and straightforward, having more to do with life reporting, more useful perhaps to historians, rather than a valid literary act. The author's view of the individual self as unique and unrepeatable is also noteworthy. Through autobiography a person tries to achieve transcendence. Through autobiography one achieves eternity and

transcends death. The autobiographer is a witness to his importance and immortality. This focus on the unique self is of particular interest to this research as one of the points explored in the Thesis is the importance of the self and its relationship with the text. At the same time, Gusdorf rightly observes that lives, all lives, are entangled with the lives of others. No one lives outside the world; he/she must enter interaction with others, create bonds and relationships, but, at the same time must remain autonomous and live an independent life. A self is always in communion with others, his/her life beats in the rhythm of a group/community but retains his/her uniqueness. This view on the self and the individual should be considered valuable and important. In fact, this perspective is in accordance with the sociological and psychological theories of the self-creation and development discussed in the previous section of this chapter which highlight the social and collective dimension of the self. After all, autobiography is only possible when a sense of self exists. A person needs to be conscious of their self and that sense is a springboard to autobiographical narrative. Gusdorf also emphasises a Cartesian dimension of every individual – a man[22] is an agent of change and shapes his own life and the world outside of him. His desire to preserve memory and history leads him to write an autobiography. While this is true, many marginalised subjects such as Black men and women, etc. never enjoyed the status of the self in white hegemonic societies, Gusdorf's emphasis placed on "agency" and the ability to shape the outside world and one's life are qualities strongly desired by all freedom-seeking people.

In autobiography, "the artist and the model coincide" (*ibid.*, p.31), the historian /autobiographer is a person narrated and narrating at the same time. To Gusdorf, autobiography is like a mirror where one (the autobiographer) can see themselves clearly. Moreover, the author compares the autobiography to an act of composing a film in accordance with a previously identified script, that script being life already lived and experienced. For an autobiography to be written, there must be certain pre-conditions present. One must have a sense of history and of the past and must also be aware that the now differs from what was, which will not repeat itself. Since the past will never return, the autobiographer must catch it and retrieve it as if it were a film frame: freeze it.

Memory serves to recall the past and preserve lost time trying to anchor it for posterity. To Gusdorf, autobiography is "a second reading of experience" (Gusdorf, *ibid.,* p. 38). The

[22] It is worth noting that Gusdorf, mirroring his times, uses the language where "man" is a universal symbol of all human beings. This is a non-inclusive language whose effects (exclusion of women from the current theoretical works but also from the language) was redressed only with the advent of Second Wave Feminism.

act of writing an autobiography means re-living life, only this time it happens in a more conscious way. Memory, aside from being like a full vessel ready to be grasped, helps the author reflect on life lived and events which, perhaps, have been lost to time. Since the past cannot be immobilized, through autobiography it can be reproduced forever and captioned beyond time, like a photograph. However, Gusdorf cautions his readers that the written versions of life and memories have a somewhat "ghostly" quality to them - they are long gone and incomplete.

Examining the same problem of lived life and its link to the text, Olney (1980b, 1998) claims that the relationship between lived life and imitated one is unstable and uncertain. In his essay included in the anthology already mentioned, he speaks of "ontology of autobiography" and the special use of memory and its place in autobiographical practice. While Gusdorf uses memory to immobilize the past, Olney asks himself whether it is possible at all to retrieve the past. Drawing on the Greek term "*ta onta*" meaning "things that are" as well as "the present as opposed to the past and to the future" (*ibid.*, p. 238), he concludes that it is impossible to capture the past life and also the past self. In this sense, autobiography is an illusion. The past could be brought back to the present moment only on one condition and that is if life is viewed not by the number of years lived and physical experiences, but as a mental process. If life is seen as an interior journey, an atemporal dimension of our existence, then perhaps it is possible to recreate it. Memory is compared here to a thread which is, at first, invisible and comes to the surface only when it is needed to recall certain facts or events. And so, the autobiographer will trace back this memory-thread and weave with it his/her internal story. Nevertheless, Olney cautions that memory works only in the present and serves consciousness. It is possible that what individuals are retrieving from memory is something that never was. If an autobiographer wishes to weave a story of his/her past self, perhaps what he/she will remember is not the self that really existed but a fictitious past and equally fictitious self.

While some centuries ago autobiographers/memoirists such as Montaigne and Jean Jacques Rousseau believed that it was possible to render the truth of life through narrative and the choice was within the autobiographer's reach, the 20th Century brought distrust at such a possibility. Autobiography no longer continues to be seen as a reliable source of historical truth and life as it is. This disbelief in a possibility of recounting the truth of a life is related to memory and, more specifically, to a new approach to memory. Memory ceases to be some kind of a storage room, a reservoir where stories are ready to be retrieved untouched

and unaltered. In fact, the past changes through the years, it is altered through the process of recollection, which, must be noted, always happens in the present. Writing autobiography is an act where memory, to some extent, effaces the past and works to reinvent it. The final result, in the form of autobiography, is self-reinvention and playing with the past. To Eakin (1999), autobiography is a product of two kinds of art: the art of memory and the art of imagination. Both elements are intimately linked in the process of writing autobiography – they are inseparable and indispensable. The critic sees autobiography as an act of self-invention where life is the raw material that will take its final shape, colour, and fragrance in writing. In this sense autobiography can be seen as a process of identity and self-formation. Still, the author emphasises that while novels which feature autobiographical elements are well received, the same is not the case with autobiography. Readers of autobiography tend to expect non-fiction when confronted with autobiographical texts. Fiction and its elements detected in autobiography tend to discourage the readers who will fail to appreciate autobiography as a genre if it contains "lies." To illustrate his thesis, Eakin cites American novelist Mary McCarthy (1912-1989) who admitted that each and every autobiography contains, necessarily, elements of fiction, whether we are ready to admit it or not. She emphasised the fact that there is a thin line dividing a novelist and an autobiographer. When the author of an autobiography writes about his/her life, he/she feels the need to embellish it, make it more beautiful and more appealing or even more controversial, if such is his/her intention (Eakin, *ibid.*, p. 11) and he/she succumbs to the charms of fiction and imagination.

The complex question of memory is not a new area of study and was scrutinised by philosophers and in mythology. In Greek mythology, Mnemosyne, the Mother of the Muses[23], is the daughter of Gaia (Earth) and Uranus (Heaven). In the Greek language "Mnemosyne" (Μνημοσύνη) derives from the word "mnemonic" (*mnēmē)* which precisely means remembrance or memory (Rosário, 2002). In ancient Greece, the psychological function of memory was worshipped; the poet could surpass his limitations, spatial and temporal distances while creating poetry – a capacity conferred to him by Mnemosine/Memory. She was attributed such qualities and abilities as knowledge, so she was not only a source of inspiration but also of wisdom. As Edward Casey (2000: 13) writes: "It is due to her infusion from above that the poet is able to know how the mythic past really

[23] Mnemosyne had nine daughters with her nephew Zeus: Calliope (epic poetry), Clio (history), Euterpe (music), Erato (lyrical poetry), Melpomene (tragedy), Polyhymnia (hymns), Terpsichore (dance), Thalia (comedy) and Urania (astronomy).

was: how things were in *illud tempore* (that former time)". She was the one responsible for inspiring poets whose excellence comes not from art but from being "possessed" by Mnemosyne.

In the mythical context to remember means to retrieve the original moment and render it eternal, in contrast to the human experience of time as something fleeting and forever lost. Recollection, then, is an act of immortalising: the role of memory is not only to remember the past but to relive it, to bring it back in all its splendour. In remembering humans symbolically escape death. Thus, Memory inhabits the house of immortality. Of course, since Greek times the human understanding of memory has developed and altered immensely. Casey mentioned above claims that nowadays modern people are no more inspired by the Mother of Muses if they remember at all who she was believed to be (Casey, *ibid.*, p. 12). At present, memory has become the subject of neurological, neurobiological, psychiatric and psychological inquiries, not to mention history, cultural studies, and literature. Still, as Rosário argues, the mythical understanding of Memory helps people to link the past with the present and project it into the future. It shows them the role of identity and difference, and, above all, it permits them to become fascinated with the new, what is to come (Rosário, *ibid.,* p. 5). It adds poetic value to the way human beings confront the past, the act of remembering and forgetting.

Discussing the questions pertaining to the domain of memory and forgetting, Paul Ricoeur in his *Memory, History, Forgetting* (2004: 5) argues that "Memory, reduced to recall, thus operates in the wake of the imagination. Imagination, considered in itself, is located at the lowest rung of the ladder of modes of knowledge, belonging to the affections that are subject to the connection governing things external to the human body (…)". The point he makes then is that memory is not only linked to events, but it is also a form of knowledge. He distinguishes three types of memory: repressed memory, manipulated memory and forced memory. The first kind of memory is linked to a pathologic-therapeutic level, the second discloses a practical dimension and the third relates to ethics and politics[24].

[24] Repressed memory according to Ricoeur refers to what Freud meant when he was speaking about mourning and melancholy and the link between the private and the public (people can mourn the loss of their loved ones but also the loss of some abstract idea such as liberty, country, an ideal). Such memory can be inscribed in the collective existence. Manipulated memory, in other words, instrumentalized memory and acts of forgetting become the subject of manipulation by power, frequently political one. It is at this level that we are witnesses to the abuse of memory, attempts at silencing certain kinds of (collective memories) so that others can emerge and become reinforced. Ideology and politics are often behind the attempts at erasing certain collective or individual memories and bringing to the fore those which serve the ideological purpose of current times.

The question of memory is particularly relevant to autobiography given that the form is usually a retrospective account that obligatorily weaves the narrative through what we believe we remember. The early understanding of the function of memory in literary studies, presented by critics such as Gusdorf, that of a vessel with ready-made memories which the author could reach for whenever he/she needed, did not stand the test of time. The most recent research in the areas of cognitive sciences, neurology and neurophysics demonstrate that memories are not stationary and stable entities "frozen" or archived in the brain (Eakin, 1999, 2008). It is not that neurons store memories at a given "address" in the brain, as if it were a hard disc. Instead, scientists have discovered that impressions of events, places and people are dispersed in many different places of the human cortex (Keller, 1982). Moreover, in neurological and psychological terms, each time a person remembers, invokes memories of past events and times, he/she constructs them "on demand", i.e., creates them at the very precise moment of remembering. This leads us to believe that memories display a dynamic nature instead of a passive and static one.

Modern cognitive theories differentiate between declarative and procedural memory. Declarative knowledge can be divided into episodic memory and semantic memory (Greenberg and Rubin, 2003). Declarative memory is related to our knowledge (information about the world surrounding us) while procedural memory is a set of rules and skills with the help of which we navigate the world (Klein *et. al.*, 2004). "We argue that episodic memory can be conceptualized as a mental state resulting from the finely tuned interplay of a set of psychological capacities that transform declarative knowledge into an autobiographical personal experience" (Klein *at al.*, *ibid.,* p. 463). This type of memory refers to the so-called *autonoetic awareness*. To be able to relate the story of our incidents and events, we need to have a sense of our self, tied to our understanding of who we are. In order for autobiographical self-knowledge to appear in a coherent way, it requires a person to see themselves as a "coherent entity persisting through time, whose past experiences are remembered as belonging to its present self" (Klein *et al.*, *ibid.*, p. 463;). According to cognitive specialists, at least three abilities are necessary if an individual wishes to construct his/her coherent autobiographical memory: a capacity for self-reflection, a sense of personal

Forced memory, in turn, is "aided" at the political and ethical level. Here the memory is not so much manipulated as forced. It comes (via narration or commemoration) with an "authorised" History which means history officially accepted and learnt in institutions. (Hannoum, 2005)

ownership and the ability to think about time as an unfolding of personal events happening to the self.

To be able to write an autobiography, a person must then use his/her autobiographical memory. Katherine Nelson (*in* Eakin, 1999, *op. cit.*) claims that autobiographical memory is a social and cultural construct because sharing memories is a social act that helps form the personal history of an individual inserted into society. Individual memories can come together to form a group memory, through such medium as storytelling. Recollections shared between individuals create social practises (Cappaletto, 2003). However, it is essential to bear in mind that social memory and the politics of forgetting are highly susceptible to ideological purposes. What is remembered and what is forgotten is neither purely careless nor innocent. When it comes to important historical and political issues such as wars, oppression, Holocaust, slavery, discrimination against members of the First Nations, among others, not all memories are considered equally legitimate and not all of them get told. Memories, in cultural and political contexts, are subject to distortion, erasure and appropriation to meet certain political and ideological needs. In his insightful article on collective memory and place, "Invention, Memory, and Place" Edward Said claims:

> Memory and its representation touch very significantly upon questions of identity, of nationalism, of power and authority. Far from being a neutral exercise in facts and basic truths, the study of history, which is of course the underpinning of memory, both in schools and university, is to some considerable extent a nationalist effort premised on the need to construct a desirable loyalty to and insider's understanding of one's country, tradition, and faith (Said, 2000: 176).

A similar view was expressed several years earlier by renowned historian Pierre Nora who claimed that memory and history seem to be in opposition and memory can become subject to manipulation and deformation. The following excerpt from his 1989 article "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoir" serves very well the purpose to illustrate the tendency to alter history through altering memory:

> Memory is life, borne by living societies founded in its name. It remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived. (Nora, 1989: 8)

Ricoeur (*ibid.*) too, devoted his attention to manipulated and instrumentalised memory where both, memory and forgetting are subject to manipulation by those in power. It is in this aspect that memory and identity cannot be separated because identity is based on memory. Thus, if memory is fragile and exposed to manipulation, so is identity. Memory is manipulated due to ideology, often created, and maintained for the benefit of the stronger, the dominant. "Hence when memory (via narrative, but also via commemoration) is forced, it comes armed with an 'authorized' history which is the official history taught and learnt in institutions" (Hannoum, 2005: 127).

Scientists have dedicated some efforts to analysing what effects neurological pathologies may have on memories and self-construction visible in autobiography (Klein, *et al.*, *ibid.*). Any impairment in sets of psychological capacities such as self-reflection, self-agency, self-ownership, and personal temporality may result in breakdowns of autobiographical memorial experience. Autobiography, then, is only possible if all elements interplay smoothly with each other. In case of patients with amnesia, autism, frontal lobe pathology or schizophrenia, the autobiographical act will be broken down and no coherent self-narrative will be possible. Eakin (1999, *op. cit.*) refers to Freud's opinion that a coherent story of an individual is, to some extent, related to his/her health. An unhealthy, mentally unstable, or ill person will have difficulties explaining himself/herself, as is understood from the above-mentioned research in the area of cognitive sciences. They will be unable to create a coherent and logic narrative and such a narrative is culturally required for an individual to function well within society.

It is also important to bear in mind that false memories do exist and the phenomenon of pseudo-memories has been described by psychiatrists and psychologists. Experimental psychologists have always been interested in why memory fails. It has been determined that memories do not exist in a vacuum, rather they impact each other through what has been termed as "interference" (Loftus and Pickrell, 1995). Elizabeth Loftus has spent decades researching the mechanism of false memories and concluded that, in some cases, memory distortion might be the result of deliberate attempts to change someone's memory. In some situations, for example during hypnosis or therapeutic sessions some people could be led to believe that certain events happened in their lives, even if they did not, particularly in

contexts of traumatic memories related to sexual abuse (Lief and Fetkiewicz, 1995).[25] Obviously, such methods of inducing false memories are ethically questionable, still they demonstrate that human memory is not always a reliable mechanism and can fail in spite of human attempts at remaining truthful. In addition, it is important to note that such findings may impact negatively not only general confidence in certain therapies but also authenticity of accounts written by victims of different kinds of abuses. Still, these findings may have profound impact on our understanding of the link between autobiography, memory, and truth. If memories fail, we must compensate for what we cannot remember by recurring to imagination and this means introducing fiction to autobiographies. Clearly, fiction does not mean outright lying. However, elements of fiction in autobiography, which has been seen as a genre of non-fiction for a long time, destabilized some scholars who would rather see autobiography as a stable, truth-related genre. The question of truth-telling and the concept of the autobiographical pact coined by French literary critic Philipe Lejeune whose work on the contractual dimension of autobiography has severely impacted autobiographical studies in the second half of the 20th Century shall be referred to shortly.

However, when discussing the question of memory, remembering, and forgetting as essential elements in the act of writing autobiography, it is necessary to pay heed to a problem rarely touched upon in theoretical analyses of autobiography. It should be made clear that, ideally, each autobiographer or memoirist should be free to include in his/her account his own version of events and experience. Astrid Erll very aptly observed in her work on role of individual and collective memory and its importance in memory studies:

> Memories (…) are subjective, highly selective reconstructions, dependent on the situation in which they are recalled. *Re*-membering is an act of assembling available data that takes place in the present. Versions of the past change with every recall, in accordance with the changed present situation. Individual and collective memories are never a mirror image of the past, but rather *an expressive indication of the needs and interests*[26] of the person or group doing the remembering in the present. (Erll, 2011: 8)

[25] For more information on so-called "pseudomemories" or "false memories", visit the website False Memory Syndrome Foundation, its genesis and mission statement: http://www.fmsfonline.org/index.php

[26] Highlighted by the author of this Thesis.

Obviously, autobiographer has his/her needs and interests when composing an autobiography and there are facts, situations, memories and experiences that are not meant for public consumption. The act of not telling the entire truth, decision not to share everything, unwillingness to strip one's self completely before reading audience is a basic right any author of autobiography/memoir should enjoy. It is true that memory is selective, it is equally true that memory fails autobiographers or that there might be factual inaccuracies in autobiographical account, whether intentional or not. However, it is rarely observed in theoretical literature dedicated to autobiographical narratives that silence can be a conscious choice on the part of the author. This choice is also what gives an author certain narrative and authorial power over the text he/she composes, and, as a result, over the image that is transmitted and self that is constructed through narrative. The author has, or at least should have (in case he/she is not pressed by the publishing house or other external elements such as political interests) total freedom to select memories that will be included in the final version of the autobiographical text.

In many instances authors of memoirs and autobiographies had little if any control over their lives, for example enslaved people, women, sexual or religious minorities and so being able to exercise textual control over their accounts gave them back their human dignity and voice supressed by hegemonic culture. Sometimes, the price for this silence regarding the most intimate aspects of one's life and experience is ostracism shown by readers, critics and literary environment, as was the case with Zora Neal Hurston's autobiography (*Dust Tracks on a Road*, 1942) in which she decided to keep silent about various aspects of her life such as sexuality or even her artistic development as a writer. Nina Simone, for example, chose never to mention some aspects of her sexuality in *I Put A Spell on You* (1991) and maintained an image of a decidedly heterosexual woman. Any autobiography must be, necessarily, selective and the ultimate decision what to include in the text should belong to the author. This selection, conscious and serving its purpose to exercise freedom, but also protecting author's intimate relations, friends, family members, his/her own private life cannot be, under any circumstances, considered as lies or outright manipulation of the readers. In fact, it should be included as an obvious, an *a priori* condition of the autobiographical pact as defined by Philippe Lejeune and discussed later.

In what concerns the truth, however, Eakin (1985) came to the similar conclusion that autobiographical truth is not a constant, something secure and frozen in time and memory. It is a flexible phenomenon, a process under construction, a discovery of the "I",

and a self-invention. However, as the author argues, autobiography should not be seen as pure fiction and truth must not be banished from the genre. Helga Schwalm (2014) also agrees that while autobiography as a genre is strictly related to non-fictional writing, it draws on the fictional and creative dimensions. As a result, the genre is difficult to classify as it constantly blurs the line between fiction and non-fiction, factuality, and imagination. Moreover, in autobiography the readers are confronted with duality of the autobiographical subjects – the narrated "I" and the narrating "I". It brings about the problem of a distance between these two selves – the one writing and the one being written about. In this relationship, the narrating "I" seems to detain more power over the narrated "I", because he/she decides what will be written about the narrated person. The autobiographical "I" of the narrative is never the same person in the sense that it is not the same now as it was a few decades ago. It cannot be reproduced faithfully not only because between the present and the past selves there is a gap of years, experiences, and past events but also because the language is opaque to rendering experience. There is, thus, a conflict and tension between the past "I" and the present "I". Factors that separate the narrated "I" and the narrating "I" are: time, emotions, education, psychological, physical and ideological distance. Very often it is even geographical distance. For this reason, it is important to note that the narrating "I" has different voices, his/her own, but also those of other people appearing in the narrative (Waters, 2016).

The self and *bios* as fiction is an interesting turn in the theory of autobiographical studies. It invites an observation that an autobiographical narrative is fiction and, indeed, many critics have tried to establish links between autobiography and fiction, autobiography and construction of the self that, perhaps, is fictive. Jean Starobinsky offers an interesting insight into autobiography as a literary form in his 1980 article "The Style of Autobiography". The author, like many others before and after him, tries to define autobiography and provides his own version of a definition: "a biography of a person written by himself" (*ibid*, p. 73). Again, this outlook focuses on a literary approach towards autobiography. Starobinsky's definition guides readers in a slightly different direction. What he argues is that the readers should not only expect from autobiography a description of life but a narrative and this implies creation and invention. To Starobinsky, autobiography is a more fluid concept that allows more freedom while composing an autobiography but also while selecting which texts can be considered autobiographical. He, unlike William Howarth (1980) for example, permits a greater variety of texts which could be included in the genre of autobiography. For this

reason, he cautions against the use of terms such as "autobiographical style" or "autobiographical form" because there are as many styles as there are autobiographers. The style is a question of individual choice but matters only if certain conditions are met: "These conditions are of an ethical and 'relational' order and require only a truthful narrative of life, leaving the writer the right to determine his own particular modality, rhythm, span, etc." (Starobinsky, *ibid.*, p. 73). Clearly, the critic allows, to some extent, for an individual dose of invention and creation but ethics and truth are indispensable conditions for a text to be considered an autobiography. In autobiography as a literary act, the style has an important role to play: it establishes two kinds of links. The first is a link between the author and his/her past and the second is between the author and his/her audience. In this way, the style orients the writer not only toward the past but also toward the future (and his/her future readers). It is when authors employ elaborate, beautiful and poetic style that critics, and perhaps readers too, suspect that the narrative is untrue. Starobinsky holds that, at times, beautiful style can be seen as an impediment to autobiography: the style works as a smoke screen to cover the author's attempt to "smuggle" fictional accounts into his autobiography. In this sense, the style at the beginning of his essay, is a purely individual matter, but by the end of his argumentation it can become a "principle of deformation and falsification" in autobiography. Even though it is an interesting argument to consider, it can be affirmed that, if readers accept the fact that autobiography is a hybrid form, a mixture of fact and fiction, much more than just an account of life and self-interpretation, then some amount of invention and elaborate style should not lessen the value of autobiography. Quite to the contrary, it should be approached as an enrichment of the autobiographical narrative.

The link between the narrating "I", the narrated "I" and the author has been the topic of influential studies carried out by Philipe Lejeune. The French scholar is, perhaps, best known for his autobiographical theory which emphasises the relationship between autobiographer and the reader and stresses the contractual aspect of this relationship. Lejeune's autobiographer is not a ghost ready to dissolve itself in the text or shatter into a thousand pieces, but a real living person who tells primarily the "truth". In his *Le Pact Autobiographique* published originally in 1975, the author tries to find his own definition of the genre:

> Récit rétrospectif en prose qu'une personne réelle fait de sa propre existence, lorsqu'elle met l'accent sur sa vie individuelle, en particulier sur l'histoire de sa personnalité" (Lejeune, 1975/1996: 14).[27]

There are certain key-words that the author highlights and which, according to him, are essential to any definition of autobiography: the narrative in prose, individual life and story of personality. It is also relevant that the story be retrospective. He also maintains that the essential condition for an autobiography to exist is that the narrator and the principal character (in other words, the narrating "I" and the narrated "I") must be one and the same person; he/she must be a real person. This is the basis of the autobiographical pact, the kind of approach that makes the reader think of legal language and contractual conditions rather than the literary dimension of the text. The signature on the cover or incidence between the author, narrator and the narrated person guarantees for the reader that the narrative he/she is dealing with is autobiography. It is, however, sufficient that one of the elements of the contract fails or is uncertain for a given text not to be autobiography *sensu stricto* for Lejeune. The texts that do not fall under the category of autobiography, constitute its sub-genre, for instance biography, memoirs, autobiographical novel, autobiographical poem, diary, self-portrait or autobiographical essay. It is essential to mention at this point that the present study has been carried out not without reservations concerning this rigid categorisation which, in fact, Lejeune himself corrected after years of research on life-writing. It is difficult if not counterintuitive to introduce artificial divisions if it is clear that self-narratives vary in forms and autobiography draws on other forms of self-writing, such as diaries, journals or memoirs. The dividing line between autobiography and memoir is particularly tenuous and shall be discussed later in this chapter. If anything, autobiography can be a hybrid form, open to creativity and the demands of the times, its author's personality and aims. Then, as some authors and scholars claim, all writing is autobiographical (Murray, 1991).[28] It is impossible

[27] "The retrospective record in prose that a real person gives of his or her own being, emphasizing the personal life and in particular the 'story of life'. (own translation).

[28] In his paper on the autobiographical nature of writing, Donald Murray, Professor Emeritus at the University of New Hampshire, author of academic books on writing, numerous essays and poetry says: "We are autobiographical in the way we write; my autobiography exists in the examples of writing I use in this piece and in the text I weave around them. I have my own peculiar way of looking at the world and my own way of using language to communicate what I see. My voice is the product of Scottish genes and a Yankee environment, of Baptist sermons and the newspaper city room, of all the language I have heard" (Murray, 1991: 67).

to draw a clear line between fiction and non-fiction, meaning that all autobiography entails fiction and all fiction entails autobiographical elements.

It is quite telling that several decades after Lejeune published his *Le Pacte Autobiographique,* he admitted that "autobiography is not itself a discipline, but a practice that can be approached in very different ways. To state it simply, it can be a source of information (in history, human geography, sociology or ethnology), a subject of study (in psychology or literature)" (Lejeune, 2009). The scholar did not limit himself to the Structuralist school, which shaped his initial understanding of autobiography, nor did he curb his academic interests to the study of canonical works. According to Allamand (2018) in *The Autobiographical Pact (bis)* (1983) and *The Autobiographical Pact, Twenty-Five Years Later* (2002), Lejeune demonstrated his interest in "narrative identity". The topic of the link between the narrative and the construction of the self and identity was well studied by Paul John Eakin and Anthony Kerby. Unlike his fellow critics from the deconstructionist school, Lejeune still believed in the self-in-writing and importance of autobiography. Faced with Serge Dubrovsky's critique of his definition of autobiography and the subsequent emergence of the new literary term "autofiction", Lejeune rethought and adapted his vision of autobiography and the issue of "real name", which, as he argues, "possess[es] a sort of magnetic force, and convey[s] an aura of truth to everything that comes close to them" (Lejeune *in* Allamand, 2018: 53). Still, he maintained that if his autobiographical pact between the reader and autobiographer was to be valid, textual characteristics such as autodiegetic narration and the presence of biographical/historical information were essential.

The initial understanding of autobiography as presented by Lejeune was refuted by other scholars of autobiography who claimed that the narrated "I" and the narrating "I" are not the same persons: what separates them is the ocean of time and experience. It must be also admitted that the taxonomy Lejeune proposes leaves many life narratives outside of his definition. For example, he does not categorize such modes of writing as memoir, self-portrait or essay, personal or autobiographical novel. Still, he argues that the generic boundaries are constantly shifting making it impossible to establish clearly defined frontiers. What bears more importance for the author is position of the reader and what he/she expects from autobiography. To the reader, the only source of verification of the text is a name on the cover of the book. The author who signs his/her autobiography vows, with his/her name, the authenticity of the text. If we recollect the aforementioned Starobinsky's article, it will be possible to note that he also highlighted the ethical dimension of autobiography. To both

critics, truth and ethics are important elements of autobiographical narrative. The autobiographical pact Lejeune insists on relates to the affirmation of identity within the text, the identity of the author signing the autobiography and the character within the text must remain the same as they are the same person. The reader can never have doubts regarding the identity of the autobiographer. In the contract, the pledge is taken between the reader and the writer and it is the reader's right and prerogative to verify the identity of the author and check the authenticity of the text. To put it another way, a reader in Lejeune's theory could be compared to a detective who looks for illicit information or, alternatively, to a lawyer whose task is to find loopholes in a contract. To some extent, this approach places the whole power with the reader who is in his/her right to doubt the veracity and the authenticity of the autobiographical narration.

The question of truth in autobiographical accounts remains an important aspect of any discussion of autobiography. What are the consequences if the autobiographical pact is breached? The aforementioned pact requires from the autobiographer an ethical approach towards his/her readers. It is one thing to include fiction in the autobiographical narrative. Clearly, many details from the past or reconstruction of dialogues that took place decades before entails some amount of fiction. Autobiographical discourse is linked to re-invention of emotions and mental states. If memory fails and it is now clear in the light of the above-mentioned studies that it does, what remains is often fiction, invention, creative effort to give narrative continuity and emotional flavour to the autobiography. It is quite another thing, however, if autobiography contains a premeditated act of lying (what Lejeune argued was that any information resisting factual verification is in the "order of lying"). The truth is a key element of any autobiography – if not factual truth, observable and subject to exterior verification, then at least what the author feels or believes to be his/her truth. And here, again, the above-mentioned question of the right to choose not to tell the entire truth which cannot be conflated with lying and manipulation must be kept in mind.

As Eakin observed in his analysis of the reception of autobiographical accounts, any failure to render the truth and attempts to introduce outright lies and manipulation to autobiographies are met with severe resistance on the part of the readers. The scholar gives an example of a memoir written by James Frey, *A Million Little Pieces*, and published in 2004. The book told the story of a former drug addict and it initially sold relatively well. It caught the attention of Oprah Winfrey who, in her show "The Man Who Kept Oprah Awake at

Night", hailed the book a revelation, a true account of a life lived.[29] However, the journalistic and readerly investigation led to the conclusion that the book was everything but a true autobiography. As a result of the scandal, Frey's publishing house was obliged to pay indemnities to readers who sued the company for selling the book as an autobiography while, in fact, it was a hoax.

This example raises various questions related to the nature of the autobiographical account and, primarily, the expectations and role of readers. It takes us back to the above-analysed issue of the autobiographical pact and the role of ethics in life-writing. Clearly, if there is any suspicion that the autobiographical pact has been broken, readers feel in their right to denounce the text as manipulative and untrue. A question also emerges: who has the right, if not obligation, to investigate an autobiography for its accurateness and veracity? Publishing houses? Readers alone? Based on Frey's account, however, it becomes obvious that readers did not feel manipulated just because of memory failure or a certain, unavoidable amount of fiction in his memoir. What attracted severe criticism and, in the end, loss of the mandatory confidence of readers were the premeditated lies, hypocrisy and disrespect towards them. It is quite telling that offended readers sued the author and the publishing house, which brings us back again to the notion that any autobiography author "signs" a contract with their readers by placing their name/signature on the book cover. Such a contract remains legally valid and, in case of breach of contract, legal consequences can ensue. *A Million Little Pieces* was, in the end, republished as a semi-fictional novel and in this way will probably be read differently, with another set of expectations than when it was publicized as an autobiography / memoir.

[29] As the rumour has it, according to Oprah Winfrey the book was "like nothing you've ever read before. Everybody at Harpo is reading it. When we were staying up late at night reading it, we'd come in the next morning saying, 'What page are you on?'" and since then the author's ascent to fame was instant. The memoir quickly became number one on the New York Times bestseller list for over 15 weeks as well as the No. 1 bestseller on Amazon. It was translated into 22 languages and was marketed everywhere as an autobiography/memoir. The fairy tale ended quite unexpectedly when the investigative site Smoking Gun took a closer and attentive look at Frey's memoir and declared that *A Million Little Pieces* was full of lies and it manipulated readers. The six-week investigation into the facts described in the memoir revealed that many of the events never took place, a lot of the incidents were severely exaggerated (for example, Frey's descriptions of the severity of his crimes, his imprisonment experiences, his participation in a train accident where he portrayed himself as a victim, apart from two girls who died, etc.). The further details of the investigation into the hoax of *A Million Little Pieces* can be read on the Smoking Gun's website: http://www.thesmokinggun.com/documents/celebrity/million-little-lies.

However, Frey's (non)autobiography was not the only case where an accusation of a hoax was advanced by investigative readers. Such is the nature of autobiography – there will always be readers, investigative journalists and others who will doubt whether the autobiographical narrative they hold in their hands is trustworthy. Binjamin Wilkomirski's (his real name is Bruno Dössekker) *Fragments: Memories of a Wartime Childhood* (1997) was initially published as a memoir, but after being exposed for inaccuracies was categorised as a novel. Once again, charges of false witnessing are hard to defend, and reputations are forever marred.

Scandals, hoaxes and controversies shatter relationships of trust and authenticity between writers, readers, editors, and activists. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (2012) claim that suspicious reading takes place quite often nowadays when readers are confronted with allegations of witness manipulation and untrue accounts of trauma. The authors focus on the ethics of reading testimonial narratives of suffering and harm. Verification is important indeed, but as the authors argue, it needs to remain ethical, too. It is important how and why we verify and what our aim is. Is it only to discredit the narrative for political purposes? Or is it because it is truly inauthentic? What harm can be done when certain narratives are "ousted" and discredited? Can a cause linked to human rights suffer due to such detective-oriented reading and exposing hoaxes? It becomes clear that authenticity is fundamental to capturing readers' attention and identification with the author and the cause. The "I" writing the narrative must be, forcibly, reliable and the narrative should be documentable, in the popular understanding of autobiographical narratives. Smith and Watson conclude that the ethics of reading can contribute to a good cause, alerting against psychomanipulation which harms human rights issues. Nevertheless, the way to verify must consider any risk of damage, both to authors, survivors, and the cause. Smith and Watson argue that the very posture of an *a priori* suspicious reading, approaching a witness narrative from a perspective of looking for inaccuracies can cause considerable harm. It can be driven by political motives of discrediting a cause (in case of political oppression, violation of human rights, gender, sexual, religious, and racial discrimination). The conclusion and hope the authors express at the end of their research is that, optimistically, readers will shift their expectations from pure facticity and information to a more "relaxed" reading where attention is more attuned to formation of the self and narrative representation of traumas, personal and communal experiences: "We anticipate that the norms of expectations of rhetorical reliability will also shift from the demand for, and the production of, authenticity

in acts of witnessing to a focus on formations of first-person testimony that productively exploit its constraints" (*ibid*., p. 620). In other words, the authors advocate a purely textual construction of events and self, leaving margin for creativity, imagination, and faulty memories. This seems to be the optimal approach towards autobiographies and memoirs where, as has been reiterated, fiction blends with facts, memory with forgetting and silence and where the self is constructed narratively and is often quite distant from the self who lived the life it recounts.

The resistance many literary critics demonstrate to diversity of forms, narratives, and authors' freedom to choose how to shape their self and narrative is one of the reasons why Elizabeth Bruss (1978) suggests that critics should display a more flexible approach to studying and reading autobiography. She argues that autobiography cannot be seen as a purely literary genre with rigid boundaries where hierarchical binaries of fact vs. fiction, truth vs. lie are maintained and, as a result, hinder the creative act. Rather it should be approached within the context of social and cultural tendencies. Similarly to Starobinsky, Bruss advocates that there is "no intrinsically autobiographical form" (Bruss, *ibid*, p. 10). It should be seen as an act rather than a form. In fact, in response to Lejeune's concept of autobiography, its truthfulness, authenticity of experience and the problem of a "real name", counterproposals that challenged the status of autobiography emerged and, in some cases, denied the genre its right to existence, prophesying its end.

These concerns are echoed in one of the most controversial essays on autobiography authored by Paul de Man (1979). In his *Autobiography as De-facement* de Man argues that one of the problems related to the study of autobiography is that it has been subject to definition by countless critics and still, after decades, the concept remains elusive and slippery. To de Man, autobiography has been raised to the level of a literary genre giving it a status which, perhaps, it should not enjoy. "This doesn't go without some embarrassment, since compared to tragedy, or epic, or lyric poetry, autobiography always looks slightly disreputable and self-indulgent in a way that may be symptomatic of its incompatibility with the monumental dignity of aesthetic values" (de Man, *ibid*, p. 919). It is definitely a controversial opinion that strips autobiography of its dignity and literary and cultural importance. However, the essay confirms what troubled other critics of autobiography: it is, indeed, extremely problematic to categorise the genre mainly because there are few patterns that autobiographies have in common and for every work there is an exception to the rule. Autobiography again, displays no rigid and specific frontiers and offers no solid foundations for generic categorisations.

Curiously, Paul de Man questions the assumption, often taken for granted, that first comes life as a lived experience and provides material for autobiography to be written. He asks what if it is the other way around? Is it at all possible that autobiography can produce life and shape it? The writer's existence and performance might be, in fact, governed by the rules of self-portraiture. This dichotomy between true life, fact and fiction is abolished in de Man's essay. He claims that the distinction between autobiography and fiction is not a matter of "either/or" but, it is, again, inconclusive. According to de Man, autobiography can be compared to the concept of *prosopopoeia* – a rhetorical device, a figure of speech in which a person or a writer addresses his audience as another person, an inanimate object or an absent one. Originally in Ancient Greek, *prosopon* meant "face" or "mask" that actors in Greek theatres used to portray their emotions and mental states. Prosopopoeia is a trope of autobiography because it is through autobiography that the writer puts on a mask and becomes someone else: a voice of the dead – he/she is everything but himself/herself. Autobiography is a fictionalised voice from the grave. Thus, autobiography is not a genre or a mode but a way of reading that takes place in all texts. Paul de Man's text evokes images of death rather than life-sustaining characteristics of autobiography. His idea of the autobiography takes on wax-coloured image of a mask the author puts on when writing his/her life narrative and, as the essay titles demonstrates, an autobiographical act is not necessarily creative but is reduced to self-effacement. As he says "Autobiography veils a defacement of the mind of which it is itself the cause" (*ibid*. p. 13). Autobiography as treated by Paul de Man brings out the issue of face, mask and death which dominate the entire attempt at creating autobiography and fossilise the living. Loss, death, and transgression mark the genre of autobiography. It is a view contrary to James Olney's which represents a rather liberal humanist approach to autobiography, believing that the self can have access to language and the language is not an obstacle to self-knowledge and self-expression.

Some scholars went a step further and questioned the grounds for autobiography and the self altogether. Postmodernism brought many existential concerns with it, among them disbelief in a unitary, coherent, and self-knowing individual. While earlier criticism embedded in Modernism never doubted the role of the author in the process of writing texts and the importance of the self, expressed through autobiographical narratives, a new trend appeared that questioned authorship itself and all it implied for the genre. A late 20th Century

generation of literary theory critics from the poststructuralist schools of thought[30] has challenged completely the notion of self-referentiality of language and, attached to it, authenticity of the self/author. They suggested that the *autos*, undermined by the unconscious, may be simply non-existent – a ghost that does not exist beyond language. Michel Sprinker in his 1980 article "Fictions of the Self: The End of Autobiography" refers to Michel Foucault who posed the question "what is an author" and Roland Barthes who announced, "the death of the author". Both Barthes and Foucault claimed that texts live beyond their authors; as soon as they enter circulation, they belong to readers and authors lose control of them. The idea of an author who exercises control over their text is, probably, no longer adequate, and although Foucault refers mainly to scientific texts, he argues that the same applies to other types of discourses: literary, psychological, philosophical, etc. (Foucault, 1998). Derrida and intellectuals related to the *Tel Quel*[31] group have questioned the idea of individual subjectivity and called for the acknowledgment of the so-called "textual, non-subjective 'I'". Through the psychoanalytic study of language, Jacques Lacan also challenged the existence of the Cartesian self – a rational, reasonable individual capable of knowing him/herself and expressing him/herself through neutral language. Lacan argued that there is no such thing as "a sovereign self" but a self who is always in relation to others emerges through intersubjective discourse (*cf.* Sprinker, 1980, *op. cit.*, p. 324). An individual able to make his own choices and who is responsible for his own life has become an illusion in postmodern philosophy. The very language has been considered anything but neutral and no writing person could possibly call himself/herself an author as the language he/she uses is already imbued with meanings attributed to words by other people. He/she simply borrows words, arranges them in a given order and has no impact whatsoever on the text reception. These theories did change, in fact, the way contemporary scholars view the self and subjectivity, denying the individual the freedom to control their own text and shape their own

[30] Post-structuralism is a development in the area of philosophy and literary theory, particularly related to the questions of linguistics and use of language in literary texts. The movement is strongly associated to the work developed by Jaques Derrida who came up with the technique of deconstruction. The movement was created in the late Twentieth Century. Post-structuralism stresses the link between the reader and the text while the structuralism sees "truth" behind and within the text. As a result, there is a strong implication for author and self as author or owner of the text because the truth has lost any status. The Cartesian subject, knower of the truth, has been abolished, so to speak, and replaced by an entity with multiple identities, not a fixed one.

[31] *Tel Quel* was a French avant-garde literary review published between 1960 and 1982 (Éditions du Seuil). The main goal of the group of intellectuals gathered around the review was to evaluate the 20th Century literature. Initially self-defining as a Maoist view of Marxism, later on it distanced itself from politics. Article on Tel Quel group: https://www.britannica.com/topic/Tel-Quel

self. If an individual, sovereign self does not exist and all language is but illusion, where does it leave us in terms of autobiographical narratives? Is it possible, as Sprinker claims in his essay, that autobiography has no future and has met its end? Of course, while it is true that in many cases the postmodern self is portrayed in literature as fragmentary, discontinuous, and incoherent, in other contexts such claims can prove harmful to certain groups of people, such as postcolonial subjects, African Americans or women who, traditionally, have been defined as non-subjects without their own right to shape their Selves and their narratives. It must be also kept in mind that there are studies carried out by scholars in the field of cognitive sciences, psychology, psychiatry, neurology, and neurobiology which reiterate that a coherent narrative and a continuous sense of the self are necessary conditions for an individual to create a logical autobiographical story. Not always are fragmentarisation of the self, splitting of the subject and lack of anchorage in the self, body and one's life desirable elements. As shall be seen in further chapters, they often cause pain, suffering and instability which find an outlet in created text. The tendency which will be presented throughout the Thesis is to look for a safe solution, to heal the fragmented and torn self through the narrative, reconciliation with one's community, family members, seeking refuge in sexuality, myth-making and love.

1.3. Memoir.

As has been discussed in the previous subsections, autobiography as a genre reveals itself to be a slippery term and is often impossible to define clearly. The purpose of the section was show that autobiography should be approached with an open mind, without trying to classify it by imposing rigid rules upon it and confining it to narrow categories. In many instances, traditional autobiography has ceased to exist and play its important role to many authors who began experimenting with the form by employing other autobiographical sub-genres or, in other words, other forms of life-writing in general. To many critics and authors, the autobiography in its most traditional form, linearity, and unproblematic closing, seemed to have exhausted its possibilities. However, this does not mean that autobiography has met its end and that it will not or has not already shifted in other more creative and innovative directions. New perspectives and theories came to inject some fresh blood into the theory of autobiography. Among these are approaches that take into consideration gender, class, intersection of multiple factors such as social, geographical, and sexual location. New types of self emerged previously unseen or plainly marginalised and ostracised. Minorities

(Blacks, women, working class, sexual minorities) aired their views and penned their autobiographies suggesting that the classical mode of autobiography ceased to be sufficient and representative of all selves.

As Karl Weintraub (1978, *ibid*.) rightly observed, autobiography adapts itself to a cultural and historical epoch in which it is created and draws on culturally available (or imposed at times) models of the self. To many critics and authors nowadays the genre of memoir is more useful and creates more freedom for an author to express and construct his/her self. It seems less rigid with decreased focus on the entirety of life and increased focus on shorter periods of one's life. Autobiography, in turn, is more intent on describing the inner states of a person, the development of his/her personality and has a more self-reflective dimension[32]. Experience is viewed from the inmost perspective ("external fact attains a degree of symptomatic value derived from inward absorption and refection", Weintraub, 1975: 823). In memoir, the author pays less attention to inner movements of consciousness – his/her attention is more focused on the world of events; writing a memoir presupposes recording the events and incidents ("ideally, he aspires to God's all-seeing eye", Weintraub, *idem*). Also, it should be noted, memoir has less global dimension in what concerns one's lifespan. Very often it concentrates on a period of time, sometimes a couple of years, a couple of months, or even days, youth or older age and serves to describe moments and experiences in life that might have lasted short time but were life-changing, traumatic, memorable, and haunting. It is more prone to look on temporality and fleeting nature of a moment in life. Memoir does not claim to monopolize the entire lifespan of a person. It can focus on an illness, as shall be discussed, a traumatic or a happy event, a period of life that proved to be marking, memorable, unforgettable.

The term "memoir" was used long before the advent of autobiography and practised all over the Western world for centuries, but the genre was considered a form of "pre-

[32] Autobiography can be linked to a genre of Bildungsroman, a concept honed and divulged amply by Wilhelm Dilthey who saw it as a genre which traced the path traversed by the protagonist from youth to adulthood (Summerfield and Downward, 2010). In Bildungsroman, the character comes to understanding of himself/herself as a person with social responsibilities. His/her personality becomes a type and the experiences become a symbol. The author creates a character, an ideal which, because it inhabits fictitious text, can allow for greater distance between author and protagonist and can become symbolic. Bildungsroman can be also called a novel of development, a novel of action or a coming-of-age novel. In autobiography the author is, simultaneously, protagonist with views that both of them share, theoretically at least. In this sense, the link can be traced between autobiography and Bildungsroman where both texts focus on inner development of the protagonist, on the path that led the author and the character to where he/she is now. Autobiography, in contrast with memoir, can be seen as a picture taken from above where the whole landscape can be seen clearly, along with the network of rivers. Memoir is focused rather on certain period of life, as if it were extracted from lifespan and looked upon through microscope.

writing" by historians and scholars such as Georg Misch – an interlude to more complex and sophisticated forms such as autobiography, biography, and history (Misch *in* Rak, 2004). Memoir had an informal nature and was claimed to be practised by passive people, merely observers of the world and events. Lee Quinby (1992) also observed that memoir has been marginalised within autobiography criticism and was considered a lesser form, along with personal forms like diaries, journals, and letters. Curiously, it has become particularly popular among current writers because it offers the possibility to ascribe meaning to experience rather than the chronological recounting of one's life which, to some authors, proves to be a limiting possibility. Many postmodern and postcolonial theorists hold that traditional autobiography, understood as a chronological and linear account of one's (famous) life is not adequate to render postmodern experiences and re-present current cultural and political contexts anymore. If traumatic events, political or state violence are taken into account, memoir seems to be a much more adequate form of speaking out than autobiography. A good illustration of this affirmation is a relatively recent publication of *No Friend but the Mountains: the true story of an illegal imprisoned refugee* authored by Behrouz Boochani (2019). The memoir, written in form of short WhatsApp messages, denounces the state violence and abuse of power directed at "illegal" immigrants in Australia. Behrouz Boochani, a Kurdish journalist sought political asylum in Australia but instead of finding freedom, he found himself incarcerated in the country's ill-famed detention centre on Manus Island during nearly six years. The period of nearly six years is carefully described in the published book where the author denounces discrimination and the peculiar logic of war against terrorism.

If we recollect the early analysis of the genre of autobiography, as defined by first generation theorists of the genre, i.e., Gusdorf, Spengeman, Weintraub, among others, (i.e., retrospective account of exemplary life creating, thus, a universal white, Western male self) we will remember that it has been considered by post-modern, feminist, and postcolonial theorists as a tool of social and cultural exclusion rather than inclusion. Selves such as of Boochani's seem to be best served by the genre of memoir rather than full-length autobiography. Nowadays, the term "memoir" is used by many publishing houses as a classification of diverse ways of self-writing. As Smith and Watson argue: "In contemporary writing, the categorization of memoir often signals autobiographical works characterized by density of language and self-reflexivity about the writing process, yoking the author's standing as a professional writer with the work's status as an aesthetic object" (2010, *op. cit.,*

p. 4). While analysing critical literature on autobiography and related forms, it has been determined that several scholars either do not differentiate between autobiography and memoir or, alternatively, still treat memoir as a (minor or less important) form of autobiography, some sort of autobiographical sub-genre. The boundary between the former and the latter is definitely not easy to trace since both forms borrow techniques and styles from each other. Julia Rak (2004, *op. cit*.) claims that the genre "memoir" has received much less attention than autobiography, however it is gradually more willingly co-opted by authors (often with non-normative subjectivities and stories) who wish to share their experience. Still, the scholar, trying to account for the less critical attention memoir has attracted, stresses the fact that memoir has a less professional nature than autobiography – she terms memoir production as "non-professional" or "non-literary" (*ibid*., p. 306). Memoir as a genre through which authors negotiate discourses of identity wobbles on the frontier between the private and the public, "bios" and "auto", between what is considered literary and non-literary writing. However, these characteristics are also responsible for memoir's popularity and for the fact that literary and cultural scholars have turned their attention to this form of life-writing[33]. In the attempt at defining the "memoir" the following is an example of a definition of memoir provided by George Fetherling:

> We would never call autobiography of a politician or other professional public figure a memoir. Such books are too formal to fit the distinction, following as they do the straight conventions of non-fiction; too determined to cover the subject's entire life or career and show him or her in the most favourable light. A memoir is more tightly focused, more daring in construction, and (its author hopes) more penetrating. A memoir can be of one's self or of other people or of a particular decade – or of a particular place. (Fetherling *in* Rak, 2004: 305).

Interestingly, it is currently possible to observe a certain tendency of some politicians and celebrities who opt for the memoir format in which to share their stories with readers and sell their image. As Sidonie Smith (2010, *op. cit*.) aptly notes, before the 2008 presidential elections in the United States there was an upsurge in memoirs published by politicians, Democrats, Republicans, or Independents. Identity narratives proved to be of crucial

[33] It should be kept in mind that the term "life-writing" includes all forms of self/life/writing, i.e., journals, diaries, letters, memoirs and, of course, autobiography. It also includes biography, although not under the heading "self-writing".

importance to candidates who were anxious to show their reliability, trustworthiness, and desirability. Clinton's *Living History* (2003) has the purpose of demonstrating the viability of a woman becoming president. In it, Clinton took pains at presenting a unique story of a strong, independent woman who knew how to break the glass ceiling. Barack Obama's *Dreams from my Father* (1995/2004) and *Audacity of Hope* (2007) focused on bi-racial identity and his mixed heritage. The former US President succeeded in portraying himself as an example of success in America where, after centuries of discrimination, it is now possible for a Black person to pursue the American Dream, the dream Martin Luther King and Malcolm X shared. In many cases political memoir becomes a genre where authors express their patriotism, masculinity, and a sense of belonging to the nation.

Laura di Summa-Knoop (2017) analyses various forms of life-writing and comes to the same conclusion; she corroborates previous opinions that in recent decades memoir has become a very popular genre which morphed into a blend of fiction and non-fiction. It still baffles critics who attempt to draw a line between autobiography and memoir, fiction, and non-fiction. This desire to discuss again boundaries between memoir and autobiography is not new but it is a defining feature of postmodernism. In her view, such a division is impossible and unsustainable as it will contribute to further misunderstandings and confusion among critics and readers. She herself coined a new term "critical autobiography" (*ibid*., p. 8) which is supposed to implode the traditional approach toward autobiography and shake its foundations, privileging, in this way, memoir and its open nature.

Stepanie Hammerworld (2015) speaks of "autobiography" in a general sense and of memoir as a specific type of autobiographical writing and such a division is not deprived of logic. She claims, moreover, that memoir as a genre has a powerful transformative power because the author can choose the most meaningful moments of his/her life and is freer in doing so than if he/she limited himself/herself to a traditional autobiography with its emphasis on linear structure and a bird's eye view upon the whole life. It is curious to note that the memoir form was more often chosen by women who felt the genre suited them better to express or construct their subjectivities. According to Analisa Federici (2018), autobiography, seen as a more "masculine" art did not offer so many textual opportunities to many women who shun this form in favour of memoir. Many Victorian women, for example, chose for themselves memoir instead of autobiography, one of the outstanding examples being Virginia Woolf and her *Moments of Being* where she decided to retrospectively systematise her private life and experiences.

Nevertheless, this preference for memoir does not mean that autobiography cannot open the same scope of possibilities; perhaps autobiography could be approached at a more macro level while memoir at a micro level, with its propensity to detail and the attempt at catching a fleeting moment. It must be also remembered that the understanding of autobiography in the second half of the 20th Century did not primarily focus on its retrieval of the past but mainly on it being a textual tool to construct one's subjectivity (Smith and Watson, 2010, *op. cit.*). The textual self and forms of self-inscription took a strong hold of autobiographical studies and opened new terrains.

At the beginning of this chapter it was asserted that many forms of life-writing, and particularly, autobiography and memoir, have become democratized in a sense that nowadays almost everyone has a story to tell and can publish their memoir. In fact, as Patrick Madden (2014) observes we are witnesses to a "memoir boom" (p. 222). There are different kinds among currently published memoirs, from celebrity to survival kits, travel writing in the 1st person to what Madden calls "nobody memoirs". In contrast to autobiography, memoirs can focus on a specific issue or period of time so many of them deal with subjects such as trauma, illness, success, motherhood, childhood, different kinds of abuse, and loss. Popular culture produces memoirs on parenting, dog raising, cooking, and so on. Some memoirs have unlikely subjects and wobble on the frontier between the literary and the kitsch. Some, however, constitute an effort to come to grips with a difficult reality. Elizabeth Wurtzel's *Prozac Nation: Young and depressed in America – A Memoir* (1995) treats the theme of depression, Susanna Keysen's *Girl, Interrupted* (2000) focuses on mental illness, Mary Karr's *The Liar's Club* (2015) exorcises her family's alcoholic and pathologic past and Lucy Grealy's *Autobiography of a Face* (2016) deals with the question of disfigurement and the importance of the body in creating and maintaining one's identity. These are just some examples among the eruption of all kinds of memoirs that, although appear to address somewhat trivial problems, do seem to be important to their authors who search for therapeutic means and what often comes with a published memoir: fame and money. Some scholars such as Madden (*ibid.*), differentiate between traditional and new memoirs, the latter being fruit of the postmodern zeitgeist with its awareness of the mediated nature of life, the fallibility of memory and the artificial dimension of textual production. Traditional memoir, in its turn, comes closer to the novel or a short story (*ibid*, p. 225). Mary Karr, reflecting on her memoir writing said that she sent it to all characters who appear in it to fact-check her memory, though emphasising that no writer or reader can possibly expect a memoir writer to only describe truth because

truth in any memoir is only an author's interpretation of what happened: "There is a kind of recursive loop in memoir. Imagination informs memory, and memory informs imagination. People are concerned that the events are fabricated, when what's most lethal is the slant you put on it".[34]

One of the most notable theorists of the genre of memoir, Ben Yagoda (2010) decides to use two terms "autobiography" and "memoir" interchangeably because to him those two definitions mean more or less the same thing. At the beginning of his book he agrees that "memoir" is a form of autobiographical writing but, at the same time, claims that "autobiography" is unambiguous and relatively simple to categorise while "memoirs" are more complex.

Such a claim is problematic since every example of writing that involves memory – silences related to forgetting, a retrospective view on one's life, questions of identity and textual self – is all but unambiguous. Still, Yagoda claims that "memoir" in its turn is more complex. Citing from Roy Pascal's *Design and Truth and Autobiography*, Yagoda argues that while autobiography pays attention to the author's self, memoir gravitates towards the Other(s). Roy Pascal in the above-mentioned work on autobiography published in 1960 made a division between autobiography and memoir still even more confusing. Like Yagoda several decades later, Pascal claimed no clear line could be drawn between autobiography and memoir and yet it must be admitted that his argument still holds true to some extent even nowadays:

> The line between autobiography and memoir or reminiscence is much harder to draw – or rather, no clear line can be drawn. There is no autobiography that is not in some respect a memoir, and no memoir that is without autobiographical information. Both are based on personal experience, chronological, and respective. But there is a general difference in the direction of the author's attention. In the autobiography proper, attention is focused on the self, in the memoir or reminiscence, on others (Pascal, 1960: 5).

Still, Yagoda acknowledges that at present there have been changes to the genre, the self has become more present in the memoir than before and facts are not expected to be so faithfully recounted (Yagoda, *ibid*. p. 2). Indeed, definition of both autobiography and

[34] Jennifer Schuessler, "Frank McCourt and the American Memoir" in *New York Times*, July 25, 2009: https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/2009/07/26/weekinreview/26shuessler.html

memoir provided by both theorists seem to be confusing and incomplete. If this is correct that both genres are strictly related as they refer to past events of the author, involve complex telling of memories and constructing the self, still we should see autobiography as covering a lifespan rather than a short period of time. However, the argument that autobiography is purely introspective and memoir exclusively other-oriented is limiting the genre and obscures complexities and hybrid nature of both autobiography and memoir.

As has been noted, the question of truth-telling is not less important in memoir than it is in autobiography. Thomas Couser speaks of "high-definition memoir" (Couser, 2012: 72). He claims that the writing is so full of creative techniques that it starts to distance itself from truth, though always keeping touch with it. Ben Yagoda, too, devotes his work to memoir and analyses questions of truthfulness in them. If a book scores more than 65 points on Yagoda's scale of truthfulness it can be named a memoir. The lower the score, the less reliable and truthful the memoir is. Of course, this is only a half-serious approach to measuring veracity in memoir and there are doubts as to whether such "witch-hunting" for slips of memory or tongue and nearly statistical and mathematical approaches do a disservice to the memoir genre and authors.

1.4. Autofiction.

In recent years literary critics have dedicated their efforts to conceptualise the term "autofiction", coined in 1977 by Serge Dubrovsky in his reaction to Philippe Lejeune's autobiographical pact and the traditional understanding of autobiography. Dubrovsky argued against a strict approach towards autobiography which left no room for fictional writing and factual information woven into one text. His primary intention was to renovate the concept and contribute to a new discussion on the hybrid nature of autobiography with its undeniable links to fiction, imagination, and fictionalisation of the writer's self. Dubrovsky's novel *Fils* inhabits two worlds: the autobiographical and the novelistic where the author is, concomitantly, the protagonist. However, the author refused to define his work as autobiography (Gasparini, 2011: 13). The text reveals a considerable amount of ambiguity, which is further deepened by a psychoanalytical session the author / protagonist undergoes.

On the back cover of his novel *Fils* he included his own definition of the term which constitutes, in reality, a different kind of reading pact:

> Autobiographie? Non, c'est un privilège réservé aux importants de ce monde, au soir de leur vie, et dans un beau style. Fiction, d'évènements et de faits strictement réels ; si l'on veut autofiction, d'avoir confié le langage d'une aventure à l'aventure d'un langage en liberté, hors sagesse et hors syntaxe du roman, traditionnel ou nouveau. Rencontres, fils de mots, allitérations, assonances, dissonances, écriture d'avant ou d'après littérature, concrète, comme on dit musique.[35] (Dubrovsky, 1977: 10).

The above definition demonstrates, however, that Dubrovsky himself saw autobiography in rather traditional and conservative terms, limiting it to famous people who are privileged enough to write autobiography and who undertake the task at the end of their lives. Researchers who carefully study autobiography know too well that the genre appears in many more forms than the one presented by Dubrovsky. Not all autobiographers wait until the final years of their lives to write their autobiography, not all of them were privileged and not all of them considered their lives as exemplary. Autofiction as a term and a concept tried to make space for those kinds of writing where author, narrator and character were still one and the same person and the information provided was factual and subject to verification. Simultaneously, there was room for fiction, so the text could be claimed as a novel (Hanson, 2017). Manuel Alberca in his work on autofiction *El pacto ambiguo: de la novella autobiográfica a la autoficción* (2007) analyses the impossibility of a clearly marked difference between the real and the false: between what has been (the real) and what could have been (the possible) – the person and the protagonist, the hero and the writer, imagination, and experience (Martins, 2013). The aim of the writer of autofiction is to make his life and himself an artwork and to simulate his identity in the act of self-representation.

Describing this tendency, the concept of autofiction brought to life an interesting blend of fact and fiction where, as Poul Behrendt argues, a "double contract" takes place: on one hand readers are aware that the author is claiming the truth about him/herself and appears under his real name and on the other readers and author agree that fiction governs the text: "Here, the distinction between lying and truth is disregarded: ideas and beliefs can

[35] "Autobiography? No, that's a privileged genre for the important people in this world, in the evening of their life, written in a nice style. Fiction, events and strictly real facts: if one wants to call it autofiction, having trusted the language of adventure to an adventure of language, exclusive of wisdom and novel's syntax, traditional or new. Encounters, sounds of words, alliterations, assonances, dissonances, style before or after literature, concrete, musically as they say". (Translation in Hywel Dix's *Autofiction in English*, 2018: 16).

be expressed, even if they are counterfactual, as contributions to the ongoing negotiation of the constitution of our culture and 'reality'" (*ibid*, p. 3).

The French site dedicated to the study of the concept and dissemination of academic works on autofiction defines the genre thusly:

> Notion subtile à définir, liée au refus qu'un auteur manifeste à l'égard de l'autobiographie, du roman à clés, des contraintes ou des leurres de la transparence, elle s'enrichit de ses extensions multiples tout en résistant solidement aux attaques incessantes dont elle fait l'objet. Elle vient en effet poser des questions troublantes à la littérature, faisant vaciller les notions mêmes de réalité, de vérité, de sincérité, de fiction, creusant de galeries inattendues le champ de la mémoire.[36]

The editors responsible for the site reiterate that the nature of autofiction is multifaceted; it reveals characteristics impossible to define clearly and is primarily concerned with various ways of blending fiction, truth, sincerity, and reality. To some extent, it can be argued that autofiction, like autobiography or memoir, is a hybrid genre without clear boundaries, drawing inspiration from other literary genres, such as the novel or the autobiographical novel.

Karen Ferreira-Meyers (2015) corroborates the previous opinions of her colleagues claiming that the term/genre of autofiction has gained more popularity, but she also observes that the word "autofiction" means different things to different authors and critics; she claims that "Everyone seems to use the term in his/her own way" (Ferreira-Meyers, 2015, *ibid.*, p. 203). It has become frequently very used and applied to nearly all types of confessional literature and autobiographical narratives. It seems that it has come to stay with us and is used to address all doubts and uncertainties regarding the self, identity, memory, truth, and fiction. One assertion from Ferreira-Meyers's article seems of particular clarity that, perhaps, helps distinguish differences between autobiography and autofiction:

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[36] Definition provided by www.autofiction.org (accessed on July 18, 2019). English translation:

"It is a subtle notion to define, tied to the author's apparent refusal of the autobiography, roman à clés, of the constraints or delusions of transparency, enriched by its many extensions all while solidly resisting the incessant attacks of which it is the object. It comes from posing questions that challenge literature, shaking notions of reality, truth, sincerity, fiction, plowing through the unattended galleries in the field of memory." Translation extracted from Stefan Kjerkegaard's "Autobiography and self presentation: From autofiction to autonarration", Aarhus University, https://www.materials.narrative.ut.ee/Stefan%20Kjerkegaard%20LACE%20Tartu.pdf.

"Whereas traditional autobiography tries to describe a character which really existed in the most realistic and effective way possible, autofiction fictionalizes a character which really lived. That is the pragmatic point of view regarding autofiction raised by Dubrovsky in 1977" (*ibid*, p. 206). Indeed, this explanation brings more light to the already complex and confusing question of definitions, attempts at categorisation and desperate, at times, trials to contain the genre.

The concept of autofiction has been quite well studied, especially in the Francophone world. Gérard Genette (1993) theorized the term and proposed that all cases where an author of a fictional work writes about his own person, i.e., includes his own name within the text be categorised as autofiction. If this suggestion is deemed worthy of attention, then numerous examples of world literature would fall under this category and the term would describe literary practise long known and studied. For example, Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy* would meet the demands established by the concept of autofiction. The text is filled with autobiographical references and homonymy between the author and the protagonist.

Although the genre of autofiction has been present in the literary world for centuries, only with Dubrovsky's coinage of the term did critics and authors start to perceive such literature in a new way. What seems to be innovative in such an approach to the fictionalised "I" is that autofiction legitimises the practise of blurring lines between fact and fiction and readers, if they are aware of it, express their consent. They do not feel manipulated or lied to, as it happens with hoaxes in autobiography or memoirs, because they know from the beginning that truth and fiction cannot be separated in autofiction work. Despite the concept still baffling many critics with some even doubting its usefulness, the fact remains that autofiction came to re-define the way autobiographical accounts are read and approached. It still holds an unstable position between the autobiography and the novel and, according to some critics (Gasparini, 2011, *ibid.*) the term exists to point out the differences between autobiography, autobiographical novel, and fictitious autobiography. As a matter of fact, in his 2014 article, Jonathon Sturgeon[37] claims that in autofiction novels the self is understood as a "living thing" composed of fictions. The important point here is that the relation between the self and fiction is redistributed and fiction lost its label of being "false" or a "lie". In fact, it makes up an important part of human lives and the stories they tell.

[37] Jonathon Sturgeon, 2014: *The Death of the Postmodern Novel and the Rise of Autofiction*. In *Flavorwire*, December 31, 2014: http://flavorwire.com/496570/2014-the-death-of-the-postmodern-novel-and-the-rise-of-autofiction

In the light of the above discussion, it has become clear that the concepts of "autobiography", "memoir" and "autofiction" share certain common characteristics. They all entail constructing of the self through narrative, although in autofiction this narrative self seems to be least "reliable". Here it is most noticeable that the pact between writer and reader allows for more authorial freedom to weave plenty of fiction into the prose. Among the three, the concept of autofiction departs most from the idea of autobiography. The remaining two concepts, autobiography and memoir belong to the same literary family, but they cannot be considered identical and so interchangeable use of both terms cannot take place lest confuse and obscure differences between them. Although in recent decades the term and genre of memoir has gained much more currency and, as has been observed above, has been often chosen over the term "autobiography", it serves particular interests of particular groups of authors who object, for various and legitimate reasons, the term "autobiography" linking the genre to hegemonic practises of Western intellectual elites and construction of Western, white male subject. Despite the criticism which the genre of autobiography has been confronted with, it is still a useful and interesting term which should be approached as a tool for self-reinvention and self-construction. It has not exhausted its potential and possibilities and, as shall be discussed in next chapters, remains a form adequate to trace back the story of one's life in all its complex aspects. For the purpose of this Thesis, the term "autobiography" has been chosen to be used henceforth and will be preferred over the term "memoir" in spite of the fact that various other terms related to autobiographical writing (such as self-writing and life-writing) will be employed throughout the following chapters, with emphasis, however on "autobiography".

At the end of this chapter, it is important to recapitulate its purpose. It is entirely devoted to the discussion of three interlocking literary concepts: autobiography, memoir and autofiction. However, before the analysis of the three literary concepts could have taken place, it proved of great relevance to examine first the concept of the self as seen by different epistemologies and to devote a subsection of the chapter to the link between the self and the narrative as this link will be a constant throughout the whole Thesis. This link is considered of the utmost importance to the entire Thesis because its main goal is to discuss the self constructed through narrative in four African American female autobiographers.

The discussion of the three concepts (autobiography, memoir and autofiction) focused on their historical development and analysed diverse theoretical approaches developed by specialists in the areas of Literary and Cultural Studies. Neurosciences,

psychology, philosophy, social sciences, and even classical studies were drawn upon to broaden the perspective on autobiography, memory, the question of fiction vs truth. The purpose was to demonstrate how various sciences can contribute to the current understanding of narrative construction of experience, life, and self. In order to comprehend better the complex and hybrid nature of autobiography and related genres, several aspects of autobiographical writing (also termed as self-referential or self-writing) were brought forward, among them the question of memory/forgetting and its complicated relationship to text, ideological and political aspects of memory, the problem of intentional silence on the part of the author regarding his/her choices of what to leave out of autobiography, imagination and blurred lines between these aspects. The question of memory has been given special attention because the concept and how it evolved throughout decades further complicates the genre of autobiography. It helps understand that fiction (also due to failing human memory but also because memory is an act of recreating the past events now, in the present, and has a performative dimension) is an inseparable part of any autobiography and does not diminish its importance or credibility. Also, it has been mentioned that memory can become subject to intentional deformation and manipulation for political purposes, as has been illustrated by work carried out by Edward Said, Paul Ricoeur or Pierre Nora.

In order to analyse comprehensively the aspects of self-writing, it has been decided that the important (but not the most important and, definitely, not the only one among many aspects relevant to autobiographical writing) factor of gender shall be scrutinised in a separate chapter. Because the question of gender in Literature and Culture is a complex one and deserves some attention, chapter II will be partly devoted to the discussion of female autobiography. Only then will it be possible to render a complete picture and transmit the complexity of the topic at hand. Thus, chapter II, will commence with a discussion of the complex link between gender and self-writing, the link that has been forgotten or deemed unimportant in the earlier stages of academic work on autobiography. Only after elucidating this topic will the chapter II proceed to the historical and cultural contextualisation of African American Autobiography and its place in and the contribution to the American letters and the area of Black Studies in particular. Such contextualisation will open space for the analysis of four Black American female autobiographers and their textual selves in chapter III, IV and V.

Chapter II

Feminist, American and African American perspectives on Autobiography

Introduction.

The discussion in the previous chapter was of a conceptual and theoretical nature and, as has been mentioned at the end of the examination of literary terms, the analysis of various concepts used throughout the Thesis, such as "self", "narrative self", "autobiography", "memoir" and "autofiction" were at the centre of the analysis. It was of relevance to examine the concepts with the intention to better understand the complexity of autobiographical narratives, their hybrid nature, problematics related to questions of fiction vs truth, memory and its lapses, autobiographical styles, the relationship between the autobiography and reading audience, and so forth. For the sake of clarity, however, it has been decided that in order to examine the genre of autobiography and related life narratives, the factor of gender[1] should be treated separately and should be given attention it deserves in chapter II. The discussion that ensues throughout this chapter shall use the term "gender" as it implies a set of complexities which impact the way women's lives are perceived and experienced, precisely because gender is socially constructed. However, it must be remembered that the term "sex"[2] overlaps the term "gender", both terms betray certain common traits but cannot be used interchangeably.

Today, in the light of thorough research carried out from gender-specific point of view, any analysis of self-referential writing would be considered incomplete if it failed

[1] According to the World Health Organization, the term "gender" is socially constructed and, as such, is a source of various forms of inequalities and discrimination. Because it is socially constructed, it varies from society to society and from culture to culture. "Gender refers to the characteristics of women, men, girls and boys that are socially constructed. This includes norms, behaviours and roles associated with being a woman, man, girl or boy, as well as relationships with each other. (…) gender is hierarchical and produces inequalities that intersect with other social and economic inequalities. Gender-based discrimination intersects with other factors of discrimination, such as ethnicity, socioeconomic status, disability, age, geographical location, gender identity and sexual orientation, among others". World Health Organisation's definition of "gender": https://www.who.int/health-topics/gender#tab=tab_1

[2] The term "sex" refers to a set of biological attributes in humans and animals. It is primarily associated with physical and physiological features including chromosomes, gene expression, hormone levels and function, and reproductive/sexual anatomy. Sex is usually categorized as female or male but there is variation in the biological attributes that comprise sex and how those attributes are expressed. "What is Gender? What is sex?": https://cihr-irsc.gc.ca/e/48642.html

to take into consideration writings penned by women and female scholars' theorising of autobiography written by men and women. Insights brought by feminist theorists into discussion of self-referential texts helped expand or reformulate the literary canon based on male (and frequently biased) choices which excluded not only feminine literary production dismissing it as of little value but also barred non-white people's access to classical canon. Such feminist perspectives also brought attention to several aspects of autobiography writing and reading previously ignored or omitted by academic scholarship.

Thus, the purpose of the chapter II is to discuss, among others, Women Studies' and Feminist theoretical perspectives on autobiography and investigate various aspects of female autobiography never seriously considered before the advent of feminist critique. The first section (2.1.) of this chapter will focus on early discussion of female texts by feminist scholars whose main concern was to determine whether female texts differed, in any way, from those written by males in what concerned textuality, contents of the autobiographies and what, if any, impact gender of the author had on the narratives. As will be seen, however, critical reflection on gender-specific texts will not provide easy answers and solutions and it will be argued that gender cannot be a sole factor influencing the text and self-construction through autobiography. In fact, it will be observed that, in certain cases, providing answers *a priori*, looking for fixed solutions where ambiguity reigns can doom women and their literary production to cultural essentialism and separatism. As postcolonial theorists rightly claim, gender must be always taken into account along with other variables such as class, sexual orientation, ethnicity or religious denomination. Otherwise produced theory will prove exclusionary and one-dimensional, instead of being inclusive and more complete.

As the present Thesis's main purpose is to analyse African American female autobiographical narratives, it proves to be of paramount importance to present American and African American perspectives, problematics. and main trends in autobiographical texts to provide theoretical and contextual background to further chapters. Chapters III, IV and V will be devoted to autobiographies penned by Audre Lorde, Nina Simone, Faith Ringgold and Rebecca Walker and the analysis will be supported by the general concepts of autobiography discussed in chapter I, questions pertaining to Feminist and Women's Studies theorisation of female autobiography analysed in chapter II but the analysis will be also grounded in the rich tradition of

African American autobiographical productions, discussed in the present chapter as well. For this reason, section 2.2. will focus on the development of American autobiography, discussing the question of American confessional autobiographies rooted in the Puritan tradition as well as emergence of the exemplary American Self, enhanced by autobiographies of so-called American men of success, i.e., Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson. Although there are many more canonical American autobiographies that were published well into the 20th and 21st Centuries, for the purpose of this Thesis it was decided to focus mainly on the early stages of American autobiography. The same applies to African American autobiographies which have turned out to be a fertile soil for Black self-construction. Narratives of the enslaved Africans brought against their will to the American continent shall be considered in the section 2.3. as they proved to be an example for many generations of Black Americans to follow. Black female autobiographical production will be discussed, too because it served as a source of inspiration to the 20th Century African American women autobiographers and, in some aspects, it is still possible to detect common themes and aspects which pass from generation to generation of Black American women[3].

The last section (2.4.) will be devoted to review of current theoretical literature on Autobiographical Studies. The most recent research will be examined, along with publications devoted to autobiographies and memoirs analysed from various angles. Particular attention shall be paid to contemporary research into feminist and African American autobiography. The current Thesis places itself as a continuation of the contemporary research at the intersection of Autobiographical, Feminist and African American studies and it will draw from these three branches of research. Also, it will attempt to fill in *lacuna* in what concerns current academic research on four African American autobiographers under analysis in this work. It is the first Thesis of this kind in Portugal which treats all of the five autobiographers in one work, looking comparatively at their narratives from three different angles (questions of tension

[3] According to scholars specialised in African American female autobiography, there are certain recurring themes and problematics in autobiographies penned by Black women in America in 19th, 20th and 21st Centuries: many of the autobiographies or memoirs focus on the role of the family (particularly mothers) as a vehicle of passing the traditional values down to further generations, the continuing aspect of looking for one's freedom and subjectivity in the face of racism and socioeconomical problems, the quest for personal fulfilment, etc. Although there are generational differences between mothers and daughters, there is a strong link inherited from earlier generations and passed down to daughters and sons (cf. Braxton, 1991, Lamore, 2017, Briscoe, 2022).

between individual, autonomous I and its relationship with the larger community, narrative expressions about the body trying to write it into contemporary cultural discourses about Black bodies and relationships with Other(s) and how these authors construct their narrative selves through such relationships).

2.1. Feminine/Feminist self-writing – is the subject different?

The study of autobiography was practised primarily by male scholars until the 1980s. This, undoubtedly, impacted the way autobiography as a genre was perceived, read, and disseminated. Critical anthologies and academic articles that included analysis of autobiographies and memoirs penned by women were few. To give an example, the seminal anthology on autobiography edited by James Olney in 1980, *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical* included only one token essay on female autobiography authored by Mary Mason "The Other Voices: Autobiographies of Women Writers". Another path-breaking work on Western autobiography penned by Albert Stone in 1982 (*Autobiographical Occasions and Original Acts*) proved to be a little better in this sense as Chapter 6 analysed autobiographies by Margaret Mead and Anaïs Nin ("Becoming a Woman in Male America: Margaret Mead and Anais Nïn") and Chapter 8 found some room for autobiography by Lillian Hellman ("Factual Fictions: Experiments in Autobiography by Norman Mailer, Frank Conroy, Lillian Hellman"). Clearly, most male scholars did not demonstrate much interest in life-writing penned by women and this void was redressed by female researchers only in the last two decades of the 20th Century. The movement linked to Second-Wave Feminism brought with it interest in self-referential writing by women and theorised female autobiographical narratives[4].

[4] When seminal essays and anthologies on Western autobiographies started to be published, from 1950s onwards, as has been mentioned, they failed to include female autobiographies. However, it is important to note that women did compose autobiographies and memoirs many decades before the emergence of academic interest in autobiography and related genres. To give just a couple of examples: Christian female mystics penned their texts weaving autobiographical, highly introspective reflections on their souls, divine love and relationship with God, e.g., Hildegard von Bingen's *Scivias* from 1151-52, St. Catherine of Siena's *Dialogue* published in 1378, Julian of Norwich's *Revelations of Divine Love* from 1395, Margery Kempe's *The Book of Margery Kempe* (1501). 18th and 19th Centuries witnessed emergence of texts by Charlotte Charke's *A Narrative of the Life of Mrs Charlotte Charke* (1755), Laetitia Pilkington's *The Memoirs of Laetitia Pilkington, Written by Herself* (in 3 volumes, 1749-1754), *Ann Candler's Poetical Attempts by Ann Candler, a Suffolk Cottager*, *with a Short Narrative of Her Life* (1803), Susan Sibbald's *The Memoirs of Susan Sibbald, 1783-1812* (published only in 1926). Elizabeth Cady Stanton's *Eighty Years and More: Reminiscences 1815-1897* appeared in 1895, *Harriet Martineau's Autobiography* in 1855.

Autobiography began to be seen by women scholars as one of the most adequate forms of self-expression, a characteristic of feminist theorising of the genre. It allowed women to assert their supposedly unique, female selves, their personalities and their experiences once suppressed by the patriarchal system of gender oppression. The 1980s and 1990s witnessed a proliferation of publications on female autobiographies. Scholars such as Julia Watson, Sidonie Smith, Leigh Gilmore, Shari Benstock, Mary Mason, Rita Felski, Domna Stanton, Estelle Jelinek, Bella Brodzki, Françoise Lionnet, Felicity Nussbaum[5] and many others devoted their research to gendered aspects of autobiographical writings. The early discussion focused on the issues of difference in language and themes in autobiographies written by men and women. The majority of critics agreed at the time that women's lived experience differed from men's. Initially that difference was understood to be of a more biological order, but with time it shifted from a biological to a cultural dimension of sex differences (to what is today understood as "gender").

However, the question of whether literature, autobiographies produced by women in this particular case, are different and markedly "female" remains inconclusive, and critics disagree considerably on this aspect. Proponents of the difference at all levels but particularly at the linguistic one claim that women express themselves in writing differently from men. Virginia Woolf was one of such advocates of typical female writing – in style, syntax, and grammar (Dibattista, 2014). Woolf was particularly sensitive to the question of the material conditions of women's writing and acute absence of any female predecessors upon which later generations of women could lean for support and inspiration. In her famous and much-quoted *A Room of One's Own* published originally in 1929, she insisted on the need to unearth and study the lives and writings (*bios* and *graphia*) of women who had been marginalised by the patriarchal culture. She touched upon a sensitive point which referred to the fact that women were frequently deprived of financial, logistical, and cultural autonomy to write their selves into existence. Also, she noticed aptly that paucity of female models of the self and insufficient number of women's writing caused forthcoming generations of women not to know whether their lives were the norm or not. The following quotation by Dibattista

[5] Works devoted to feminine and feminist examination of autobiography written by women (but also by men) by those female scholars shall be scrutinised and mentioned later in this chapter. It is important to note at this stage, though, that the female critics of self-narratives such as Julia Watson, Sidonie Smith, Domna Stanton or Estelle Jelinek belong to the earlier generation of academics who paved the way for further generations of feminist activists and academics who continued the work on female literary production, posing new and sometimes provoking questions.

regarding lack of any previous models on which women writers could draw, illustrates the problem well:

> Lacking any standard of comparison, a woman had no reliable way of determining whether her life was a common or singular one. Singular, in this context, usually carried the unhappy connotation of odd or deviant rather than exceptional or unique. Autobiography offers the chance and means to judge as well as represent oneself, but women often lacked the very criteria for judgment and thus often felt ill-equipped to decide how typical (normal) their character and their experience might be. (*ibid*, p. 210).

The relevance of self-writing by women was studied earlier by Hélène Cixous, French poststructuralist, feminist, and writer. In her famous and influential work on women's writing, "The Laugh of the Medusa",[6] the author highlighted the necessity for women to write "as women" and about women:

> Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies – for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement. (Cixous, 1976: 875).

Cixous advised women to write their selves through the body – it is through writing that women will return to the body which had been confiscated from them by phallogocentric[7] order. Through the act of writing, women will retrieve their bodily pleasures and get back their strength. Through the act of writing and speaking, the woman will also inscribe herself back in history – she will reclaim what has been taken from her. The silence imposed on women will be broken by a woman's voice and writing. Interestingly, Cixous's philosophy of

[6] "The Laugh of the Medusa" was written originally in French under the title "Le Rire de la Méduse" and published in 1975 and translated into English one year later by Paula Cohen and Keith Cohen. The English translation referred to in this Thesis comes from 1976 Cohens' translation.

[7] The neologism "phallogocentrism" was coined by Jacques Derrida who claimed that any point of view expressed in and through language is, mandatorily, male centred. The term is composed of two words: "phallocentrism" (focusing on the masculine point of view) and "logocentrism" (focusing on language in ascribing meaning to the world). The term has gained much popularity especially among feminist intellectuals who drew on it to critique the omnipresent masculine view of the world which excluded or belittled women. https://dbpedia.org/page/Phallogocentrism

female writing is heavily influenced by psychoanalysis and a rather essentialist view of a woman's self. It is worth reflecting on whether such an exclusively women-oriented approach toward presenting women as writers, although dictated by cultural prescriptions imposed on them, contributed, one way or the other, to a further marginalisation of women by depicting them as creatures set apart from the rest of the world, nearly ontologically different from men.

Nevertheless, it must be emphasised that her philosophy, like that of Luce Irigaray[8] and Julia Kristeva[9] contributed to a deepened awareness that women were represented and written about mainly by men rather than representing and writing about themselves. After centuries of phallogocentrism in the construction of meaning and female representation, time has come for women to take up pen and counter discriminatory images constructed by often misogynist men. French Second-Wave feminism, although seen today as essentialising and exclusionary in the way it conceived of women and marginalised black and "Third World" women, should not be belittled or dismissed easily. It drew attention to the fact that male literature has been a locus of female oppression, invisibility, and marginalisation. To confirm that observation it is enough to take into consideration the infamous pseudoscientific treatise by Otto Weininger[10] *Sex and Character* (English version published in 1906) where differences between sexes are studied and where misogynist and sexist theses abound, for example: "A woman's demand for emancipation and her qualification for it are in direct proportion to the amount of maleness in her" (*ibid.*, p. 39) or

> It is enough to make the general statement that there is not a single woman in the history of thought, not even the most manlike, who can be truthfully compared with men of fifth or sixth-rate genius, for instance with Rückert as a poet, Van Dyck as a painter, or Scheirmacher as a philosopher. If we eliminate hysterical visionaries, such

[8] Luce Irigaray is a French linguistic, psychoanalyst and feminist philosopher whose work focused on women and language, namely uses and misuses of language in relation to women. Her most renowned work is *Speculum of the Other Woman* published in 1974: https://www.britannica.com/biography/Luce-Irigaray

[9] Julia Kristeva is a Bulgarian-born French psychoanalyst, critic, novelist, and educator working mainly in the area of linguistics, psychoanalysis, semiotics, and philosophical feminism. Her most known works are: *Desire in Language* (1969), *Powers of Horror* (1980), *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1984). She was a member of the previously mentioned Tel Quel group: https://www.britannica.com/biography/Julia-Kristeva

[10] Otto Weininger (1880-1903) was an Austrian philosopher who authored his only work *Sex and Character* (*Geschlecht und Charakter*, 1903). *Sex and Character* is partly scientific, partly philosophical treatise and scrutinises ontological differences between men and women where the masculine element is portrayed as moral, productive, and positive while the feminine one is always linked to weakness of character, unproductivity, and lack of moral compass. The book, it must be noted, also contains anti-Semitic arguments (in a dedicated chapter) where Judaism is denounced as feminine and amoral in contrast to Christianity: https://www.britannica.com/biography/Otto-Weininger

> as the Sybils, the Priestesses of Delphi, Bourignon, Kettenberg, Jeanna de la Mothe Guyon, Joanna Southcote, Beate Sturmin, St. Teresa, there still remain cases like that of Marie Bashkirtseff (*ibid.*, p. 42).

Sadly, Otto Weininger's treatise is not an exception to the rule but rather one of many examples of women's subordination in culture and their subaltern position in a history made and written by men.

Understandably in light of the above, the concept of *écriture feminine*, first introduced in the already mentioned "The Laugh of the Medusa", paid attention to what and how women wrote; how they chose their topics and how they constructed their female selves. At the time feminist theorists of literature had no doubt that the female self existed and could be expressed in literature. Cixous, coined the term "*écriture feminine*" (women's writing) to point to the nature of the symbolic feminine, however she insisted on seeing the feminine not in its universal essence but strongly linked to the historical and situated context. Her approach highlights diversity among women seeking to find common ground. Differential writing, writing by women, would open up new space for different voices and bodies in language – here the body would play a primary role. Writing was associated to menstrual blood and a mother's milk – two genuinely female fluids. According to French psychoanalytical feminists, body is text and text is body. Anatomy means, thus, textuality. The body is inscribed into the female text and becomes, at the same time, the place of resistance and subversion of masculine order and logic. Thus, body and writing were seen as women's tools against erasure and silencing. French feminists defined "feminine" writing as pre-Oedipal, in the realm of the semiotic and was associated with the Mother.

It was, moreover, characterised as "plural, continuous, interdependent, nonsensical, roundabout, a narrative of ruptures, gaps, wordplay, *jouissance* fundamentally different from the forward drive of logocentric certitude and individuality" (Smith, 1987: 13). A woman-writer-autobiographer breaks, thus, the silence and implodes the masculine discourse from the inside marking it with her bodily desire, fluidity, and plural subjectivity. This position, defended by French feminism was described thusly by Elaine Showalter in her insightful article dated 1981 "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness": "The concept of *écriture feminine*, the inscription of the female body and female difference in language and text, is a significant theoretical formulation in French feminist criticism, although it describes a Utopian

possibility rather than a literary practice." (Showalter, *ibid*, p.185). Showalter, however, gives value to this current within feminist thought as it, along with English feminist critique highlighting oppression and American feminist critique privileging textuality, tries to "rescue the feminine from its stereotypical association with inferiority" (*ibid.*, p. 186). It must be noted, though, that such theories were later seen as very limiting and radical. In fact, they did what they fought against: they limited women to their bodies and shackled them anew in material, bodily constrains. They made strong references to the female body, trying to tell women apart from men and highlight the female uniqueness (as opposed to male's), however they contributed (non-intentionally perhaps) to further essentialising of women.

It is relevant to note that not all feminist theorists supported this vision of the female self and writing. Dibattista (2014, *ibid.*) observed that both French feminists and then Anglo-American feminist theorists focused too much on essentialised features of women's writing coining neologisms, such as "autogynography", setting, thusly, women's literary production apart and fossilising it beyond any recognition (*ibid.*, p. 209). Some women scholars argued that gender cannot be the only category of analysis of female literature and cultural, political, and historical analysis. In her 1999 interview with Joan Scott, Hilda Rømer Christensen asked the famous historian if it still made sense to use "gender" as a useful category of analysis. Answering her question, Joan Scott asserted as follows:

> Yes and no. I think it is still a useful category of analysis because it lets you ask questions or identify issues about the relations between men and women: how they are constructed, how masculine, feminine, male, female are being understood at a particular historical moment. But the trouble with gender in 1999 is that is has become so routine a category for so many people. They'll just say "gender" as if it carries an explanation of its own. As if, if you say "I'm doing a gender analysis" you already know what you are going to find out: that men are superior, women inferior; that women have been discriminated against in certain ways, that there are certain stereotypes operating and so on. (Joan Wallach Scott and Hilda Rømer Christensen, 1999: 8).

The tendency on the part of early feminist scholars to group women's writing and also women's autobiography under a specific heading of gender was questioned because it obscured other equally important categories of analysis such as economic class, sexual orientation, religious denomination, and so on. (Peterson *in* Folkenflik, 1993, *ibid.*). The

idea that only gender and biology determine the quality and nature of women's language and literature can prove detrimental to the very project of unearthing and understanding women's literary production. While critics such as Mary Mason ("The Other Voice: Autobiographies of Women Writers") claim that women write differently (if so, what makes this writing different? Culture? Education? Is the difference a matter of style?) and what impacted heavily their writing was their gender, analysis of some 18th and 19th Century women's autobiographies reveals that there were texts in which gender played a minimal, if any, role.

If focus shall be placed on, for example, Quaker autobiography, texts written by women will not differ so much from those composed by men – spiritual preoccupations dominate the narrative, the representation of life as a battle of opposing forces, the focus on faith, worldly temptations, and so forth. Countering Mary Mason's argument that women's autobiography will never fit the Augustinian model, the Quakers' self-narratives do display some similarities to patterns visible in St. Augustine's autobiography (*ibid*. p. 83). In the collection The Friends' Library which included the Quaker autobiography, there are more similarities than differences between male and female narratives. On the other hand, it must be remembered that Quakers had a model to follow and any deviation from norm in writing might have had serious consequences for the author in terms of his/her credibility and access to the religious community. In their journals, meant for private consumption, Quaker women tried to instruct other women and men how to develop faithful heart, encourage steadfast religious approach and exercise in virtue. They strived at finding their female voice which would not counter religious precepts of their community and "enhance personal progress in the search for a stronger personal faith" (Wright, 2003: 37). Spiritual writings of Quaker women were contemplative with a particular emphasis to diminish or do away with the autonomous self altogether and render oneself completely available to God. Any trace of individualism and self-aggrandizement had to be eradicated. Although many Quaker women's writing focused on religious development, it also served to render their voice in rejection of patriarchal hierarchy within religious community (Wright, *ibid*.). It needs to be born in mind that many Quaker women were active preachers travelling to convert souls and some of them reached iconic status of women's rights activists and social reformers.[11]

[11] Lucretia Mott, Susan B. Anthony, Prudence Crandall as well as Angelina and Sarah Grimké courageously addressed political and social issues, involved themselves in a battle against slavery and emancipation of women and Blacks. Some examples of Quaker female autobiography include: Mary Penington's 1848 *A brief*

The same applies to autobiographies written by women mystics, such as St. Teresa de Àvila or Julian of Norwich (*Revelations of the Divine Love*) – their selves were very little concerned with traditionally understood femininity and writing against masculine norms. The focus of their narratives was clearly on their selves immersed in God's love, conversion, obedience towards the rule of Christian love and, broadly speaking, the nature of their religious experiences. Closer reading of women mystics' accounts will bear certain intertextual similarities regarding the role of the body in experiencing their faith (very often bodies in pain and suffering illustrate the mysticism of these women), however in these cases feminist critique should be careful when applying general rules to specific female texts. Clearly, there are other categories of analysis which should be considered when examining women's autobiographies because it is also possible to find more divergencies between women's autobiographies from different ages, social classes, and religious denominations than simply between women's and men's autobiographies.

A similar problem emerges when in feminist critique of autobiography women scholars focus solely on differences in the way men and women construct their selves and subjectivities. It should be noted that although gender does have an impact on the way people write their selves, the cultural epoch and the norms seen as obligatory in those epochs influence autobiographical writing as well. Aside from looking at the gender of the author, it is advisable to contextualise the time when a given autobiography was created. For example, in a particularly insightful article on autobiography and the problem of ending entitled "Autobiography and the Problem of the Finish", Hannah Sullivan (2011) refers to Leslie Stephen and his hybrid and complex memoir *The Mausoleum Book* started in 1885 and continued until 1904, the year of his death. This multi-formed text, which is neither full autobiography, nor biography nor diary reveals traits of Victorian thought on autobiography when there was less concern about revealing private experience. As a matter of fact, the era dictated the rule of non-disclosure of sensitive, private information of experience. The choice was to minimise the "I" to drive readers' attention away from the author's self and resist the autobiographical impulse to address personal concerns. This choice of hiding the self from others' eyes was, therefore, related to the cultural and historical period, not solely to the gender of the author. Laura Marcus (1994) corroborates such an opinion when she

account of some of my Exercise from my Childhood, or Elizabeth Stirredge's 1726 *Strength in the Weakness*, or Alice Hayes's 1765 *A legacy, or widow's mite*.

claims that the obsessive focus on gender and differences between male and female writing can create artificial gaps and divisions and may lead women critics onto a false path.

Despite certain limitations and short-sightedness of early feminist theorising on female autobiography, the movement turned out to be revolutionary in how it helped shape current knowledge of autobiographical forms. Feminist postulates contributed to new possibilities and a re-definition of the concept of autobiography. Various feminist scholars coined new terms and proposed new definitions that aimed to broaden the canon, introduce new, lesser-known texts written by women and subvert the traditional notion of autobiography seen until then as a product of the universal Western male subject. Autobiography has gained unique status among feminist theories of female self-writing because it offered a privileged space for women to construct new subjectivities, express their experiences and share their stories in a freer way. This is perhaps the reason poststructuralist tendencies to wipe out the writing subject did not attract much attention among feminist critics of female autobiography. Women scholars understood that abiding by new theories which prophesised the end of autobiography would endanger the female subject who, historically, had been marginalised and denied its agency and authenticity. Nancy Miller observed regarding the "crisis of the subject": "Because women have not had the same historical relation of identity to origin, institution, production that men have had, they have not, I think, (collectively) felt burdened by too much Self, Ego, Cogito, etc." (1988: 106). Feminism saw that the price women would pay for associating themselves with the poststructuralist view of the subject would mean double erasure: as women and as writers. Because post-structuralism erases a powerful self, capable of action, having agency and using the language as a tool against marginalisation, it brings with it the risk of diminishing women as rational beings capable of shaping the world.

Continuing the work of unearthing female text, building a feminist theory based on the observed results, an trying to coin new terminology to describe the newly discovered feminine reality in literature, Domna Stanton published in 1984 an influential anthology on the question of women's writing and autobiography. In *The Female Autograph* she proposed a new term that would better express women's autobiographical production: "autogynography". She noticed that previous criticism on autobiography, carried out mainly by male scholars, largely ignored female production omitting such autobiographical works as Margery Kempe's *Book of Margery Kempe* (15th Century), Margaret Cavendish's *The Relations of My Birth, Breeding and Life* (17th Century), Julian of Norwich's *A Shewing of God's Love* (14th

Century) and Dona Leonor López de Córdoba's *Written Document* (14th Century). Indeed, no male scholars were interested in including those works in 20th Century anthologies or full-length works on autobiography. Drawing on these critical works authored by men, Stanton affirms that: "Within this new realm of autobiographical criticism, woman still remained 'the dark continent', in replication of the status that Freud ascribed to her over half a century ago" (Stanton, *ibid.*, p. 4). While unearthing autobiographies written by women and making parallels between male and female-authored self-narratives, Stanton concluded that the self usually portrayed by traditional critics of autobiographies was typically male, white, middle-class, and unitary/coherent. In contrast, women's texts revealed a different subject, often split, fragmentary and discontinuous. Moreover, her study confirmed that the majority of self-referential texts written by women betrayed a characteristic of non-linearity, the narrative being interspersed with stylistic devices considered traditionally as non-autobiographical, such as poems, fragments of letters, etc. Also, in a thematic scope, female autobiographies differed considerably from males': women, broadly speaking, tended to focus much more on the relational aspects of their selves, bodily matters such as motherhood and betrayed traces of the self in more unison with others than men, whose autobiographies have been seen as a triumph of solitary selves. "Autogynography" then clearly refers to a form of feminine writing – *écriture feminine* – which reveals not only a different subject(ivity) but different themes and ways to express one's (female) self. Domna Stanton's anthology was a true trailblazer at the time as it was totally dedicated to female perspectives on autobiographical narratives written by women and claimed space in the academic field dominated by men whose scholarly interest did not include women's writing.

Although of undeniable importance due to its innovation at the time of its publishing, for a researcher anchored in the 21st Century, Stanton's work does raise some questions. It tends to read female autobiographies from a certain point of view, looking insistently for differences between male and female autobiographies and memoirs where, at times, such differences may not be so conspicuous. It is certain that many male-authored autobiographies displayed a coherent autonomous self, but it would be an overstatement to claim that male autobiographers never felt torn, in doubt or fragmented, so to say. It is also an overgeneralisation to claim that most male autobiographers display a solitary self. Even if we take into consideration one of the most exemplary autobiographies, *Confessions* by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a more attentive reading of the text will reveal his concern about other people in his life story. His father appears on the pages of his narratives, as well as his teachers,

female friends, and his aunt whom he recollects with tenderness and gratitude. Other examples of autobiographies or memoirs penned by men counter the early feminist theorising of female and male self-narratives. James McBride's 1995 *The Color of Water: A Black Man's Tribute to His White Mother* is another case in point. The memoir focuses almost exclusively on the author's mother, Ruth, born an Orthodox Jew who, risking her family's rejection and marginalisation, decides to marry an African American man. The personae of McBride's mother dominates the entire memoir and, in this way, challenges the thesis that male memoirs and autobiographies display only solitary, male-oriented selves. In 2008 Ta Nehisi Coates published his memoir *The Beautiful Struggle: A Father, Two Sons, and an Unlikely Road to Manhood* where he pays tribute to his father Paul and reminisces on different figures who crossed his path and led him to his own self-understanding. Trevor Noah's memoir follows the same path: his *Born a Crime* (2016) is a story of the boy's relationship with his Xhosa-speaking, fearless, rebellious, and deeply religious mother. She is as present on the memoir's pages as the author. Just these three examples counter the theory that male autobiography or memoir focuses exclusively on male ego and self, excluding the Other(s). The autobiographies by James McBride, Ta Nehisi Coates and Trevor Noah display males' selves turned towards Others (mother figures, specifically speaking) and shun the portrayal of their subjectivities as hyper-masculine, lonely islands.

However, if pseudoscientists such as Otto Weininger defended the idea that women lacked a coherent, unbroken identity, it might be a risky undertaking to insist that one of the main characteristics of female autobiography is the fragmentary, incoherent, and discontinuous self. Perhaps, by wanting to differentiate women's writing from men's, feminist theorists did fall into a trap of marginalising women anew. And it might prove beneficial for the theory of autobiography and feminist reading of life-narratives to re-read male autobiographies and memoirs in search for signs of femaleness and relatedness or, in other words, humanity shared by both men and women.

Another comprehensive work devoted to the subject of autobiographies written by women appeared two years after the publication of Stanton's book on female autobiography. Estelle Jelinek's *The Tradition of Women's Autobiography: From Antiquity to Present* (1986) brings yet another contribution to the academic knowledge in the field. In fact, Jelinek traces the history of women's self-referential writing starting with the earliest known records of Roman memoir, studies the autobiographical female narratives throughout the 17th and 18th Centuries

and concludes her work at the second half of the 20th Century with the analysis of Kate Millet's work. As she herself admits, her approach toward autobiographies is literary:

> (…) for I treat each autobiography as a literary work. Personality and writing skill are what shape autobiography, and it is the final product that I describe, without judging the accuracy or objectivity of the narrative. I assume that the 'self' portrayed in each work is as unified and accurate (or not) as the writer projects and that the self-knowledge provided is as reliable as the author wants or is able to present, just as the protagonist of a novel is as unified and as reliable as the author to create. (Jelinek, 1986: xi).

The above quotation is important because it reveals an interesting approach towards autobiography in general and female autobiography in particular. Jelinek claims that to her, autobiography is a narrative/linguistic product and the self created through the text must not be judged for its accuracy or credibility. As a matter of fact, Jelinek admits that any autobiographer should relish authorial freedom to create his/her autobiographical self as he/she deems adequate to the purpose. In this way she admits that an autobiographical act is, at the same time, a performative one. The writer chooses to portray himself or herself the way he/she deems best. The factuality and accurateness might not be the most relevant aspects of life-narrative. What counts most is the final, linguistic, and literary effect.

It should be emphasized that Jelinek's work corroborates the findings Stanton mentioned in her *The Female Autograph*. Women do tend to focus on private aspects such as family, close friends, domestic sphere as opposed to public one. Again, it should be reiterated that this is not a general rule as there are women's autobiographies highlighting mainly the public aspect of their lives, especially if we refer to women activists, suffragettes, and so on. Nevertheless, there seems to be another common denominator in those texts. Often women feel obliged to apologise for writing their autobiographies, as if self-referential narratives were a sign of egotism and self-indulgence, traits that are culturally unacceptable in women (at least not in certain times and cultures). Another conclusion, like the one at which Stanton arrived is that women, in contrast to men who display a self-confident, coherent, and one-dimensional individuality, portray a self-image that points at their fragmentation, sense of loneliness and alienation, of being cut off from the society and limited by their female condition. As Jelinek claims: "(…) they feel the need for authentication, to prove their self-worth" (Jelinek, *ibid.*, p. xiii).

Both Stanton and Jelinek wrestled with the same problem, including a lack of sufficient critical material to substantiate their claims and hypotheses. This proves again that with the advent of feminism, indispensable work had to be done to restore female "storied selves", to borrow Eakin's (1999) expression, and unearth names that had been buried by official history and patriarchal culture.

In the last decades more unearthing by female scholars and work dedicated to the female/feminist perspectives on autobiography has been carried out. There have been endeavours to propose new definitions that would substitute or, at least, complete the term and meaning of autobiography which, according to many women scholars, ceased to be an adequate term and form to express new and not masculine-oriented subjectivities, selves, and lives. If women, according to feminist theories, displayed different selves, then the universal model of the self, adopted and disseminated through male autobiographies and criticism proved not to be a valid norm for women anymore. If freedom and the right to pick words to name the world around us removed women from the margin of society and grants them visibility, as Audre Lorde insisted upon, then coinage of new terms is not only a personal but also a political act.

In what concerns new terms and attempts at coining new concepts, Leigh Gilmore (1994) proposes another term to describe autobiography as well as the way of reading and studying it: "autobiographics" is the author's response to fill the void of criticism on female autobiography. She claims that criticism developed during the 90s contributed to the creation of the binary between female and male texts. Women's selves so far have never been considered as representatives of Western selfhood and that concept has been appropriated by the Western male – a poet, a scholar, a hero, an individual and a self-made man unshattered by doubts, incoherence, and instability. Women's autobiographical texts were not considered true autobiographies but rather life-narratives following no rules, no form, and no shape. These narratives, according to the author, never fulfilled the criteria of autobiographical canon since they were often written as acts of resistance against hegemonic discourses that relegated women to invisibility and defined them as non-entities and "Other".

The feminist response to such interpretation of women's autobiographies was to propose an interpretation of women's texts where the self had to be the exact opposite of male's, i.e., discontinuous, fragmentary, Other-oriented, and incoherent. Thus, female autobiographies present a challenge to the Western model of both the self and autobiography.

Following this line of thought, the term the author proposes serves to name the female experience[12], female narratives and stands for a new approach to "technologies of autobiography" (Gilmore, *ibid.*, p. 5). Gilmore poses an important question: how does autobiography as a genre participate in politics of the production of culturally acceptable selves? The issue of experience is treated carefully when the scholar reflects on the fact that it cannot be stripped of its historical and political context and daily praxis. Experience could become a weapon in ideological fight and become a tool of exclusion of other women (for example women of colour or from the so-called "Third World"). Indeed, it is well known that feminism has been accused by postcolonial women of excluding non-white women not only from the movement but from the construction of epistemologies of non-Western women and their feminist practices and comprehending experience (Mohanty, 1984; Oyewumi, 1997, 2010). Both scholars, Chandra Mohanty[13] and Oyeronke Oyewumi[14], from India and Nigeria respectively, dedicated their academic work to question the Western feminists' understanding of post-colonial women as only victims of patriarchal oppressive practises, women deprived of power, agency, and tools to resist or subvert their cultural and political situation. In fact, these post-colonial scholars put blame on Western feminist academia and activism for romanticizing "Third World" women.

Deep cultural differences between women in different geographical, political, and cultural locations stand at the centre of Gilmore's attention. She arrives at the conclusion mentioned earlier by Laura Marcus that gender as a category is insufficient when analysing

[12] It must be noted that feminists diverge considerably when it comes to the term "experience". While in the beginning of the Second-Wave Feminism "experience" was taken for granted and symbolised a terrain of great import for women who sought, through true personal and intimate experience, to retrieve their lives and stories, later on the concept has come under certain criticism. Joan Scott, for example, in her seminal essay "Experience" (1992) interrogates experience as the basis for self-knowledge. According to the author, experience is not a reliable foundation for the construction of subjectivity and, by extension, selfhood. It is not possible to discuss identity solely on the basis of experience without falling into a trap of essentialism. Instead of taking the word "experience" for granted, Scott calls for re-thinking of the term and its functions within social sciences, particularly history. This involves work on experience as not self-evident and self-explanatory but a contestable term, in need of re-interpretation.

[13] Chandra Talpade Mohanty dedicated a number of works to scrutinise the problem of Western academia approach to post-colonial women in India and elsewhere. In her "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses" (1984) or *Feminism Without Borders* (2003), she denounces the Western hegemonic approach and discriminatory practises which portrayed post-colonial women as hapless victims of Indian or African patriarchal practises and traditions.

[14] Oyeronke Oyewumi focuses her academic interests on questions related to the way gendered discourses in the West created a figure of African, Third-World woman and ascribed to her typically Western notions of gender and gender-related victimisation. Her most famous and award-winning book is *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* published in 1997.

experience and writing. Women who write autobiographies, especially black and non-Western women often challenge Western feminist notions of womanhood and selfhood. Instead of enacting it and fitting it into their lives, they simply question its validity. What is also innovative in Gilmore's concept and philosophy of approaching the genre of autobiography is that she re-reads male life-narratives to verify whether they really display a coherent, stable self. She aims to comprehend what makes those texts symbols of male continuity and coherence. How did canonical autobiographies written by men become so strongly associated with an ungendered, unmarked, and disembodied self? She suggests that the concept of technology of autobiography stands behind the construction of culturally and politically available subjectivities. Male scholarship is not without guilt as it read (when it did not ignore) women's autobiographies through the lens of its times (and masculine bias). Those texts which were not ignored and deserved male scholars' attention, were treated rather poorly. It must be remembered that initially autobiography did not score high on the academic scale of literary genres. Then, women's literary production generally did not spark interest or fascination among literary critics. So, when the genre of autobiography and memoir was associated to women, no academic enthusiasm could follow on the part of male scholars. Lesser literary forms such as diaries, journals and memoirs were ascribed to women, while canonical autobiographies were considered to have been written by men and scholars wanted to see a universal Self represented by white, Western, middle-class man.

Knowing that autobiography is a powerful tool with which subjectivities are constructed, Gilmore challenges the basis of women's autobiography where women were fossilised into stiff categories and who, in their narratives, enacted the model imposed by early feminist theory. She strongly criticises such a model where two terms and concepts "women" and "autobiography" seem to be ready-made ideologies only waiting to be discovered and confirmed in selected female autobiographies. She argues that when critics juxtapose "women" and "autobiography", they already construct, *a priori*, a category which must fulfil feminist critics' expectations. Meanwhile, autobiography can become the most powerful tool with which a woman author can construct her own identity and self – true or false – depending on her needs and purpose. Gilmore emphasises the performative[15] dimension of autobiographical narrative when she claims:

[15] Author's emphasis.

> (…) autobiographical subject is produced not by experience but by autobiography. This specification does not diminish the autobiographer; rather, it situates her or him as an agent in autobiographical production. For the discourses of truth and identity are varied and complex and when autobiographer wishes, for example, to represent herself in opposition to a certain standard of 'truth', I would argue that she knows what she's doing rhetorically and is not merely telling what happened. (*ibid.*, p. 25).

Here she makes a move towards textual construction of the subject whose agency is translated into autobiographical writing. The act of writing is, thus, the act of performing – an active process where the self is being forged. She, the autobiographer, might choose to create her narrative self which does not have to be strongly linked to experience and *bios*. Self-construction, then, is a rhetorical gesture, sometimes divorced of its *bios* element. The final result depends entirely on the author (at least in theory if she is free to act/write out of her volition and suffers no external pressure) and on what she wishes to render visible in her text. She also has the right to silence those parts of her life and experience which she desires to remain inaccessible. This was the case of, for example, Zora Neal Hurston who was even accused of being insincere in her treatment of her life. She chose to remain silent on various aspect of her life, for instance in what concerned her sexual or artistic life but her silence only unnerved critics and readers. Even though critics say she was unwilling to write her autobiography, when she finally did, she had a final say as to what was included in the text concerning her private life.

Gilmore further explains that the term she proposed (autobiographics) is a way to approach the autobiographies written by women. It is an interpretative strategy to read "outlaw" narratives, excluded from the canon, as worthy of all critical attention. These are often autobiographical texts which implode the concept of traditional autobiography and contribute to the subversion of canonical genre abolishing normative forms of writing and normative subjectivities. All narratives that refuse to conform to traditional autobiographical rules and which blend and mix different styles of life-narratives forming hybrid texts are included in the category of autobiographics. They also include non-normative selfhoods which bring about rupture with the stable, coherent, and unitary self. They open space to discursive contradictions, shifting and even conflicting identities, destabilising the genre and refusing to follow its traditional principles. So, autobiographics means not only a way of

writing but also a way of reading and interpreting autobiographical narratives bringing to the surface non-linearity, resistance and even subversion as methods of self-representation:

> Autobiographics gives initial conceptual precedence to positioning the subject, to recognizing the shifting sands of identity on which theories of autobiography build, and to describing 'identity' and the networks of identification. (…) I think of autobiographics operating within texts that have not been seen as autobiographies and occurring in the margins of hegemonic discourses within cultural texts, in the social spaces carved in the interstices of institutions, and so it is here that the terms of a different reading and retextualization of the subject of autobiography must be located (*ibid*. p.42).

Gilmore's concept and understanding of autobiography goes against the grain of dominant discourses in the critique of the genre. It is much more inclusive than the theories proposed by early critics of autobiography, such as Gusdorf, Olney, Spengemann or Lejeune and its important value lies in the inclusion of texts which, traditionally, would not be even considered worthy of attention. In this way, the whole study and critique of autobiographical writings benefitted from this new approach. Gilmore's seminal work discussed above demonstrated also that knowledge is not out there to be collected and written down. Epistemology is constructed from a certain perspective and vantage point. It involves, inevitably, relations of power and even prejudices. It mirrors various factors such as culture, religious belief or lack of thereof, ideological background of scholars who practise theorising. Male scholars did not succeed in evading discriminatory theses about women's literary production but neither did female scholars. Categories such as gender, ethnicity, age, or sexual orientation impact not only the writing itself but also the art of interpretation and epistemology. This interesting point regarding the way criticism is made is quite rarely made by scholars themselves (Cosslett *et.al.,* 2000).

In what concerns new terms and definitions proposed by feminist critics dissatisfied with the current state of affairs in the area of life-writing, Caren Kaplan (1998) speaks of "outlaw" genres when she refers to texts which Leigh Gilmore defined as autobiographics. Drawing on Jacques Derrida's criticism of the law of the genre[16] which strangles and limits

[16] The essay "The Law of Genre" ("La loi du genre") given originally as a lecture in Strasbourg in 1979 by Jacques Derrida proposed that genre has a role of imposing norms on literary practises and the genres should not be mixed, otherwise one will achieve monstrosity or anomaly. Once we defined a genre, we have, at the

literary texts trying to compartmentalise them often to their detriment, Kaplan discusses genres which, traditionally, have been refused the status of autobiography and, as such, have been downplayed by the critics. She enumerates various genres which, according to her, seem most adequate to express non-normative selves: prison memoir, testimonial literature, ethnographic writing, biomythography, cultural autobiography and, finally, regulative psychobiography. She explains that:

> I juxtapose these alternative genres not as a comprehensive list or complete map of global literary production that refers to 'autobiographical' tradition, but as an indication of a variety of reading and writing strategies in operation as the law of the genre intersects with the postcolonial, transnational conditions. (Kaplan, *ibid.*, p. 209)

Her effort is to map other literary genres, often written by "Third World", postcolonial and Black women who demonstrate their validity and significance on the literary scene of self-referential narratives which break with the traditional forms and open up spaces for new and unexplored forms of self-expression.

As can be seen from the above review of feminist approaches toward autobiography, the phenomenon is very complex, and the field has produced significant academic works which allowed to theorise about autobiography written by women and comprehend multi-layered problematics researchers confront when faced with autobiography and feminism. The matters of self-writing, autobiography as a primary tool for self-expression, subjectivity, experience, and elusiveness of definitions illuminate feminist theories applied to autobiography. Without any doubt, feminist perspectives helped raise questions and uncertainties that had never been taken into consideration before by proponents of traditional approaches to autobiography who had omitted, ignored, and dismissed the female vision of self and everything the female-centred perspectives imply. Discussion of the above approaches, terms and concepts helps to comprehend how ambiguous the area of autobiography is and that no clear-cut conclusions can be reached. Scholars need to proceed with caution when theorising women's autobiographical production lest they fall into a trap of essentialising women, this time not on biological but cultural basis. Gender, clearly, cannot be the only aspect of analysis of literary texts. Historical, political, and cultural

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same time, set the limits on the very genre. This leads us to the conclusion that "genre" is, in itself, a self-limiting concept.

contextualisation and situatedness of a writing subject must be obligatorily taken into account. Nevertheless, the field of Feminist Studies is open to further insights and reflections on how women construct their narrative selves and perhaps the question is no more whether they do it differently from men. It needs to be asked how social constructs such as race do impact the way women (and men) re-invent themselves and fight identities that had been imposed on them by dominant cultures.

2.2. Early American Autobiography: historical and cultural contextualisation.

Before the discussion of African American autobiography can follow, there is a pressing need to outline some characteristics of American autobiography in a more generalised sense because undoubtedly, Black autobiography in America cannot be viewed separately from the literary American traditions and cultural circumstances that shaped the genre on the continent. Whether African American autobiography is considered as a sub-section of the American self-writing forms or whether it is ascribed an autonomous status, to look at the African American autobiography without previous contextualisation would be to place the genre in a historical and cultural vacuum. Early scholarship on American autobiographical forms highlighted the fact that American autobiographers have used American myths, i.e., assumptions, shared experiences and beliefs to practise self-scrutiny and self-portrayal. In its most general form, the American myth traces the human path, or in other words, pilgrimage, from imperfection to the state of near perfection (Spengemann, 1965, *op. cit.*, p. 503).

For different cultural groups imperfection meant different things. For Puritans it meant the state of sin and depravity inherited from Biblical Adam and to attain the state of perfection meant to enter communion with God and secure ultimate grace. Rationalists saw imperfection in intellectual terms rather than spiritual; happiness pursued through reason was the desired perfect human condition. Transcendentalists, in their turn, sought to unite themselves with Nature where their spirit could flourish freely, unencumbered by depraved society. Still, some other groups, like the 19th Century activists whose purpose was to reform society, saw perfection in collective Utopian harmony. Would any of those myths apply to enslaved African Americans who, since their arrival on American soil were marginalised as half brutes and sub-humans? Probably not, since what they sought first and foremost was to attain freedom through various means such as literacy and bodily liberation. The concept of

the "American myth"[17] cannot be reduced to a single dimension because cultural values are subject to constant change and evolution; they are created not by the nation as a whole but rather by specific groups with their particular problems, values and aims. When an author writes an autobiography, they fit into one of the myths, roles and models of individuality predetermined by the culture. In this way the author accepts a role and establishes a connection with the current culture. This is an observation already made by Karl Weintraub (1978, *op. cit.*.) in his research on autobiography and different role models throughout the centuries and cultures. Spengemann, too, admits that to write an autobiography is to seek a model and an anti-model that would suit the autobiographer best. Authors of autobiographies can either choose to embrace the values or reject them altogether.

Autobiographical discourses produced on the American continent did not commence, however, with the advent of the Anglo-Saxons. In the same way, the history of the continent did not start with the discovery of the land by white Europeans. Previously, indigenous peoples already had their oral stories, legends, myths, and songs. In oral culture, voice and movement, dance, for instance, carried important messages and values contributing to the collective development and transmission of history to further generations. As Shea (1991) argues, autobiographical narratives were mainly performative at that time. Only with the arrival of explorers and travellers and the irresistible desire to create the "New World" and the "New Man" did novel ways of self-invention begin to be registered. Captain John Smith (1580-1631), an English soldier, explorer, admiral, and author left behind a number of historical records and maps. He can be considered the author who created a myth of himself as a man of courage and an exemplary hero. Through his narratives he re-invented himself to subscribe to the culturally desirable model of an authentic man: autonomous and independent (Shea, *ibid.,* p. 30). Such a model proposes the role of man as a bearer of light among barbarian, uncivilised peoples. The trope of the Christian saviour and courageous man risking his life to bring civilisation to America and fulfil his mission is a recurrent one throughout autobiographical accounts of the Founding Fathers of the United States. *Diary of Cotton Mather* (1681-1724) is one of the most classical examples of such narratives. The author penned many works whose purpose was to leave a moral and educational legacy to

[17] In Mateusz Bogdanowicz's 2014 article "What Is the American Myth Really Like?" the following definition of the "American Myth" is proposed: "the sum of views, visions, images, values, beliefs and opinions presenting the United Stated as a positive country and Americans, as people, in a good light" (p. 15.). The article further discusses the strongly attached to the myth certain values such as the promise of a better future (in financial terms), optimism, individualism, freedom, remoteness and distance and democracy.

the next generation of Puritans and where the link between the "I" and history is strongly established. Other examples of autobiographical narratives woven into Puritan Founders' texts are William Bradford's *Of Plymouth Plantation* written between 1630 and 1651 and John Wintrop's *Journal* covering the years 1630-1649. Other public figures such as Thomas Shepard[18], Increase Mather[19] or Jonathan Edwards[20] also wrote their chronicles and journals aiming to register daily events, the history of their colonies, adversities, illnesses, and successes in making American continent their own. So, the earliest forms of autobiography, not necessarily as it is understood today, emerged in exploration and travellers' tales to describe and publicise the American continent.

American autobiography primarily written in the 17th Century showcases its religious and spiritual dimensions. As Robert Sayre (1977) refers to the Puritan tradition of autobiography: "Puritans also had a sense of their lives unfolding within a grand cosmic drama" (p. 249). The term "Puritan" was coined around 1590. Puritans were divided into two groups: the group of non-separatists who were dissatisfied with the Reformation of the Church of England but decided to stay within its structures and advance more reforms, and the so-called Dissenters who considered the Church of England so corrupt, rotten, and excessively influenced by the Catholic Church that they resolved to leave it. The second group supported the idea of going to great lengths to secure the purity of their faith and practises. The Puritans who migrated to the New World, particularly New England, and founded the Massachusetts Bay Colony belonged to the second, dissenting, group. Puritans who settled in New England aimed to emphasise individual and collective conformity to the teachings of the Bible and ascribed great significance to self-examination and nearly uncompromising responsibility for one's deeds and decisions. Puritan religious philosophy highlighted the personal election to salvation – predestination was a strong belief which impacted their spiritual confessions and anxieties related to doubts whether one would be saved or not. This uncertainty was deepened by their religious conviction that human nature

[18] Thomas Shepard (1605-1649) was an American Puritan minister and a figure of renown in colonial New England: http://digitalpuritan.net/thomas-shepard/

[19] Increase Mather (1639-1723) was a Boston Congregational minister, author and educator. He was the son of Richard Mather, son-in-law of John Cotton and father of Cotton Mather: https://www.britannica.com/biography/Increase-Mather

[20] Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) was a philosopher of the British American Puritanism, a mastermind behind the religious revival "Great Awakening" and one of the forerunners of Protestant missionary expansion in the 19th Century: https://www.britannica.com/biography/Jonathan-Edwards

was sinful and worthless (Ahlstrom, 1972). Spiritual growth could not be attained by human effort at all – the future after one's death depended solely on God's grace.

Thus, the first authors of American autobiography tended to diminish themselves before God when writing about their spiritual tribulations. What is called today the "American exemplary self" has its roots in spiritual confessions of the Puritan clergymen and governors of the first colonies. Additionally, because Puritans were held accountable by their religious community in order to be accepted into the congregation, they had to expose their path from sin to conversion and, to some extent, practice self-flagellation in public (in textual terms, naturally). The following quotation illustrates well the point: "The Puritans ripped up consciences in the pulpit and urged self-trials in the [prayer] closet in service to the twin tasks of 'self-suspicion' and 'self-examination'". (Packer *in* Badgett, 2018: 30). Moreover, this visceral mistrust boosted the drive to remain watchful lest they fall into the trap of an unfaithful heart. Thomas Shepard's chief aim in his major writings was to root out any signs of moral self-deception and secure true converts to the faith and candidates to salvation. It is then easy to imagine that spiritual confessions and self-writing at the time had only one possible script to follow: repentance, self-exposure and hunting down any signs of an unfaithful and deceitful heart.

Autobiographical authors believed sincerely that, by doing their self-examination they could attain true self-knowledge which would authorise them to speak to others and on behalf of others. The act of public self-exposure guaranteed them epistemology of their selves. The self was intimately linked to a theological point of view and was unable to separate itself from a religious vision of the surrounding world. The models of self-writing were imposed on individuals by rigid religious norms of self-examination. It is also important to note that, in its early version, American autobiography was composed mainly by public figures, members of the clergy and judges. Sacvan Bercovitch observed aptly in his full-length book on the Puritan soul *The Puritan Origins of the American Self*: "Selfhood appears as a state to be overcome, obliterated; an identity is asserted through an act of submission to a transcendent absolute" (Bercovitch, 1975: 13). While in the 17th Century England autobiography was diverse and multifaceted, in America one model of self-writing was suggested, if not imposed, and culturally accepted. There were, however, very few exceptions to the rule, individuals who tried to break with the iron grip of Puritan thought. Anne Hutchinson and Roger Williams appear as examples of free thought in a scenery completely dominated by religious autocracy:

> The minister at Salem, a determined Christian named Roger Williams, questioned whether any mortal could determine the spiritual purity of other people's souls. Concerned that hypocrisy would sneak into God's churches, he advocated a rigid separation of saints from sinners, of church and state – a logical idea, given Puritan theories about perfectibility, but one totally impractical in a society seeking religious uniformity. For his troubles, Williams was banished by the Massachusetts authorities. He fled to Rhode Island in 1635 and established another colony committed to the principles of religious toleration. […] While Puritan theology denied that good works could bring salvation, the New England orthodoxy could not allow moral standards to lapse even in affairs of this world. Thus when Anne Hutchinson, a member of the Boston congregation, challenged the ministers' emphasis on moral behaviour over spiritual purity, the Massachusetts establishment moved to suppress her beliefs. As in Williams' case, however, Hutchinson's position – known as 'Antinomianism' – was difficult to denounce because it simply represented a logical extension of widely held Puritan ideas. Such theological consistency did not protect this woman, however; after a lengthy trial, she was expelled from the church and banished from the colony in 1638. (Carroll, 1985: 63-64).

Before the advent of secular autobiography in America, particularly the canonical works of Benjamin Franklin or Thomas Jefferson, the above kind of autobiographical writing dominated the American literary scene and left an imprint on the American psyche and cultural views of autobiography. Thomas Couser (1979) argues that American autobiography owes much to the earliest autobiographies shaped by the Puritan culture where the author's limited freedom and, at least, theoretical drive to self-exposure mingled. "Required to serve community goals, all Puritan literature tended to be theological in content, didactic in purpose, plain in style and allegorical in technique" (Couser, 1979, *ibid.,* p. 10). Puritan autobiography reveals its dimension of auto-didactic diary/chronicle but also mixes other forms such as biographical elements. Full-time narrative was a frequent form as it gave authors the opportunity to expose their entire religious life from the narrative's beginning to end. The act of writing such as full-life narrative was driven by a desire to leave a moral and pedagogical tool for posterity, particularly children and/or religious community. It served as a model to follow for future members of the community. The man of God penned his experiences for the edification of future Christians and to pave the way to God: the reader was expected to identify with the author's efforts to deserve God's grace

and, if possible, to follow in his steps. Thomas Shepard, for instance, dedicates his narrative, *My Birth and Life* (1646-1649) to his son and, thusly, he wishes to secure not only his own transcendence but also his son's salvation. It is his moral and fatherly duty to transmit Christian values to his son: he nearly obliges his son to lead a moral life and fill in the previously, ready-to-follow model of life. As a matter of fact, an individual had his life-path already established for him and no deviation from this path was admitted. Spiritual integrity was valued over individual or psychological one and the discovery of meaning was one of the primary goals of Puritan accounts of their religious life.

The next century brought new shifts in American autobiography. Autobiographers of the 18th Century were much less concerned with religiosity and did not identify their selves and lives with God as they did in the 17th Century. The three most studied canonical writers of that Century, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and Benjamin Franklin established a link between personal history and the history of the nation. They too apologised for writing autobiographies but justified their actions by claiming their mission, secular this time, benefited the nation. They also witnessed changing times, maturation of the American idea of nation, its mission and fulfilment of ethical and patriotic values. Benjamin Franklin wrote his autobiography in the same period as Rousseau and both writers saw themselves as unique citizens, freed from the constraints of their respective cultures, although liberation took place in opposite directions in both cases. James Cox observes the following:

> Franklin, in concentrating in the externality of his past, had shown largely by implication in his style and structure the conversion of his inner self into a social and political self. Thus, his 'success' is an exemplary narrative implicitly depicting the sublimation of private energies into social action. Rousseau's experiential narration is almost the inverse of Franklin's. He discloses his progressive alienation from society – the long process by which he withdrew by stages from society to his island in a lake. His island is a perfect equivalent of the embattled, moated, insular, present consciousness which at once generates and releases the past which has grown inside him. (1971: 264)

All three, Jefferson, Adams and Franklin informed their readers of the motives behind writing their accounts. Jefferson wished to leave information for his family and keep notes for his own reference, Adams wished to describe his character while Franklin desired to leave his account to his son, William Franklin, governor of New Jersey:

> Imagining it may be equally agreeable to you to know of the circumstances of my life, many of which you are yet unacquainted with, and expecting a week's uninterrupted leisure in my present country retirement, I sit down to write them for you. (Franklin, 1952: 3).

The autobiography of Benjamin Franklin is one of the best known and analysed works in American literary studies. Nearly every highly regarded scholar specialised in American literature had something to say about Franklin's autobiography (Pangle, 1988; Sayre, 1963; Cox, 1971, Deniz, 2019). It has been hailed as a canonical work, an autobiography exposing the American exemplary self, an interesting pedagogical text, and a testimony of the epoch. As Steven Forde (1992) argues in his article on Benjamin Franklin under the title "Benjamin Franklin's Autobiography and the Education of America", the *Autobiography* had a curious life: first it was meant as a memoir, then took the shape of a public record of a public figure's life and obtained immense success. It undoubtedly shaped American culture and impacted the way American individualism is seen now. Franklin was criticised for being a libertine, a narcissist and morally shallow (Forde, *ibid.*, p. 357), but his text cannot be lightly dismissed, considering Franklin moulded the way future "successful autobiographies" were written and sought after. *Autobiography* represents Franklin's concern with education and the attempt to shape American character. Although, it is not spiritual in its message and structure, it often refers to morality, the issue of a life well lived to the best of one's capacities[21]. Wealth, industriousness, and virtue are emphasised as valuable choices in life and Franklin's example demonstrates how to reach those goals. The emphasis on worldly success, the contrast between Franklin's initial ragged physical appearance and his posterior prosperity and the reputation he basked in are conspicuous characteristics of his narrative. It must be remembered, of course, that through autobiographical account one creates their self the way they wish to be perceived and remembered. As has been highlighted in earlier parts of this chapter, there is no transparent and straight correlation between the lived life and the textual self. Autobiography, as should be remembered,

[21] This tendency to describe one's life as a success and to leave a typically American heritage to further generations is illustrated in Andrew Carnegie's self-narrative*, The Autobiography of Andrew Carnegie and the Gospel of Wealth*, originally published in 1920, where he glorifies the financial success and demonstrates that the American Dream, so sought after by millions arriving on the American soil, is perfectly attainable under the condition that an individual dedicates himself/herself totally to work and the ideal of success comprehended mainly in economical and societal terms.

displays its performative nature. In this context, Franklin's autobiography should be treated as yet another, brilliant in its result, account of the successful self which has become an example for generations to come.

There is also something paradoxical in autobiographies written by Franklin or Jefferson which have come to symbolise American autobiography of the 18th Century, and which is visible in the tension between self-effacing subjectivity and, at the same time, attempts to explore and present one's self as unique and exemplary. Ruth Banes explains this paradox in the following way:

> (…) John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and Benjamin Franklin attempted to efface their autobiographical selves. At the same time, paradoxically, they connected individual history and identity with a larger purpose. (…) Adams, Jefferson, and Franklin addressed a community which did not possess a shared set of sacred principles or religious beliefs. In writing an autobiography, each emphasized purposes more significant than himself. By emulating the spiritual autobiography, Adams, Jefferson, and Franklin emphasized universality of their principles, rather than individual importance. (…) Adams and Jefferson had explained how their own views were part of the American Revolution and public policy. Franklin had shown that one could rise from poverty and obscurity to influence and affluence with a bit of discipline and faith. For secular autobiographers, God's purpose had been reinterpreted to justify secular American beliefs and values. (Banes, 1982: 237).

All of the three, thus, showed themselves as free individuals who, although worked or even existed to educate their nation, could weave their textual selves as they wished, following their desires and plans. All of them worked hard to build the nation which they believed was the Land of the Free. This shall stand in stark contrast with the Black people who had to tear away every single inch of their freedom proving in their narratives they were, in the first place, human beings.

2.3. The Unfree in the Land of the Free: African American attempts at gaining humanity and freedom through Letters.

During the time when Franklin, Adams, Jefferson and Woolman[22] wrote their selves into textual significance and took pains to build the land of the free, a group of enslaved Africans transported to American soil took equal pains to safeguard their humanity. Literacy and the need to learn the master's tongue were seen as the primary and most important tools to attain longed for freedom and any trace of White acknowledgement. Between 1760 and 1865, so-called slave literature appeared. Its goal was not only to prove their author's existence but, mainly, to meet the political requirement to denounce slavery. Henry Louis Gates Jr. (1988) claims that race became the mark of difference in those writings. Also, this literature, up to the end of the Civil War (1865) in particular, presents an interesting trace, which Louis Gates Jr. calls "the trope of the talking book".

As mentioned before, it was essential for Black people to assert their humanity and the only means they thought they had to do it was through literacy. They had to occupy a position of "speaking subjects", even before they could establish themselves as subject at all, destroying in this way their status as objects. Writing was seen as a prerogative of civilised peoples who had attained their highest level of humanity, while orality was deeply devalued in Western culture. This is exactly what Black people desired: to achieve human status through letters and literacy. After Descartes, reason was associated with the production of text and the lack of written history or literature was seen as evidence of the inferiority of African peoples who functioned for centuries through orality. The Biblical connotation of the Word (Logos) as God but also Wisdom and Truth helped establish the privileged status of the written word/text. Thus, peoples who were unfamiliar with the written word, could not possibly deserve to be free and considered of equal standing with Western citizens. Hence, enslaved and non-enslaved Blacks in America became intent on asserting their humanity only through written word/Logos.[23] Enslaved authors such as James Gronniosaw

[22] It is worth noting that John Woolman, a Quaker minister, was a staunch opposer of slavery and protested against it in his own way by refusing to write bills of sale, wills, and other documents directly related to slavery. He also boycotted all products associated with indentured labour: https://woolmanmemorial.org/?page_id=644

[23] *Logos* has many meanings in Western philosophy, religion and culture. *Logos* is a Greek word denoting "word", "discourse" or "reason". The concept related to *Logos* dates back to Heracleitus who discerned in the cosmic process a logos that would correspond to reason in humans. In the Stoic school, *logos* was defined as an active and spiritual element which traversed all reality. The meaning of Logos acquires special significance

(*A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukasaw Gronniosaw*, first edition from 1770), John Marrant (*A Narrative of The Lord's Wonderful Dealings with John Marrant, a Bl*ack, 1785), Olaudah Equiano (*The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano,* 1789) or John Jea (*The Life, History, and Unparalleled Sufferings of John Jea, the African Preacher*, 1811) were all determined to place their voices in text. Theirs are the first African American autobiographical narratives where the above-mentioned trope of the talking book is noticeable. In Gronniosaw's case, he is presented with a prayer book in Dutch which, as he claims, refuses to speak to him (because it is written in Dutch, a language Gronniosaw did not know by that time). This silence of the Dutch book symbolises the black man's exclusion from the Logos, the (Western) Word and World. The book does not speak to Gronniosaw because, as a black man, he is seen as sub-human, deprived of knowledge of letters and thus, mute. So, his Blackness stands in the way to humanity and inclusion in the (white) culture (Gates, 1986).

The peak of slave narratives took place around twenty years before slavery was abolished (1865). Most of those texts witness the inhuman treatment of Blacks, sold and dumped into gutters if their bodies proved to be of no more use to slaveholders. Clearly, slave narratives were also instrumentalised when used in a heated debate to end slavery and their primary role was to portray how the whole system functioned. Still, as a genre, slave narratives set a tone for future Black letters because it proved to be so compelling, resistant, and ready to (re)claim Black humanity through letters. Many of those narratives promoted Christian values, rejecting at the same time reductive "white" Christianity as opposed to the Christianity of Jesus (inclusive and profoundly humane). White Christianity was strongly associated with hypocrisy and moral decay – this tendency will be present also in the 20th Century where, in some texts of Black Panther members, religion professed by White America will be made responsible for all inhuman treatment of Black Americans[24].

In many slave narratives the author has no knowledge of his/her real name or date of birth which impacts the construction of his/her identity. One's name given by his/her parents is the anchor of identity and when a name is given by a master, then the identity is

in Christian philosophy where *Logos* = Word and Word is God. In the Gospel according to John, Jesus Christ is described as Logos/Word (Word made flesh). See: https://www.britannica.com/topic/logos

[24] The theme of "white" Christianity as a symbol of oppression and hypocrisy is analysed in Assata Shakur's *Assata. An Autobiography* (1988), Anne Moody's *Coming of Age in Mississippi* (1968) or Malcolm X's *Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965), among others.

false, imposed by White society and culture. It becomes a prosthesis of the original identity, a mask hiding the real self. What counts in Black slave narratives is the act of having been born: faced with the impossibility of knowing their real name or having to adopt their slave masters' names, Black subjects assert their existence by the very fact they were born. Thus the "I was born" sentence is the anchor of the self and identity. It becomes the basis for a life story worth telling the world. As Stephen Butterfield noticed in one of the earliest academic works on Black autobiography *Black Autobiography in America*, published in 1974, slave narratives display the movement from anonymity which erases the self to self-conscience and self-knowledge. It heads to self-realization and freedom in direct opposition to the values displayed by slavocracy. Moreover, there is a trope of a mask worn before the white person: this mask was expected to hide true feelings. The trickster trope is strongly rooted in African American literature and culture, a mask-wearing figure whose purpose was to outwit the white person, often stronger and dominant:

> The records left by nineteenth-century observers of slavery and by the masters themselves indicate that a significant number of slaves lied, cheated, stole, feigned illness, loafed, pretended to misunderstand the orders they were given, put rocks in the bottom of their cotton baskets in order to meet their quota, broke their tools, burned their masters' property, mutilated themselves in order to escape work, took indifferent care of the crops they were cultivating, and mistreated the livestock placed in their care to the extent that masters often felt it necessary to use the less efficient mules rather than horses since the former could better withstand the brutal treatment of the slaves. (Levine, 1977: 11).

This attitude led to the creation of a hybrid personhood whose primary goals were self-defence and maintenance of Black dignity. The personhood behind the mask is authentic, the Other, symbolised by the mask is purely theatrical and performative. Curiously, some slave narratives, like Frederick Douglass' descriptions of these defensive strategies and masks, causes performativity to double – not only is it acted out but also described. Frederick Douglass produced three autobiographies: *The Narrative* (1845), *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1854) and *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1892). Throughout the autobiographies, especially the first two, his identity is strongly linked to resisting and fighting slavery. His is an active fight against the dehumanising effects of slavery and racism of overseers. Similarly to some 20th Century autobiographies penned by

Civil Rights activists, particularly those involved in the radical fight against racism (Malcolm X, Huey Newton[25], Bobby Seale[26] or Assata Shakur), violent resistance is a key element in Douglass' reaction to debasement. He defended and justified violence as a means of self-determination and weakening the enemy (white slaveholders). However, it must be highlighted that Douglass' approach was quite uncommon for slave narrations, which focused more on being mild and unjustly beaten without referring to violence on their part.

While former enslaved persons such as Douglass resorted to direct violence and bodily reaction to slavery, female (ex) enslaved narrators used other strategies of self-defence. Nellie McKay (1998) argues that fewer enslaved women dared confront their masters in a direct, physical way, save for Harriet Tubman or Ellen Craft. Most women, seen also as sexual bodies, subject to rape and all kinds of sexual abuse from white masters, had to find different strategies of survival and resistance. They asserted their subjectivity in a more masked and indirect way, mainly through linguistic techniques of talking back, sass and even grunting. Johnnie Stover (2003) speaks of black women's "mother tongue" – a strategy women autobiographers and enslaved narrators use to act against attempts to keep them silent. The scholar demonstrates that Black women's mother tongue is gendered. She asserts that this:

> (…) uniqueness is not a result of biology; it does not exist because a woman is female. Rather, it exists because she is a woman, a product of specific cultural, socio-political environment. Her mother tongue has developed over time – changing, shifting, and adjusting in accordance with a woman's need to find outlets for her voice in a male-dominated society. (…) This mother tongue is a combination of words, rhythms, sounds and silences that women have encoded with veiled meanings. (Stover, *ibid.*, p. 7).

Moreover, having analysed four female autobiographies, Stover concluded that women's resistance to slavery occurred through non-verbal techniques like a look, a set of lips, the way a hand moved, and the body positioned. Irony, humour, secrets and even lying were those women's strategies to survive and resist oppressors.

[25] Huey Newton's autobiography *Revolutionary Suicide* was originally published in 1973.

[26] Bobby Seale published his autobiography *A Lonely Rage: The Autobiography of Bobby Seale* in 1978.

Female scholars also underscored that one aspect in which female slave narratives differed from males' is that women focused much more on the communitarian aspect of their lives. They showed themselves as much more other-oriented than men. One of the vital arguments quoted by many researchers is that while Frederick Douglass claimed to be the only responsible for his freedom and tended to emphasise his solitary self in his success at attaining it, women narratives such as Linda Brent's refer to other people, mainly women, who appeared on their path to freedom. The role of women in Linda Brent's narrative cannot be underestimated – she finds a source of strength, courage, and a role model in her aunt Marthy. The woman becomes her sustaining force when everything around crumbles. Marthy teaches Linda resilience and has the courage to confront Mr. Flint when he tries to seduce Linda. Joanne Braxton (1989) notices that Aunt Marthy is an "enraged mother" – a black woman who is the carrier of Black female traditions, a female archetype of a hero.

Research has demonstrated that women focused more on the collective dimension of their freedom in their narratives. However, the argument regarding Frederick Douglass' masculine and heroic approach towards his freedom and self constructed in his autobiographies is countered by Celeste-Marie Bernier (2012). She claims that Douglass' last work, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* remains, until the present day, one of his most critically neglected work. The matter seems to be that the Frederick Douglass from the first period is quite different from the Frederick Douglass of the later period. There is Douglass the former enslaved, Douglass the self-made man, the labourer, the family man, the writer, the orator, the editor, the politician, etc. (*ibid*., p. 596). It is, however, in the later period that he acknowledges how his body/life had been used first by slavery and the anti-slavery movement, then by the post-war state in which it became, again, a "body of evidence", used for various political purposes. In his last work he tries to come to grips with unresolved tensions regarding race, representation, and identity. In this work too, he emerges as a complex, multi-layered figure: part man, part myth, part legend. At the end of his life, Douglass presented himself as a black radical and a model for future generations. It is in this autobiography that he admits to things which had been silenced and invisible in the first works. In those first works he constructed an image of a strong former enslaved man, relying on his heroic masculine figure to attain his (or white abolitionists') political goals. His self was, in fact, constructed not through heroic resistance but patient endurance. In later works he tries to conciliate his seemingly exclusionary selves and identities: a man of thought and a man of action. There is no more room for heroic predestination and boasting; in this work

he reveals some self-deprecating qualities in his narrative. "Rather, he testifies to a complex selfhood and fraught personal biography arbitrarily susceptible to chance and difficulties of 'circumstances' (*ibid.*, p. 604). The self-made man has doubts – what feminist critics repudiated in all masculine autobiographies is, after all, untrue, at least in Douglass' case. The self-made man is an illusion and performance only, creation for public consumption. What lies behind is a human being with multiple layers of meaning being torn by doubt. A private self is much more fragile than a public self, constructed often for public and political purposes.

However, it is possible to conclude through the analysis of Black women's early autobiographies, particularly slave narratives, that women's slavery experience shaped their approach towards the collective where others' fates and lives came first on the ladder of ethical priorities. It should be remembered that, apart from the sexual treatment of women, slavery broke Black families, separating parents/mothers from children. There are many known cases of slave-masters selling infants and mothers to different plantation owners. This traumatic experience left a lasting mark on the cultural perception of motherhood and the bond between daughters and their Black mothers. Although there is tension between Black mothers and daughters, especially what concerns the future of Black people, ways to fight oppression and generational differences are noticeable, particularly 20th Century autobiography showcases the strong intergenerational feminine link that starts with great-grandmothers, continues through grandmothers till mothers and daughters. Black women linked by blood continue to regard each other as life-sustaining force, vessels of memory and values and guarantee of the continuity in the future. This trope constantly re-emerges in black women's autobiographical and novelistic productions.

Working on the concept of Black autobiography in America and its literary status, William L. Andrews (1993) confirms that African American autobiography, a form prior to African American novel, holds a status of priority among the writing traditions developed in America. Before the novel as a genre appeared in Black writing, African Americans had already penned narratives of the self. From the 18th Century onwards, the constant drive behind Black narratives, be they slave accounts or free blacks' autobiographies, is one of freedom and pursuit of agency. This drive to freedom has been carefully analysed by scholars of American and African American letters. However, it has been noted that the initial tendency on the part of the scholars has been to study the historical dimension of early autobiographies. Lindon Barrett (1995) claims that African American slave narratives

entered the academy through the door of interest in history and because of their legitimacy in explaining plantation power relations, political concerns, and American history. The first critical works were concerned with the "authenticity" of enslaved people's accounts and the "reliability of various sources" (Blassingame *in* Barrett, *ibid.*, p. 416). These texts were treated as historiographical accounts and judged as factual narratives. Only later did literary scholars start to take interest in those narratives as literary pieces. Still their interest was much more directed toward textuality of slave narratives and focused on the role of language in those accounts.

Barrett argues for another approach toward African American slave narrative/ autobiography. To him particular attention should be paid to the cultural analysis of those texts without ignoring their literary aspects. The heed should be paid to the "symbolic dimensions of extratextual systems and links between the two" (*ibid.*, p.417). Because a text reflects personal and social identities, power relations and identity-formation, it cannot be analysed without bearing in mind the cultural dimension and entourage of the act of writing. Three aspects are important when studying slave narratives: historical, literary, and cultural interest. The last aspect reiterates the importance of considering many dimensions: historical, literary, political, etc. as all those aspects impact the end result. Literacy is of paramount importance to African American literary tradition and it became particularly salient in slave narratives.

Barrett makes an unusual, little explored link between literacy and the body: African Americans who live in the imposed condition of illiteracy are obliged to also live in the limitations and imprisonment of their material body, "the small circle of living matter" (*ibid.*, p. 419). To force them to live without the written word means to force them to live in the life of the body. Would that mean imposing on them an even greater split between mind and body? Barrett claims those two aspects are inseparable. He quotes works by scholars, for example Janet Cornelius[27] who investigated the issues of literacy in the South and concluded that often the penalty for literacy was amputation.

The body bore marks of slavery, in the form of lashes, broken bones, lacerated skin, bruises, blood, sweat and tears. The body bore an imprint of the power relations between

[27] Janet Cornelius worked on the topic of slavery and (il)literacy in the South. In 1992 she published an important work on this topic: *When I can Read my Title Clear: Literacy, Slavery and Religion in the Antebellum South*, which is the first study which focuses on the Black desire to achieve literacy, how Black church contributed to the cause and how literacy served as a tool for political resistance against White slavocracy.

the Black enslaved and the white master; cultural dominance and White hegemony left its seal on Black bodies which persisted over generations. Barrett also notes that a physical locality of birth was more important than a date of birth, often unknown to the enslaved. The geography of the South also bore an imprint on the Black body "the most ineradicable marker of self and identity" (*ibid.*, p. 422).

That is why the prohibition to read in the case of African Americans meant to separate them from Eurocentric culture and the anthropological concept of man who could only attain full humanity if he mastered civilised language and became literate. To bar Black people from this art meant to prove they were an inferior species. It was widely believed that they did not have fully developed minds and if they possessed poor mental /spiritual minds, then they did not deserve to be free. Also, literacy helped individual people to free themselves from bodily shackles and live a fully human, free existence. If Africans did not dominate writing and reading skills, then they were doomed to living in the prison-house of their bodies. The African American body houses, so to speak, hostile White supremacy idea(l)s about this body, American anxieties, ideologies, and politics of race. That is why when representing black bodies, African American writers/enslaved narrators must find linguistic ways to contradict those ideologies and even subvert them. The issue is further complicated in cases of biracial bodies, so-called "tragic mulattoes".

Narrative representations of tortured bodies and bodies in pain are quite frequent in accounts of the former enslaved. Curiously, in narratives of enslaved males the ultimate body is the female one. It is also a strategic move to show the inhumanity of the slavery system by depicting a woman's body in pain, abused, beaten and raped. Sexual abuse is very common in such accounts which also demonstrates the sexual hypocrisy of white Americans who, concomitantly, abhorred the Black body (*ibid.*, p. 431).

The image of a Black body in pain, under torture, raped and thrown away like garbage becomes a trope in enslaved women's narratives. One of the most quoted and analysed female slave narratives is Harriet Jacobs' account of her years as a slave and of breaking free (in this instance "freedom" is physical, bodily rather than literary). It demonstrates vividly how the slavocracy perceived and treated Black female bodies. Her autobiography, considered today as a representative and the best accomplished text of the era, was confirmed to be Jacobs' only in 1981 thanks to long-term research carried out by Jean Yellin (Tricomi, 2006). In *Incidents*, Jacobs had the courage to write what was unthinkable for

women of her time – she chose her freedom by way of consorting with a white man who bought it for her in the end. She and another Black writer, Harriet Wilson (*Our Nig: Sketches from the Life of a Free Bl*ack, 1859), are two examples of attempts on the part of female autobiographers/writers to assert their freedom and individuality, in spite of cultural and editorial expectations. Jacobs published her account two years after she fled from slavery. After she escaped to the North, she worked in an antislavery office/bookshop and met abolitionist Amy Post who insisted she write down her story. Similarly, Wilson got very little attention and her account, like Jacobs', remained virtually unknown until the end of the 20th Century. Only in recent years did both books attract scholars' attention and started to be considered examples of genuine Black women's voices.

Although many articles have been written on both books, relatively little attention has been paid to the question of the self in both women's narratives. In both texts the concept and model of Black selfhood is redefined against the norms of subjectivity – white in general and Black male in particular. Discussing both books, Sarah Emsley (1998) references Frederick Douglass and his typical masculine way of dealing with slavery and emasculation: focus on courage, physicality, strength, and violent rejection of the white overseer. Individual resistance and heroism were characteristics criticised by feminist scholars. At the same time, Black women found no examples in white women's literature, sentimental novels, and cult of womanhood. They had to look for models elsewhere or, simply, carve them out of nothing. Novels of seduction and novel of domesticity were not adequate models for Black women as those never had a chance to be considered proper ladies, as white, middle-class women had. Thus, all life examples and models presented in those literary texts of the epoch had little if any relevance to Black women. These examples were so pervasive and nearly obligatory for women that beyond this model there was no alternative for self-respecting women. An ideal model for a black woman was "tragic mulatta" – a beautiful, refined, delicate and moral black woman. Fragility, purity, innocence, and femininity were always under assault and often led to tragic death (*ibid.*, p.206).

Bearing this in mind, both Jacobs and Wilson had to adapt their texts and narratives to current mandatory models for attention and support from white audiences (women and abolitionists). As previously mentioned in this chapter, slave narratives did not have the purpose of showing a Black self worthy of being considered free but of displaying the evil institution of slavery. Individual lives served only to demonstrate what slavery did to Black

people and how it depraved the white plantation owners and the overseers. Authenticity depended on how faithful to the truth enslaved narrators were and for this reason a white editor or an abolitionist had to "authenticate" their story. That is why Jacobs presents herself as a passive observer of her own life and Wilson chooses to write a novel where it will be easier for her to hide her subjectivity. Still, they challenge the common cultural mores and denounce sexual and racial hypocrisy of society at the time. Jacobs broadens her concept of freedom and female subjectivity beyond that of white women. She includes in her concept not only questions of sexuality and motherhood, but also mentions aspects of economy and political awareness and action. Additionally, she subverts the Emmersonian idea of the self-reliant, heroic, and solitary man by pointing to the need for community and mutual aid.

Both Jacobs and Wilson show some degree of authorial control, for example by choosing to write "incidents" and "sketches", instead of full-blown life stories presented in a regular, linear way. Both women control their narratives, they choose what they think will not harm anyone's image and reputation. They select information which aims at proving their thesis about the contemporary society and their status as women. Wilson, for example, uses fiction to represent her life; she approaches the genre of autobiography and fiction proving these two forms do not have to be seen as opposing and self-excluding.

Other women also wrote slave narratives and today it is possible to acknowledge free-born Black women who, although did not live under slavery, wrote autobiographical accounts to create their selves, reform society and uplift the race. Nowadays readers can choose from a vast panoply of unearthed narratives, for instance *The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave* (1831), *Memoir of Old Elisabeth, a Colored Woman* (1863), *The Story of Mattie Jackson* (1866), *From the Darkness Cometh the Light, or Struggles for Freedom* by Lucy A. Delaney (c. 1891), *A Slave Girl's Story* (1898) by Kate Drumgoold or *Memories of Childhood Slavery Days* (1909) by Anne L. Burton. Julia Foote penned her memoirs in *A Brand Plucked from the Fire: An Autobiographical Sketch* (1879) and Zilpha Elaw wrote her spiritual autobiography in *Memoirs of the Life, Religious Experience, Ministerial Travels, and Labours of Mrs. Zilpha Elaw, an American Female of Colour* in 1846. The 18th and 19th Centuries proved to be a prolific time for African American autobiographies which displayed different tropes and structures but were all concerned with dignity and the Black quest for freedom.

Regarding black women's literary production in 19th Century America, aside from slave narratives, spiritual autobiographies also emerged. Due to the distinctive preoccupations of

free black women, those narratives are structured in a different way and the self emerges as free and less constrained. Jarena Lee, Zilpha Elaw, and Julia Foote are the three most canonical examples of spiritual authors – their narratives mirror the path of spiritual growth and the path to salvation. Those autobiographies mark the interior journey towards the light and those women's own place within society and the Methodist Church. They are another way for Black women to inscribe their autonomous selves into existence, culture, and texts.

In summation, slave narratives are a very well-studied form today and still a current subject of contemporary scholarship (Pittman, 2006; Schwalm, 2008; Blumenthal, 2013; Finseth, 2013; Li, 2014; Murphy, 2014; Green, 2015; Sommers, 2015; Troy, 2016), helped to establish African American literary tradition and still impact Black letters. Written by men and women, although mostly by men, they asserted their authors' existence. Even though the general goal of those narratives was not to highlight Black individuality, each text confirms that someone's existence challenged the white, hegemonic notion of Black non-humanity. "I was born", with which hundreds of narratives began, subverts racist assumptions regarding Black existence.

While analysing slave narratives, James Olney wonders what their status is: should they be regarded as literature or as autobiography? This is a curious question, since autobiography, although a hybrid form, is indeed considered literature. The scholar concludes that among a great variety of slave narratives (approximately 6,000 extant texts), they are quite similar for the most part – he speaks of "overwhelming sameness" (Olney, 1984: 46). However, at the end of his article he asserts that African American slave narratives, in spite of similarities of the stories, techniques, form and messages, do partake in a) autobiographical writing, b) the history of American literature and c) the making of Afro-American tradition. Slave narratives are part of autobiography because what is at work is the role of memory and retrospective narrative, which contribute to collective recordings of trauma, resistance to and subversion by oppressed people. Very often the lives represented were similar to one another because slavery amassed Black bodies into one indistinguishable bulk where individuality and the speaking "I" was of least importance. Facticity of the account was of great significance as, for the purpose of abolitionist policy, creative writing would fail to give a notion of veracity. Pure, raw facts were expected from former slaves to prove the horrors of slavery. At the same time, the collective experience was of more importance than individual ordeals. Slave narratives, in their majority, were not written for readers to identify with singular personality but to convince the audience, particularly in the

white North, that slavery was an abomination and had to be done away with. Many paratextual tools such as letters, introductions, forewords, and afterwords were attached to them by prominent white abolitionists to guarantee their veracity. In reality, one could argue authorial control of the narrative did not belong entirely to the author; it was appropriated either by white amanuensis or by notable white activists. The white public would only believe the enslaved person's account if it was "documentable" and was filled with raw facts and information. There could be multiple authenticating voices and auxiliary texts (Stepton *in* Andrews,1993) in slave narratives, which proves lack of confidence in Black testimony. Many autobiographies, among them the famed *Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass* (1845) published by the Anti-Slavery Office in Boston and the above analysed *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) by Harriet Jacobs, published by Maria Child, were accompanied by an introduction and commentaries made by W.M. Lloyd Garrison and Maria Child respectively. In both cases the abolitionists' commentaries were meant to give more credence to the enslaved accounts and promise that the events described took place with a white stamp of credibility. So, even though Blacks did master the language of their former masters, Blackness still stood in their way to freedom, this time authorial freedom and control.

Black texts from the 18th and 19th Centuries, written either by enslaved, ex-enslaved people or by free Blacks, opened a path to 20th Century black writers who could continue their struggle for freedom. After the Civil Rights Movement the question became what subjectivities and identity African Americans wanted to shape for themselves. More focus was placed on the linguistic aspect of subjecthood and how the Black Self is constructed through narrative. With the advent of postructuralist crisis of the author and subject, new interest surged in autobiography, with an aim to understand how Black autobiographers would answer these questions and existential doubts in their autobiographies and memoirs. More than ever Black women penned their memoirs in the 20th Century resisting what Patricia Hill Collins (2000) termed as controlling images of Black female bodies and subjectivities. The women who penned their autobiographies in the 19th Century, either as a form of slave narratives or spiritual ones, carved a path for the future generation of Black women who, in the 20th Century, were often confronted with the same old problems of sexism and racism not only within white society but also within the Black community. Many accounts, especially by women involved in the Civil Rights Movement, Black Panthers Party, etc. will denounce endemic racism present in contemporary America and

inside their own families and communities. While some spiritual autobiographers of the 19th Century rejected their fellow clergymen's sexism, relegating them to the margin of their spiritual communities, many decades later, contemporary Black American women authors will have to construct their selves against the dominant images imposed on them by white society but also defending their right to be themselves within their communities.

The section regarding the rise of African American personal narratives served to contextualise Black self-writing and to understand where the Black literary roots are. Black women from the 20th Century had some predecessors to lean on and what started in the 19th Century as a black female literary tradition continues until now, drawing inspiration from "Black Mothers and Sisters" and their contribution to Black autobiography (Reagon, 1982).

2.4. Review of Literature on Autobiography, Feminist and African American autobiography and the authors from the Thesis Corpus.

The last section of this chapter will focus on review of the specialised literature in the area of autobiographical studies. As has been mentioned, the second half and the end of the 20th Century witnessed explosion of academic works on autobiography, including feminist and women's perspectives on the genre. The literature on autobiography in general, its nature, directions and tendencies in academic scholarship is vast. Below, some of the most important works shall be mentioned which will permit the reader to understand the tendencies and what is being done currently and where this Thesis stands in relation to current academic works.

Robert Folkenflik edited in 1993 *The Culture of Autobiography. Constructions of Self-Representation* including variety of essays in the field. The collection comprises of ten essays examining history, theory and practice of autobiography dealing with women's narratives, minority autobiography and non-Western texts. In 1995 Julia Swindells edited a collection of essays on nature and theories of autobiographies: *The Uses of Autobiography*. The collection includes chapters on general theories of autobiographies, gender and wartime, cultural identities, women's autobiographies, and so on. The book's contribution to the current knowledge of autobiographical studies came in form of diverse inputs brought by perspectives on the 19th Century autobiography and autobiographical accounts from Africa, the Middle East, Europe, and New Zealand. The aim of the volume was to demonstrate how interest in self-writing continues until now and how autobiographer might be perceived not only as an individual but also "product" of the social, cultural, and political circumstances in which one

writes and reads autobiography. Also, contributors attempted to show that autobiography can become a tool for social and cultural change, impacting thus wider audiences. In 1993 Jill Ker Conway's *When Memory Speaks. Exploring the Art of Autobiography* appeared. The work is dedicated to the examination of several autobiographies and memoirs written by Hildegard von Bingen, Jean Jacques Rousseau, Henry Ford, or Katharine Graham. Conway's purpose is to trace archetypal patterns that people employ when writing about their lives. She offers an insightful perspective on the history of the genres (autobiography and memoir) tracing development of self-referential writing in classical Greek texts until our times when the genre of autobiography has evolved into different forms. However, when she discusses autobiographies penned by men and women, she insists on gender differences between those texts and argues that women she opted to study revealed textual and authorial insecurities and lack of sense of command of their destinies.

More recent works on autobiography appeared in the first years and decades of the 21st Century. Linda Anderson's *Autobiography* appeared in 2001. Anderson's research focused on discussion of theoretical aspects of autobiography as a genre and presentation of the state of the art since 1970s. She discusses in detail poststructuralists' influence on how autobiography might be viewed and how its end was prophesised to be near. Apart from offering presentation of recent tendencies in development of autobiographical criticism, different forms of the genre, she proposes a fresh look at the most recent forms of life writing such as blogs and testimonial memoirs. Her analysis of selected autobiographies is quite representative as she looks at autobiographies written by St. Augustine, Bunyan, Boswell, Rousseau and then turns her attention to women's and postcolonial texts. In this way, she does not limit her research to canonical texts but offers close reading of non-normative textual subjectivities, so often ignored in earlier research.

In the same year, in 2001 Leigh Gilmore published an important contribution to the autobiographical studies entitled *The Limits of Autobiography. Trauma and Testimony*. In it the author reads in a critical way self-narratives by Michel Foucault, Louis Althusser, Dorothy Allison, Jamaica Kincaid, and Jeanette Winterson, among others. The main purpose of the work is to analyse those authors' texts in context of trauma, crime and mental suffering and challenges those narratives pose to the traditional understanding of autobiography.

Another interesting and important academic work in the field of autobiography was published in 2004. G. Thomas Couser's *Vulnerable Subjects. Ethics and Life Writing* explores a

panoply of autobiographical texts, from the "celebrity" to "ethnographies" and analyses different self-referential narratives, all from the perspective of suffering and loss. He proposes a term "auto/bio/ethics" to fuse it with "auto/biography" and focuses on bioethical aspects of narratives that explore human suffering, illness, and disability. Couser's book constitutes an important contribution to still expanding field of autobiographical studies as he deals with ethically difficult questions of speaking for others (in biography) and about others (in autobiography) and how different discourses can make Other(s) vulnerable and expose them to double victimisation (first victimisation being, for example, an incurable illness such as Alzheimer's).

The collection *Early Modern Autobiography* edited by Ronald Bedford and Phillippa Kelly in 2009 offers a panoply of contributions from specialists in autobiographical, feminist, historical and political studies to reflect on early autobiographies written in the 15th, 16th, and 17th Centuries. As the editors argue, the aim of the volume was to offer a new way of reading significant autobiographical works as well as those which have been rarely studied. This allowed the scholars to challenge previously established patterns and taken-for-granted truths about modern autobiography and throw new light on both spiritual and secular autobiographies of the era and parallels between them.

The year 2008 saw publication of David Huddart's *Postcolonial Theory and Autobiography*. The work offers a new perspective on autobiography read and interpreted in the light of postmodern theories. The author studies writing of Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak establishing parallels with Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze and Alain Badiou. What becomes clear here is that Huddart departs from autobiography closed in its traditional frames and situates it within the post-colonial discourse which objected against racism and exclusionary practises of Western thought. In spite of current objections against Eurocentrism and white elitisms of autobiography, the author argues for relevance of the genre in post-colonial theory and possibilities the genre offers to create post-colonial subjectivities. As he claims, autobiography, though severely criticised in recent decades, still demonstrates its emancipatory potential for subjects who wish to use the genre politically and push their own and their communities' agenda against Eurocentric discourse and in favour of inclusive practices.

The art of storytelling became the subject of Smith and Watson's 2001/2010 comprehensive reader entitled *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*.

Among many academic works devoted to autobiographical texts, this scholarly work differentiates itself due to its clarity of organisation, discussion of literary concepts such as autobiography, memoirs, new forms of self-writing in the era of technology (blogs, vlogs, videos) and various aspects related to writing and reading autobiography. In fact, originality of Smith and Watson's research consists in their panoramic overview of autobiography, its historical development and theory linked to practise. The authors managed to avoid narrow understanding of autobiography without juxtaposing male vs female autobiography. In fact, in male texts they do find what feminists would call female textual characteristics, i.e., embodiment, relational dimension of autobiography, interest in private aspects of life. The updated edition from 2010 deals with questions of memory, experience, identity and discusses in detail theoretical approaches towards autobiographical acts.

Last couple of years witnessed publication of more academic works in the area of autobiographical studies. An insightful collection of essays on autobiography and auto-fiction was published in 2015 and edited by Kerstin W. Shands: *Writing the Self. Essays on Autobiography and Autofiction*. This volume offers an insightful analysis of the recently developed concept of autofiction and various scholars attempt to locate autofictional narratives in the current literary panorama. Articles included in the volume discuss Maya Angelou's serial autobiography, Barack Obama's *Dreams from My Father*, autobiographies of Winnie Mandela, Elias Canetti, among others. The innovative aspect of this volume, in a broader scope of autobiographical studies, is its turn toward autofiction and its relation to autobiography.

The complex interrelation between narrative, truth, and life-stories, particularly in the contemporary times of post-truth and separation between objective truth and personal truth has become the subject of research which brought fruit in form of 2017 *The Routledge International Handbook on Narrative and Life History*, edited by Ivor Goodson, Ari Antikaine, Pat Sikes, and Molly Andrews. *The Handbook*, comprising four parts takes as its aim to contribute to the ongoing research on narrative and autobiographical studies with particular focus on subjectivity and how subjectivity is constructed through life stories. The volume contributors, coming from various academic fields, reflect on how personal narratives can be misused by scholars and distorted by dominant culture, colonising, thus, personal experience and narrative. Perhaps it is a slightly different look on the question of life/autobiographical accounts and narrative, however this academic work not only belongs to the tradition of narrative scholarship but allows its readers to look at the complex problem of truth and

subjectivity-construction in an innovative way. Also, authors warn that personal life stories should be always contextualised and placed in the teller's social and political grounds. An important point they make is that "personal voice" is never completely personal and free – there are other, external forces, which might influence the story teller's voice. The question of narrative and autobiography (construction of narrative subjectivity) has been studied also by Paul John Eakin in his several works. The most recent works on the subject, published at the turn of the 20th and 21st Centuries (Eakin published a number of influential studies of autobiography already in 1980s and 1990s) include his *How Our Lives Become Stories* (1999), *The Ethics of Life Writing* (2004), *Living Autobiographically: How We Create Identity in Narrative* (2011), *Fictions in Autobiography* (2014). In these Eakin carried out his research whose main interest evolves around textual construction of subjecthood. Influenced by narrative studies and work carried out by neuroscientists such as António Damásio, Eakin offers compelling evidence that storytelling lies at the basis of human intellectual activity and constitutes a fundamental element of self-creation. When a person loses his/her ability to create stories, the ability to re-create his/her subjectivity is weakened or lost altogether. This approach is of considerable importance to our understanding autobiography as a performative act, although it seems to fail to provide answers in situations when humans lose their memory or capacity to retrieve past events and tell their daily stories. Do they still remain fully human and retain their "storied" selves? Such questions need to be taken into account when scholars rely completely on human ability to create stories through which they construct their selves. Eakin defends his position in a number of academic articles devoted to the theme of self-construction through narrative and storytelling (2004, 2005, 2009, 2014) where he also explains how he came to be interested in the *bios* in autobiography and shifted his interest to subjective re-construction of the self in autobiographical acts. The 2001 *Narrative and Identity* edited by Jens Brockmeier and Donal Carbaugh is, similarly, an interesting approach to autobiography from the point of view of narratology theorists. The research published in this book offers insights into how our stories and narrative partake in production of autobiographical discourse which, in turn, helps create our sense of identity and understanding of who we are.

Currently, scholars try to problematise the modern conception of the genre of autobiography and analyse it from different perspectives, drawing on post-modern and post-structructuralist theories. Influenced by Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, and Hélène Cixous, they question the status of authorship and possibility of narrative self. This is the scope and primary interest of the work on autobiography in current times published in 2019

and authored by Dennis Schepp. *The Autobiography Effect. Writing the Self in Post-Structuralist Theory* deals with questions of the self, narrative, and philosophy from a theoretical point of view. Schepp proceeds to reading theoretical texts by authors who either did not believe in possibility of autobiography or were torn by doubts but still produced large amounts of autobiographical texts where they confronted their doubts regarding authorship and autobiography.

Continuing interest in the area of life-writing bears fruit in form of anthologies and volumes which bring together specialists from different fields, such as sexual and gender studies, women's studies, etc. allowing, thus, to have an overview of varied perspectives. *Offshot: Contemporary Life Writing Methodologies and Practice* edited by Donna Lee Brien and Quinn Eades in 2018 is a result of collaboration of scholars from various areas, all of them interested in different forms of life writing: autobiographies, memoirs, biography, and poetry. The volume addresses theoretical questions of life writing, truth, history, narrative structures, hybrid nature of autobiography, fiction vs factuality, and narrative construction of the self. It dedicates room to current problems in literary and cultural studies such as LGBT communities and their self-expression, women's life writing, question of genealogy and belonging.

New perspectives on autobiography and autofiction are discussed in 2019 edition of *Handbook of Autobiography/Autofiction* edited by Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf. Contributors to three volumes (2,180 pages in total) all agree that autobiographical writings have been a major literary and cultural genre since Antiquity until present times and that the genre of autobiography and autofiction has allowed to reflect on profound issues of authorship, link between literature, imagination and reality, the link between author, narrator and narratee. In the current times autobiographical writings still maintain their relevance in the process of constructing identities and selves, albeit forms might have changed. Authors argue that in the current digital era autobiographers' presence online, in social media and blogs, has helped alter the perception of autobiography/memoir/autofiction but the genres' popularity has not waned, quite on the contrary. The volumes edited by Wagner-Egelhaaf are dedicated to most diverse perspectives on self-referential writings, ranging from history, psychology and psychoanalysis, neurosciences, women and gender studies, art, sociology, philosophy, political science, postcolonialism, religious and theological studies and media studies. Volume 1 is dedicated to discussion of theoretical concepts, volume 2 presents detailed

history of the genre while volume 3 discusses a number of autobiographical writings dating from Antiquity to contemporary times.

The autobiographical genres do continue to attract a number of scholars who publish not only volumes of monographs and book-length works on the subject. Contemporary scholarly debates on the topic are well documented in academic articles published in well-known academic journals. The number of articles is legion, however a quick look at some recent ones will help to form an idea of how vibrant the field of study continues to be. Smith and Watson, iconic names in the area of autobiography, pose innovative questions and offer readers refreshed look on new forms of autobiography, written both by men and women. Their 2001 article "The Rumpled Bed of Autobiography: Extravagant Lives, Extravagant Questions" focuses on the artistic autobiographical installation made by Tracey Emin and the intimate exposure of her autobiographical photography. The article makes clear that autobiography does not exhaust its possibilities through narrative – it can be told through photography, too. Sidonie Smith's 2011 article "Narrating Lives and Contemporary Imaginaries" focuses on memoir productions in our contemporary times and reflects on new forms of life-writing and the near-obsession with public confessions of celebrities and politicians. A very insightful article on the problem of truth-telling and how to measure truth in autobiographies and memoirs was published by both scholars (Watson and Smith) in 2012 under the title "Witness or False Witness: Metrics of Authenticity, Collective I-Formations, and the Ethic of Verification in First-Person Testimony". The article is an important contribution to an ongoing discussion of truth vs lies in any self-referential writing and how obsessive searching for factual inaccuracies can harm causes related to human rights. Similar concern of truth telling and consequences of breaking the rules of autobiographical pact is the subject of Eakin's article "Breaking Rules: The Consequences of Self-Narration" published in 2001. Similar concern is studied in Micaela Maftei's "The Fiction of Autobiography: Reading and Writing Identity" (2013) and demonstrates the fact that truth and fiction in autobiographical writing continues to be a problem provoking debates and ongoing reflection among scholars. The question of fiction, its role in autobiography and the impossibility of separating fiction from autobiographical truth is reflected on in the article by Mariette Willemsen – "Welcoming (Auto)Biography Without Waving Away Fiction" (2006). Her article constitutes a reply to Ole Martin Skilleås's claims that autobiography as a genre loses its appeal and credibility if it is filled with fictional account. Willemsen undertakes an intellectual conversation with her colleague debating that fiction is an indispensable element in any self-

writing and argues that it would be counterproductive to expect only factual truth from autobiographical genre. Theoretical reflections on memoirs and their new direction towards greater involvement with fiction, imagination and fantasy are included in Laura Di Summa-Knoop's 2017 article "Critical autobiography – a new genre?" Di Summa-Knoop muses on the genre of memoir and proposes her own, new definition of the sub-genre of memoir (critical autobiography) which, in her understanding, covers new texts that shy away from traditional autobiographies.

Current research on autobiography continues to pose multiple questions regarding the self, the possibility of constructing subjectivity, the truth, ethical aspects of writing one's and others' lives. It does differ substantially from the earlier research carried out in the second half of the 20th Century because it also mirrors contemporary concerns humanity is confronted with. However, certain questions remain basically the same, especially if the research touches upon the limits of the genre and its relationship with truth. Although recent publications reveal questions, doubts and interests shared by individual scholars, together they form bulk of intellectual work which attests to the fact that autobiographical studies have become much more varied and transdisciplinary than before. It is no more exclusively domain of literary or historical studies but addresses most diverse aspects of human existence and intellectual activity. Studies in the area of neurosciences, psychology, psychiatry, media, ethnicity and postcolonialism brought fresh insights into already well-established field of expertise, raising provocative questions and offering original reflections on the genre. New perspectives and ways of reading autobiography make it a continuously challenging task to understand how people construct their lives and selves through self-representational narratives. The review of academic publications on the autobiography and related forms proves that the field is rich and of interdisciplinary nature. Directions of further development are multiple and it is obvious that the field is far from being exhausted.

In what concerns academic work on the intersection between autobiography and feminist/women's studies, the greatest surge of works has appeared from the 1980s onward. The earliest works on women's autobiographical production, as has been mentioned, focused on tracing differences between male and female texts and attempts to define female subjecthood. The following is a review of literature produced specifically in the last two decades of the 20th Century, with particular attention to current publications and trends in the first two decades of the 21st Century.

The anthology which includes Cora Kaplan's essay on out-law genres mentioned in the second section of this chapter, edited by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson and published in 1998 is a ground-breaking work on women's autobiography and theory. *Women, Autobiography and Theory. A Reader*, the collection of academic articles by female scholars working on autobiographies written by women offers a panoply of critical essays covering various themes and problematics raised by feminist theory. The volume is divided into thematic chapters and includes works on theory of autobiographical genres, subjectivities, voice, and memory as well as body and sexuality. It represents the condition of academic research into the field of women's autobiography and, more importantly, mirrors intellectual and academic diversity in the sense that it does not exclude work related to "Third World" issues, postcolonialism and politics of racism in white feminist theory. The anthology symbolises an effort to bring together different perspectives on women's writing irrespective of class and ethnicity.

Other significant works published from the 1980s onward which shed more light on complex questions of female selves, autobiographical writing, experience, and modes of self-expression are *The Private Self. Theory and Practice of Women's Autobiographical Writings*, edited by Shari Benstock and published in 1988, *Life/Lines. Theorizing Women's Autobiography* edited by Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck, published in 1988 and Gillian Whitlock's *The Intimate Empire. Reading Women's Autobiographies* published in 2000. The first two works are anthologies comprising of contributions from such celebrated scholars as Mary G. Mason, Nancy K. Miller, Leila Ahmed, Nellie Y. McKay, Françoise Lionnet, Susan Stanford Friedman, Jane Marcus, Patricia Meyer Spacks, and Deborah Kaplan, among others. The volumes are devoted to theory and practice in autobiographical writing proposing various approaches to women's autobiographies, theorizing the genre and studying specific texts. What was innovative about the *Life/Lines* and *The Private Self* was the focus not only on gender as the main category of analysis but attention paid to other equally important aspects impacting women's textuality, such as races, social classes, nationalities, religions, sexual orientation, professions exercised by women autobiographers and historical/cultural locations of speaking subjects. Contributions from leading feminist theorists on the nature of female autobiography, a woman's place within the patriarchal order, her resistance strategies employed through writing illustrated growing interest in imploding traditional norms of autobiography but also showed new directions to be undertaken by forthcoming generations of women scholars. Whitlock's *The Intimate Empire* is an interesting example of a full-length

work focusing mainly on women from post-colonial countries as well as from United States and Australia. Her study, much quoted in later research carried out in the field had the audacity to look at hitherto ignored autobiographical texts by women of colour. Previously unknown autobiographical narratives by enslaved and colonised women and geographical diversity selected for the purpose are what characterises this work and distinguishes it from previous work made by women scholars who omitted writings by the women of colour. The year 2000 also saw the publication of *Feminism and Autobiography. Texts, Theories, Methods* edited by Tess Cosslett, Celia Lury and Penny Summerfield. In it, various essays written by scholars from literary and cultural studies discuss interdisciplinary approaches to autobiographies written by women. The choice of interdisciplinarity proves that autobiography cannot be approached solely from one field of knowledge. And so, essays included in this volume address issues such as genre and gender, textual subjectivities of women, intersubjectivity, identity and race/ethnicity, link established between mothers, daughters and autobiography, Caribbean storytelling, and questions of memory.

In what concerns memoirs written by women, Helen Buss offers the readers her book published in 2002 *Repossessing the World: Reading Memoirs by Contemporary Women*. There she comes to the conclusion that, currently, women seem to be particularly engaged in writing memoirs: memoirs about coming-of-age, about traumatic events, about romantic relationships, and so on. To her, memoirs as a genre allow a female author to mark the difference between her and men, in contrast with autobiography which does not leave room for highlighting such a difference. Also, memoirs permit their writers to practise greater authorial freedom and choice of stories to tell. They are, by nature less "factual" and history-oriented and thus help the writer resist the need to document every fact. Buss claims that women are reshaping the way memoirs are written and read and through those memoirs ascribe importance to their lives and stories. She also states that memoirs partake in culture but also create cultural moments and "educate" readers who then better understand female experiences in contemporary society. Female memoirs constitute a form of social narrative that ultimately alters the perception of the contemporary society; it fuses private with the political, brings the self closer to the Other, and helps reformulate female experience.

New political challenges related to migratory movements, crisis of identity, era of globalisation and terror have found their expression in Gillian Whitlock's trailblazing work on autobiographical accounts written by women from the Middle East: *Soft Weapons: Autobiography in Transit* (2007). In the book Whitlock tells her readers that, while

autobiographies written by non-Western subjects can be helpful to understand experiences which are rarely witnessed by Western citizens, they can also become manipulated for political means. Through the study of memoirs written by Arab women, testimonies by refugees and journalists reporting wars in the Middle East, the scholar examines the contradictions inherent in memoirs written to denounce violation of human rights. Analysing Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Marjane Satrapi's graphic memoirs and Salam Pax's online diaries the scholar addresses new issues which contemporary autobiographical discourses confront in the current times of refugee crises, globalisation and forced economical and climatic migrations. The book is important to the current research on autobiography, memoirs, and human rights because it pays attention to a particular problem: while it is of great importance for oppressed peoples to air their views and speak against human rights violations, there is a real risk that their voices can end up co-opted by Western, and not only, political agendas. It is also important to note that Whitlock's research draws particular attention to the fact that women are often the most abused group when it comes to refugee crisis and Western attempts to bring humanitarian help to nations immersed in war. A similar topic is explored in the 2014 anthology of essays on memoirs, autobiographies and human rights violations edited by Meg Jensen and Margaretta Jolly: *We Shall Bear Witness: Life Narratives and Human Rights*. The essays were composed by a panoply of specialists ranging from survivors, scholars, and human rights advocates. Personal accounts of state-promoted injustice, persecution, incarceration, and torture appear along with reflections on textuality of protest and human rights campaigns. At the same time, the publication leaves a cautionary note on how mass media, politicians and politics of geographical location impact whose stories are heard and whose might never see the light of day. This is an important aspect of contemporary scholarship on autobiographical accounts and their political implications, how they can become obstructed by political agendas or appropriated by interest groups.

In 2011 Susana Egan wrote her *Burdens of Proof: Faith, Doubt & Identity in Autobiography*. The book is an important contribution to the study of autobiographical impostures, hoaxes and lies discovered in the genre of autobiography. The author analyses a number of memoirs and autobiographies accused of manipulation and impostures and tries to answer the question of why imposture takes place, what price is there for an autobiographical impostor to pay and what consequences autobiographical pretence may have on the perception of the genre. Egan's research goes back to early Christianity to explain how author situates himself/herself in relation to the text and that, very often, what is misunderstood or resented by readers of

autobiographies is that lived and textual protagonists can differ significantly. She also draws on media studies to examine how they partake in diffusion of hoaxes and how they contribute to authors' forever marred reputations in case of proven manipulation.

The question of loss and mourning is very often acutely present in autobiographies and memoirs. This is the subject of Amy-Katerini Prodromou who published her *Navigating Loss in Women's Contemporary Memoir* in 2015. The book is a reflection on what textual forms women's loss and mourning take. Narratives of loss written by women, question of mourning self, recovery and embodiment in such accounts become what Prodromou calls "memoirs of textual recovery", a new form of grief memoir. The research in question is an interesting example of how emotions become textualized and how text becomes emotional outlet allowing a memoirist to re-invent herself through written words.

More recently, in 2016 *Life Writing in the Long Run* was published. The anthology contains 21 insightful essays by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson on female autobiographical writing in such genres as autoethnography, Bildungsroman, diary, digital life writing, genealogy, graphic memoir, human rights witnessing, and manifesto. There are also essays discussing the key concepts of authenticity, performativity, postcoloniality, relationality, and visuality. A very useful discussion on the problem of truth-telling in autobiography and the cultural issue of discrediting women's testimonies is presented in Leigh Gilmore's *Tainted Witness: Why We Doubt What Women Say About Their Lives* (2017). Starting with an in-depth examination of Anita Hill's testimony before the US Senate Commission concerning her sexual harassment case in 1991, Gilmore weaves a sound narrative of how women, historically and culturally, have been considered so-called "tainted witnesses", i.e., unreliable witnesses. She claims that women have been caught in a system which, *a priori*, delegitimises their testimony and makes it difficult for them to share their life stories, especially if the latter denounce and expose injustices and cases of sexual harassment and abuse. The book poses some important questions regarding female reliability and how gender, race and doubt impact women's struggles in making their stories heard and believed. Question of the body and autobiographical discourse has been the theme of Lerro's 2018 full-length book entitled: *The Body in Autobiography and Autobiographical Novels: The Importance of Being Normal*. This research draws heavily on Gender Studies and questions related to what is (non)normative in male and female bodies and how sexuality impacts self-construction through autobiography.

Visual autobiography has been also the subject of scholarly interest. Julia Watson and Sidonie Smith published in 2002 their volume of essays (*Interfaces: Women, Autobiography, Image, Performance*) on visual and textual female self-representation and discussed various media such as photography, video, paintings, and texts through which women negotiate their subjectivities. The topic of visual autobiography received its full-length treatment in Sarah Brophy's and Janice Hladki's *Embodied Politics in Visual Autobiography* (2014). Their research concentrates on various forms of artistic production such as TV programmes, videos, performance art and graphic memoirs which all "smuggle" autobiographic information imprint on the human imperfect body and decry the myth of exemplary (dis)embodied self. Volume on auto/biography and female theatre was edited by Maggie B. B. Gale and Viv Gardner and published in 2004 under the title *Auto/Biography and Identity: Women, Theatre and Performance*. Ryan Claycomb, in turn, produced a book on feminist theatre and autobiographical acts where he analyses autobiography as a performative act which found its best expression on stage. His 2012 *Lives in Play: Autobiography and Biography on the Feminist Stage* analyses feminist strategies and autobiographical narratives presented in contemporary American theatre.

Of course, academic articles on women's life-writing, gender, and text abound. Some examples of more influential publications from the first two decades of the 21st Century are: Douglas Werden's "Beyond Recovery: Complicating the Study of "Pioneer" Women's Life Writing" (2003), Leigh Gilmore and Elizabeth Marshall's "Girls in Crisis: Rescue and Transnational Feminist Autobiographical Resistance" (2010), Susan Ware's "Writing Women's Lives; One Historian's Perspective" (2010), Tamar Hager's "Maternal Autobiography as a Site of Feminist Negotiation and Resistance" (2015), Tiina Kunnen *et al.,* "Introduction: Gender and Politics in Auto/Biographies" (2016), Nolan Bennett's "Emma Goldman and the Autobiography of the People" (2017), Dagmara Drewniak's "This Has Been a Painful Story to Tell": Excavating Stories of Motherhood, Alcohol Abuse, and Writing in Two North American Memoirs: *Lit* By Mary Karr and *Drunk Mom* by Jowita Bydlowska (2019).

African American autobiography continues to raise academic interest, although the most important works appeared only at the end of the 20th Century and remain, until today, an important source of information about Black American autobiographical expressions. In his 1991 article published in Paul John Eakin's anthology of essays on autobiography in America, *American Autobiography. Retrospect and Prospect*, Andrews expresses his

astonishment at the lack of any substantial works on the African American autobiography written before the second half of the 20th Century. As he claims, Robert F. Sayre, one of the leading American specialists on American autobiography, confessed his ignorance and lack of knowledge regarding African American self-narratives (Andrews, 1991, *ibid.*, p. 195), even though the second half of the 20th Century witnessed the emergence of several important works in the field. Stephen Butterfield's *Black Autobiography in America* published in 1974, analyses fifty autobiographies that appeared between 1830 and 1972. The main topic the scholar is interested in is the creation of the self in language, techniques Black authors used to resist limiting images developed by white culture and the tension between their own understanding of the self and stereotyped hegemonic discourses created around Black subjects. In the same year Sidonie Smith published *Where I'm Bound: Patterns of Slavery and Freedom in Black American Autobiography* in which she argues that many autobiographies under analysis prove that freedom is to be found within the self which is the source of its unique consciousness. Robert Stepto authored a pioneering study of African American narrative – *From Behind the Veil. A Study of Afro-American Narrative* (1979). This study is made from a historical and critical point of view. He too claims that the primary drive behind many Black authors' works is the drive to freedom and pursuit of human dignity. *Act Like You Know: African American Autobiography and White Identity* was published in 1998 and authored by Crispin Sartwell. The book is original in the sense that its author focuses on Whiteness and its cultural construction in contrast to Blackness, its licentiousness, pathology, and inferiority. He analyses Whiteness from Black perspectives and traces the Black perception of Whiteness inscribed in Black autobiographical narratives.

The topic of racialisation in the autobiographies of selected African Americans is analysed in the study implemented by Kenneth Mostern – his *Autobiography and Black Identity Politics* published in 1999. In it Mostern poses a question why autobiography has been seen as central to Black political speech and a tool with which African Americans constructed their racial identities. He analyses the link between Black autobiography and racial categories such as "colored", "Negro", "black" or "African American" and their impact on Black writing. In 2000, Roland L. Williams Jr., published *African American Autobiography and the Quest for Freedom*, in which he places Black letters in a larger context of White American literature and draws similarities and differences between white and Black texts. In 2008, Jennifer Wallach published her study of memoir in the age of Jim Crow. *Closer to the Truth Than Any Fact: Memoir, Memory, and Jim Crow* resorts to the genre of memoir and how this genre can be an

instrument of historical understanding. Wallach examines works of Zora Neal Hurston, Willie Morris, Lillian Smith, Henry Louis Gates Jr., William Alexander Percy, and Richard Wright to understand how memoirs inscribe history and how the genre can be useful to historical understanding of times and people.

An interesting and innovative research on African American fatherhood was published by Tara Green in 2009. Her *A Fatherless Child: Autobiographical Perspectives of African American Men* is an original contribution to discussion of Black American autobiographical tradition. The book focuses on relatively rarely studied phenomenon of Black fatherhood and reads autobiographies written by Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, Malcolm X, and Barack Obama. The research establishes links between masculinity and Black boyhood, fatherlessness and a sense of displacement and abandonment those autobiographers felt in relation to their father figures.

One of the most recent works on African American autobiography was written by Eric Lamore and published in 2017 under the title *Reading African American Autobiography. Twenty-First Century Context and Criticism*. The work contributes to the latest knowledge on African American self-writing. It comprises 11 essays on slave narratives, early Black male spiritual autobiography, Black female Buddhists, and Black bloggers. The work reveals an innovative approach towards Black autobiographical acts in writing, online and in visual culture.

In what concerns specifically female autobiographies, Andrews compiled and annotated three spiritual autobiographies of African American women in the anthology entitled *Sisters of the Spirit* (1986) filling in, in this way, the existing *lacuna* of works devoted to African American women and their autobiographical production. This confirms Mae Gwendolyn Henderson's argument (1998) that Black women's writing has been, traditionally, ignored. Black women as writers tended to be underrepresented, underestimated, and dismissed. Although she refers to the literary legacy of African American women in general, the same applies to autobiographies written by Black women. If there are academic essays included in major feminist anthologies on women's autobiographies, the majority of them are devoted to white rather than Black women. An outstanding example is an anthology edited by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson mentioned in the previous section. We can also find an article on a Black woman named Jarena Lee, written by Frances Smith Foster in the aforementioned *The Female Autograph* or Nellie Y. McKay's essay on Zora Neal Hurston's *Dust Tracks on the Road* in *Life/Lines* edited by Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck.

The situation looks less bleak with *African American Autobiography*. A *Collection of Critical Essays* edited by William Andrews and published in 1993. The collection boasts of four out of fourteen essays dedicated to African American women: Hazel Carby's "Hear My Voice, Ye, Careless Daughters": Narrative of Slave and Free Women before Emancipation", Joanne Braxton's "Crusader for Justice: Ida B. Wells", Françoise Lionnet's "Autoethnography: The An-Archic Style of *Dust Tracks on a Road*" and George E. Kent's "Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and Black Autobiography Tradition".

African American women's autobiographical tradition, a rich and complex phenomenon in itself, became a topic of Joanne Braxton's full-length work published in 1989. Entitled *Black Women Writing Autobiography. A Tradition within a Tradition*, the work follows the autobiographical narratives of a number of Black women. Braxton first analyses female slave narratives and proceeds to a detailed examination of Harriet Jacobs' autobiography *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* – one of the most anthologised and scrutinised female slave narratives. Other chapters are devoted to Charlotte Forten Grimké, Ida B. Wells, Zora Neal Hurston, Era Bell Thompson and, towards the end of the book, Maya Angelou. Throughout the work, Braxton proposes a concept of "outraged mothers" and reminds her readers of the importance of motherhood for the African American sense of identity and resilience. The figure of the outraged mother becomes a figure of rebellion, resistance and subversion African American women resorted to not only during times of slavery but also in the 20th Century. The Black woman stands at the centre of her own experience and attempts to define herself instead of letting others define her. Through the analysis of mothers' outrage caused by a racist and misogynist system, Braxton demonstrates how the African American woman transmits to her daughter strategies of resistance and survival. Also, the author demonstrates how autobiographies can become an outlaw genre focusing on the rebellious self ready to implode constricting rules of the genre.

A very important academic contribution to the field of African American autobiography written by women appeared in 2003. *Rhetoric and Resistance in Black Women's Autobiography* authored by Johnnie M. Stover is a well-documented research on life-writing, subversion, authorship, and language used by 19th Century African American women in their autobiographies. Stover analyses the texts using lenses of gender, race and class categories which are indispensable in any examination of literary production by Black women in the United States. Experience of racism, slavery, trauma, and self-recovery are themes recurrently woven into the social, cultural, and textual fabric of African American life and, as such,

cannot be omitted from textual analysis of works produced by African American women. The importance of Stover's analysis is that she establishes a link between 19th Century narratives, draws parallels and similarities but also pays heed to discontinuities and divergences that occur in the narratives under scrutiny. Her main focus is on the "mother tongue" and how this tool permits Black women, often severely limited by their gender, race and low status in the society, to create their own space for self-expression and self-assertion. The mother tongue Stover analyses is not only textual but physical: it can be a body position, a gesture, a look, or a set of lips. Through such strategies, African American women managed to communicate their stance and also preserve their culture and transmit their values to future generations. The same year saw the publication of *Sentimental Confessions. Spiritual Narratives of Nineteenth-Century African American Women* authored by Joycelyn Moody. This book is a ground-breaking study of evangelicalism, sentimentalism, and nationalism in early African American spiritual autobiographies. Moody examines writings of Maria Stewart, Jarena Lee, Zilpha Ela, Nancy Prince, Mattie Jackson, and Julia Foote contributing in this way to the current scholarship on Black women's autobiographical production. Joanne Braxton contributed her article on *Autobiography and African American Women's Literature* included in the *Cambridge Companion to African American Women's Literature* edited by Angelyn Mitchell and Danille K. Harris (2009). *African American Autobiography* is devoted to contemporary autobiographies written by Black people in America where she mentions Harriet Jacobs, Zora Neal Hurston next to various male autobiographers such as Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, and James Baldwin.

The lack of academic interest in Black American and, specifically, Black female self-referential writings has been redressed in the last decades. Calvin Hall's 2009 *African American Journalists: Autobiography as Memoir and Manifesto* is another case in point that autobiographies of Black Americans constitute a rich source of inspiration. Hall analyses journalistic texts and memoirs of Black journalists, such as Jill Nelson, Nathan McCall, Patricia Raybon, and others. *Ethnic American Literature: An Encyclopedia for Students* published in 2015 features a special section dedicated to African American autobiography, contextualises historical emergence of the genre and presents a number of autobiographies written by Black American women since slavery times. The year 2017 saw the publication of comparative analysis of African American and Dalit Women Autobiographies authored by Gautami Pawar (*From Agony to Identity: African-American and Dalit Women Autobiography. A Comparative Study of African American and Dalit Women Autobiographies*). In it the author links the fate of African

American and Dalit women by referring to slavery and oppression that both groups witnessed. Tracy Curtis carried out thorough research on new forms of Black women's autobiography and published the results in *New Media in Black Women's Autobiography: Intrepid Embodiment and Narrative Innovation* (2015). She analyses Audre Lorde's biomythography and *Cancer Journals*, Jill Nelson's texts as well as Black women's self-representation and Buddhism. Also, she reflects on Black women's online writing and the way they shape their subjectivities in virtual spaces.

In terms of academic articles, situation is nowadays quite satisfactory. There are hundreds of essays and articles published on African American women's literary tradition, from enslaved authors to contemporary female writers. Examples below shall provide a general idea of the current state of the art on Black women's letters and autobiographical tradition. Examples are as follows: Coretta Pittman's "Black Women Writers and the Trouble with Ethos: Harriet Jacobs, Billie Holiday, and Sister Souljah" (2006), Leslie Schwalm's *"*Agonizing Groans of Mothers" and "Slave-Scarred Veterans": The Commemoration of Slavery and Emancipation*"* (2008), Johnnie Stover's "Radical Spiritual Motherhood: Autobiography and Empowerment in Nineteenth-Century African American Women" (2013), Sallie M. Cuffie's "Reconstructing Subversive Moral Discourses in the Spiritual Autobiographies of Nineteenth-Century African Preaching Women" (2016), Maria Troy's "Chronotopes in Harriet Jacob's Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl" (2016), Janaka B. Lewis's "Elizabeth Keckley and Freedom's Labor" (2016). The general conclusion drawn after consulting existing literature is that slavery narratives still attract scholars' attention, as well as contemporary names such as Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, Audre Lorde, Paule Marshall, June Jordan, Angela Davis, among others. However, this is also true that there are names which attract more attention than others, as shall be explained below.

Among the four authors included in the corpus of the Thesis, the best studied and most popular among scholars is Audre Lorde. Numerous academic articles have been published on her poetry, sexual orientation, contribution to Black feminist and lesbian studies as well as her autobiography *Zami* (1982) and *The Cancer Journals* (1980). It is impossible to enumerate all of the articles but some will follow as examples of academic interest in Lorde's *oeuvre*: Ruth Ginzberg (1992) "Audre Lorde's (Nonessentialist) Lesbian Eros*"*, William Major (2002) "Audre Lorde's "*The Cancer Journals*": Autopathography as Resistance*"*, Gail Lewis (2005) "Audre Lorde: Vignettes and Mental Conversations*"*, Sharon Barnes (2008)

"Marvelous Arithmetic: Prosthesis, Speech, and Death in the Late Work of Audre Lorde", Aishah Shahidah Simmons (2014) "Excerpts from Silence … Broken: Audre Lorde's Indelible Imprint on My Life", Arthur W. Frank (2012) "From Sick Role to Narrative Subject: An Analytic Memoir". In 2006 Alexis de Veaux published her biography of *Audre Lorde: Warrior Poet: A Biography of Audre Lorde*. Last years saw publications of a number of articles on Audre Lorde who, clearly, continues to attract scholars' attention. Lorde's radical approach towards feminism, racism and intersectionality still inspires researchers. Some examples of the most recent academic articles follow to illustrate the fact that the author has not fallen into academic oblivion. In 2019 Kaisa Ilmonen published her academic article ("Identity Politics Revisited: Audre Lorde, Intersectionality, and Mobilizing Writing Styles") which focuses on Audre Lorde's philosophy of intersectionality. Jack Turner in his 2021"Audre Lorde's Anti-Imperial Consciousness" examines the contribution Audre Lorde made to the fight against imperialism. In 2020 Suriya Nayak published an article entitled "For Women of Colour in Social Work: Black Feminist Self-Care Practice Based on Audre Lorde's Radical Pioneering Principles" where she examines the practise of self-care and self-love in Black women's community, based on Audre Lorde's principles of self-love. The same year witnessed the publication of an interesting article in the Portuguese language authored by Renata Severo: "O corpo como lugar do sentido: uma análise semiológica inspirada em Audre Lorde". In 2022 *Hypatia* published Caleb Ward's "Audre Lorde's Erotic as Epistemic and Political Practice" where, as it often happens, Audre Lorde's emphasis on the erotic is examined in the light of new feminist and gender perspectives. Also, in 2022 Laury Scheyer and Kareem Abdul published their article in comparatist studies whose goal was to draw parallels between Walt Whitman and Audre Lorde's poetry ("The Function of Poetry in the Modern World: A Case Study of Walt Whitman and Audre Lorde's Poems"). Alicia Nunes made her contribution as well to the scholarly knowledge of Audre Lorde publishing her 2022 article which examines Audre Lorde's work in the context of Black lesbian literature ("Audre Lorde: Contribuições para uma epistemologia da crítica feminista à literatura lésbica negra"). Still in the same year, 2022, two more articles appeared worth mentioning here: Giorgia Scribellito's analysis of Audre Lorde's biomythography *Zami* ("An Intercultural Analysis of Zami (1982) by Audre Lorde as a Feminist Bildungsroman") and Serene Khader's examination of Lorde's *Sister Outsider* in her article entitled "Civility, Silence, and Epistemic Labor in Audre Lorde's Sister Outsider".

There are also numerous M.A. and PhD theses on Audre Lorde, especially in many American and European universities and still new dissertations are being written on the African American author.

Nina Simone has also been the subject of some academic works, but noticeably, her autobiography, which will be analysed in the present Thesis, does not seem to attract so much scholarly attention. Simone appears in academic theses and articles devoted to the topic of music and female protest songs during the Civil Movement of the 1960s. Additionally, two biographies of Nina Simone were published: Alan Light's (2016) *What Happened, Miss Simone? A Biography* and David Brun Lambert's *Nina Simone: The Biograph*y in 2010. Some examples of articles published about this African American composer are the following: Ruth Feldstein (2005) *"*I Don't Trust You Any More": Nina Simone, Culture, and Black Activism in the 1960s", Danielle Heard (2012) "Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood": Nina Simone's Theater of Invisibility", Salamishah Tillet (2012) "Strange Sampling: Nina Simone and Her Hip-Hop Children", J. Griffith Rollefson (2015) *"*He's Calling His Flock Now": Black Music and Postcoloniality from Buddy Bolden's New Orleans to Sefyu's Paris", Jasmine Mena and P. Khalil Saucier (2014) "Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood": Nina Simone's Africana Womanism", Tanisha C. Ford (2015) "Reimagining Africa. How Black Women Invented the Language of Soul in the 1950s", Julia S. Jordan-Zachery (2017) "Sister Speak: Using Intersectionality in Our Political and Policy Strategizing*"* in *Shadow Bodies* (book). In recent years a couple of articles have been published of which we have decided to highlight three: Fleming's 2022 "Anticipating Blackness: Nina Simone, Lorraine Hansberry, and the Time of Black Ontology". The scholarly interest of this article lies in the fact that Nina Simone is analysed here along Lorraine Hansberry. Both Black women were active in the Civil Rights Movement and both displayed a radical approach towards their role as Black female citizens who took pains to change their reality through art. Richard Elliot published, in 2022 too, the article where he examines the question of Afrofuturism and dystopian characteristics in Nina Simone's music and performances. This is definitely a fresh approach towards Nina Simone's art and music linking it to the recent field of study in Black Studies which is Afrofuturism. The article's title is: "The Reincarnation of an Egyptian Queen: Dystopian Lateness and Speculation in Nina Simone's Afrofuturism".

Faith Ringgold used to be mentioned mainly in works related to African American women artists and, as in the case of Nina Simone, there is a significant scarcity of academic works dedicated to her memoir: *We Flew Over the Bridge* (1995). There is a number of

academic articles on art and black women where Ringgold's name appears, for example: Josephine Withers' "All Representation is Political: Feminist Art Past and Present" (2008), Arlene R. Keizer's (2008) "Gone Astray in the Flesh: Kara Walker, "Black Women Writers, and African American Postmemory", Paul Von Blum's "African American Visual Resistance Representation: From Repression to Resistance" (2012), Caroline Wallace's "Exhibiting Authenticity: The Black Emergency Cultural Coalition's Protest of the Whitney Museum of American Art, 1968-71" (2015), Martha Barry McKenna's (2015) "Narrative Inquiry as an Approach for Aesthetic Experience: Life Stories in Perceiving and Responding to Works of Art". In 1998 Lisa E. Farrington published a full-length work on Faith Ringgold's visual art under the title *Art on Fire: The Politics and Race and Sex in the Paintings of Faith Ringgold*. Some space is allocated to Ringgold's life and the art of quilt-making in a book entirely dedicated to African American quilt makers: Patricia A. Turner's *Crafted Lives: Stories and Studies of African American Quilters* (2009) discusses the art of Faith Ringgold in the chapter entitled "Lift As You Fly". In the Portuguese context, Teresa Botelho published an article on Faith Ringgold: "Finding Aesthetic of Her Own: Partnering Identities in the Work of Faith Ringgold" (2013). Faith Ringgold continues to attract academic attention but, as has been noted in this Thesis, it is mainly her art that is the topic of academic research. For example, Ewa Kleczaj-Siara wrote an article on Ringgold's picture books analysing them in her 2022 "In Search of Faith Ringgold's Picture Books". The same applies to the 2022 article authored by Hertha Wong: "Thinking Through the Book and Reimagining the Page: Julie Chen's Artists' Books and Faith Ringgold's Story Quilts". This article makes a comparison between two female artists: Julie Chen and Faith Ringgold and their work on books, pages, and illustrations.

Rebecca Walker's memoir *Black, White and Jewish: Autobiography of a Shifting Self* (2001) remains largely under-examined. References to her memoir appear sporadically in some M.A. theses, but it has been determined that there is a lack of sustained scholarship on Walker's autobiographical writing. Lori Harrison-Kahan published her 2005 article "Passing for White, Passing for Jewish: Mixed Race Identity in Danzy Senna and Rebecca Walker"; Fu-jen Chen published in 2009 an academic article comparing Walker to Gish Jen: "Postmodern Hybridity and Performing Identity in Gish Jen and Rebecca Walker". In the same year an interesting article appeared on Walker's autobiography: "Performing the Twenty-First Century Tragic Mulatto: *Black, White, and Jewish: Autobiography of a Shifting Self*, by Rebecca Walker" by Ralina Joseph (2009). And, finally, in 2013 there was

"Multiracial Identities in the Work of Rebecca Walker and Kip Fulbeck: A Critique of American Liberal Multiculturalism" by Gino Pellegrini. A 2013 academic article of relevance was published on Jewish Identity in the US and Rebecca Walker's case in mentioned in passing. However, the article is worth mentioning here as it helps to understand the complex identity issues expressed by American Jewish people. The article was authored by Giulia Miller and is entitled: "Identity Papers: Contemporary Narratives of American Jewishness".

In terms of Doctoral dissertations already written on the subject of African American autobiography, particularly in the United States, where the field of Black Studies is particularly vibrant, it has been determined that their authors concentrate rather on different dimensions. The research carried out helped to determine what academic dissertations have been elaborated in this field and the first finding is that there exists a significant tendency to examine in one thesis autobiographers who have more in common with each other than otherwise. For example, theses have been consulted which are dedicated solely to autobiographies written by professional writers. Alternatively, doctoral theses have been produced taking as their topic autobiographies written only by artists. Some of the examples follow: *Civil Rights Subjectivities and African American Women's Autobiographies: The Life-Writings of Daisy Bates, Melba Patillo Beals, and Anne Moody* is a doctoral thesis written by Anne Mitchell at the Ohio University in 2010. The thesis explores subjectivities of African American activists, so focuses on one group of women. Another example is a doctoral thesis written by Jerome P. De Romanet in 1990 at the Louisiana State University which explores the self of African American and Caribbean women writers and is entitled: *The Narrative Creation of Self in the Fiction by African American and African-Caribbean Women Writers.*

In 2015 a doctoral thesis was written by Heather Caldwell at the University of Massachusetts Amherst taking as its focus Black women artists and, among other discourses, the work analyses autobiographies and other textual materials related to Katherine Dunham, Jackie Ormes, Lena Horne, and Elizabeth Catlett. The thesis has a title: *Imaging Her Selves: Black Women Artists, Resistance, Image and Representation, 1938-1956.* It is also worth mentioning that Maria de Araújo from the University of Lisbon, Portugal wrote in 2008 her doctoral thesis on the subject of "I" present in discourses of African American and African authors where she analyses, among others, Nelson Mandela, Noemia de Sousa, Harriet Jacobs, Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, and Marcus Garvey. The title

of the thesis is: *Textos Afro-Americanos e Textos Africanos: Dis-cursos do Eu ao Espelho Repartido da Diáspora Discursiva Moderna*. *Since Why is Difficult - The Representation of Violence and Trauma in African-American and Afro-Caribbean Literature by Women: Autobiography, Fiction, and Subjectivity Construction in the Bildungsroman* is the 2019 PhD Thesis authored by Gonçalo Cholant from the University of Coimbra, Portugal in which he deals with the question of trauma and violence in coming-of-age novels and autobiographies written by African-American (bell hooks and Toni Morrison) and Afro-Caribbean (Jamaica Kincaid and Edwidge Danticat) women.

In this context the present Thesis will situate itself as, on one hand, continuation of academic research at the intersection of feminist and African American autobiographical studies, as it is devoted to female autobiographies published in the second half of the 20th Century. On the other hand, it will fill in the void regarding the reading of the four proposed autobiographies from three different angles (I vs community, embodiment, and relationships as three dimensions of the authors' narrative construction of their selves). As has been discussed above, several theses already exist on the subject of the self and autobiography and/or fiction, however, the proposed research proves to be relevant because the constellation of authors selected for the purpose guarantees diverse and rich narratives written by artists, activists and writers treated all in one research. Until now no doctoral thesis has appeared in Portugal studying Faith Ringgold, Audre Lord, Nina Simone, and Rebecca Walker together, analysing their autobiographies from the comparatist point of view, trying to establish parallels and divergences in their narratives. Some of the autobiographers have been examined in separate dissertations but also, it should be emphasised, in case of Audre Lorde, the works concentrate on her sexual orientation. Also, the originality of this research is based on the grounds that public figures such as Faith Ringgold or Nina Simone have been rather ignored as autobiographers and their autobiographies have remained relatively unexamined. Most academic studies on these authors tends to emphasise their roles as artists (quilt-maker/painter and singer/pianist) mainly but not as authors of autobiographies. It has been determined that Faith Ringgold tends to be discussed in the context of African American female art and Nina Simone is strongly linked to the study of Black music in the United States and the impact her songs had on the Civil Movement. She is studied rather in relation to jazz and Black musical production of protest songs and her link to the Civil Rights Movement which, as she claims in her autobiography, was just a period of her life. It was an important period, as she argues,

but neither her narrative nor her life can be reduced to those seven years of involvement with the Movement. From the four authors proposed for this research, only Audre Lorde's textual self-construction has been well studied. The remaining three autobiographers' narrative selves have remained unaddressed, and this shall be redressed in this Thesis. This research shall bring original contribution to women's and African American studies by shifting attention from historical dimension of each of the authors to textual and narrative aspect of their selves.

Hence, the Thesis will clearly contribute to the knowledge regarding these specific authors' narratives, the way they envisaged themselves in the society and the manner in which they wove the fabric of their private and public selves. Also, it is important to note that in the times when African Americans still face deep injustices, economic deprivation, massive incarceration[28], police brutality, and so forth in times when movements such as Black Lives Matter emerge in the 21st century to fight for African American human and civil rights, the question of how Black Americans shape their selves, how they can control their own image and tell their stories is of extreme importance. In the times when "controlling images" related to Black bodies (Hill Collins, 2000, *op. cit.*, 2003) still operate in full, research must be done into individual subjectivities and authorial freedom and choices to weave textual subjectivities.

The purpose of this chapter was to enrich and complement the debate started in the chapter I. While chapter I focuses on the discussion of the various concepts necessary to understand the complexity of the autobiography as a genre, its relationship to memory, act of forgetting and remembering, truth, fiction and lies, the concepts of the self, its link to narration and two remaining concepts (memoir and autofiction), the purpose of the chapter II was to examine the concept of gender in literature and culture, discuss the initial stages of the American autobiography and scrutinise the phenomenon of African-American autobiography as a part of the American tradition, opening in this way space for analysis of the four African American autobiographies selected for this Thesis. It has been concluded

[28] Ava DuVarney's documentary *13th* launched on 7th of October 2016 speaks about the current problem of mass incarceration African Americans face in the US. The title stands for the 13th amendment to the American Constitution whose aim was to abolish slavery. However, the filmmaker's argument goes that slavery continues in the United States only under a different form, mainly the strong tendency to incarcerate young African Americans in prisons largely maintained by private companies. In this way the phenomenon of mass incarceration has, both, racist and economic foundations.

that the concept of gender is a complex phenomenon which cannot be examined as the only category of analysis lest texts become limited to one factor only. Gender is, indeed of great relevance to any analysis of a literary text, but as scholars mentioned in this chapter asserted, it must be taken as an element of a bigger puzzle. Other factors are equally important, for example ethnic origins, geographical location of the speaking/writing subject, socio-economic status, religious denomination, professional aspect, among others. Only then will it be possible to draw parallels but also distinctions among the texts proposed for the corpus as each of the autobiographers which shall be scrutinised in the following chapters stands as an individual entity with her own life story, cultural and social background, her unique way of writing herself into the text.

This chapter also discussed the early development of the American autobiography and proceeded then to scrutinise the problematics of African American self-narratives, starting with the autobiographies of the enslaved Black people to set the tone for the following chapters and also to provide historical, cultural, and literary context for further analysis of the four autobiographies examined in the next chapters. Because literary tradition does not develop in a cultural vacuum, it has been important to examine the tendencies in the 18th and 19th Centuries to demonstrate that, in many aspects, African American autobiographies penned in the 20th Century do continue certain traditions, even if political and cultural background has changed significantly.

Chapter III

Black women autobiographers (torn) between their individual and communitarian self

Introduction: Roots or Routes?

It is frequently expected from people of colour to deal in their narratives with issues of race in general terms, and, more specifically, to touch upon the topic of race relations in America, colour-blindness, and racial discrimination. Thus, the cultural milieu (both Black and white) is quick to judge a Black artist if they fail to live up to those expectations.[1] As will be discussed in this chapter, Black autobiographers selected for the purpose of this Thesis deal in different ways with the question of how Blackness and community impact their lives and how, if at all, they try to resist the tendencies imposed on Black artists to demonstrate their loyalty towards that community. All the autobiographers analysed in this chapter scrutinise in detail their racial selves. However, as will be examined, the process is not always smooth and tensionless. As a matter of fact, the conflict between individual freedom and loyalty towards their racial community persists, although to varying degrees in each of the autobiographies examined. As will be analysed, certain autobiographers devote their entire narrative to demonstrate the difficulty of coming to terms with the racial and communitarian dimensions of their selves while others express less difficulty embracing their roots, maintaining, simultaneously, their autonomy and freedom to pursue their private lives and career paths and even have the courage to transmit critical observations regarding Black communities. The specific purpose of this chapter is to examine in detail what has been presented in the Introduction to the Thesis as the first axis of the research:

[1] It is relevant to refer to the example of Zora Neal Hurston's autobiography *Dust Track of a Road* (1942), which had been severely criticized by her Black peers and literary critics for the author's refusal to tackle head on racial relations in the US, the issue of segregation, and so on. As a matter of fact, even though certain excerpts which confronted American racism had been excised from the book before its publication, the whole autobiography is a positive approach on Zora's life and her status of a Black woman. The narrative does not dwell on how her skin colour created obstacles in her life and in some fragments the author even admits that constant referring to Blackness suffocates Black artists as it limits their art. She also adds that she had never had a "herd instinct" and humanity in general was what interested her, not only race. Such an attitude might be the result of her work as an anthropologist having studied under the famous German-American anthropologist, Franz Boas. Still, the approach of trying to leave her Blackness behind brought Zora Neal Hurston a severe critique from Alice Walker, who claimed in her introduction to *Dust Track on a Road* that it was an unfortunate book. Neal's biographer, Robert Hemenway's observation was of a similar nature and Nelly McKay also expressed her disappointment with the autobiography. The book was accused of insincerity not only because Zora seemed to have manipulated some information regarding her age and other facts from her life but mainly because she did not write an autobiography expected of a Black writer.

the tension between the individual self and the community within which each of the four autobiographers is embedded. It will scrutinise how each African American author selected for the corpus of the Thesis weaves her textual Self in terms of racial (non)belonging. As has been mentioned, racial identity, although socially constructed, is very important both in the eyes of the corpus authors but also in the eyes of the society - its both Black and white members. Thus, it will be examined how the racial self is born, created, and recreated in each of the autobiographical narratives and whether the racialised selfhood is problematic or not in each autobiographer's case. The chapter will study the problem of so-called racial authenticity and how, in some cases, Black communities can stifle individual freedom of Black women who strive to attain their personal and professional independence. The chapter is divided into subsections each of them dedicated to a separate author. However, before it is possible to proceed to a detailed analysis of the problem at hand, this Introduction discusses the concept of racial identity, according to the studies carried out by renowned specialists in the area of identity studies, gender, Blackness, and racial studies.

Historically, Black people have been seen as an indistinguishable mass composed of people similar to each other, not revealing any individualistic traits. Albert Memmi (2016) spoke about "the mark of the plural" when he argued that all colonised nations and people are categorised as unmarked, a mass of undifferentiated individuals deprived of their singularity and, thus, humanity. The following fragment focuses on the colonised people, however it can be extended to all members of ethnic minorities:

> The colonized is never characterized in an individual manner; he is entitled only to drown in an anonymous collectivity ("They are this." "They are all the same."). If a colonized servant does not come in one morning, the colonizer will not say that she is ill, or that she is cheating, or that she is tempted not to abide by an oppressive contract . . . He will say, "You can't count on them." It is not just a grammatical expression. He refuses to consider personal, private occurrences in his maid's life; that life in a specific sense does not interest him, and his maid does not exist as an individual. (Memmi, *ibid*, p. 129).

Clearly, it was believed that the enslaved person or the immigrant had no life of his/her own, no dreams of his/her own, no ambitions or plans for the future. Their lives were of any interest as far as they were considered useful to the masters. This unfortunate approach continues well into the 21st Century. The Western view of the once colonised, enslaved

people and, today, of people of colour, immigrants and different ethnicities tends to marginalise them as being identical in their semblance, culture, customs, and beliefs. Under the Western gaze Black people, African and Arab refugees and immigrants are either invisible or hypervisible in a negative, if not pathological way. They are rarely portrayed as individuals but rather as a collective. And so, if critics and readers are faced with art produced by an Other, they expect that "otherness", whatever that means, to be reflected in the art.

At this stage, it is useful to refer as well to the academic work developed by Paul Gilroy, especially his *The Black Atlantic* (1993) and *Against Race* (2002), which establish a link to Memmi's philosophy of insistence on the humanity and individuality of non-Western people. Gilroy's work also draws on William Edward Burghardt DuBois's concept of double consciousness in Black subjects who strive to be Black and European or American at the same time[2]. Gilroy's both works are thought-provoking because the author takes a stand against obsessive concern with race, roots/racial identity reminding his readers that all cultures impact each other, borrow themes, ideas and inspire each other. He admits that by rejecting the idea of "race" he might be complicating the political and ideological goals of groups who have been constantly marginalised and who have built entire resistance programmes on the idea of "race". He admits as well that racial identities are fruit of racism, thus people who were and continue to be discriminated against developed techniques of resistance and subversion creating political alliances based on identities:

> I understand that taking antipathy towards "race" beyond the unstable equilibrium represented by my liberal use of scare quotes might be viewed as a betrayal of those groups whose oppositional, legal and even democratic claims have come to rest on identities and solidarities forged at great cost from the categories given to them by their oppressors (2002, *ibid.*, p. 52)

Being aware that so-called "epidermal politics" might be a problem also to the Black communities, Gilroy insists on liberating the culture, science, and academia from all

[2] W. E. B. DuBois's *The Souls of Black Folk* published originally in 1903 discussed the concept of double consciousness which is a complex phenomenon related to "two-ness", to disparate and conflicting thoughts, desires, and ideals. According to DuBois it is a permanent state of the mind and form of consciousness where a Black person, stigmatised and marginalised, strives, at the same time to belong to both cultures and communities: Black and white.

racialised talk, mentality, racialised seeing, and thinking about thinking (*ibid*, p. 40). In his view, insisting on national cultures, national identities and cultural/identity purity contributes to further marginalisation of Black people and tendencies to separatism. According to the author, national identities and cultures are not obvious or permanent. In his work he proposes to focus on cultures which are fluid instead of being trapped within artificially created and obstinately maintained boundaries. He coins the term "Black Atlantic" as a reaction to nationalist patterns of thinking against mainstream culture and cultural history. He insists on "routes" instead of "roots", on voyage, transition, movement which always give rise to new cultures that in turn draw inspiration from other peoples and cultures. He specifically highlights that travel, any travel, tends to make people change their mind about race and forces them to consider what it means and how insistence on national identities can limit reflection on the richness of human cultural heritage.

"Black Atlantic" is a concept that generates debate about how movement, transition, relocation, and transformation can potentially change one's view of their self and identity, how they can become fluid and shifting, constantly changing, depending on circumstances, enriched by Others, their world views, experiences, politics, and memory. Both books offer an important and needed critique of stable but closed off identities that do not make room for new experiences, peoples, and ethnic diversity. Relocation, travel, and transition impact one's racial self and identity in such a way that when people start to question old assumptions and certainties they might be accused of inauthenticity. This problem of racial (in)authenticity is particularly relevant to this chapter because some of the autobiographers are questioned or question themselves in the same way: what do they have to do, how do they have to live, act, and speak to be considered authentic Black women? Do they betray their race and community if they do not think, speak and write enough about race, oppression and discrimination? Does criticism of the community mean a person is turning their back on it? Is it a betrayal of one's brethren? The following excerpt from Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* illustrates well the problem addressed in this chapter:

> Richard Wright's life in exile, which has been written off as a *betrayal of his authenticity*[3] and as a process of seduction by philosophical traditions supposedly outside his narrow ethnic compass will be explored below as an exemplary instance

[3] Emphasis added.

> of how the politics of location and the politics of identity get inscribed in analyses of black culture. (*ibid*, p.18).

Life in exile, choosing to live away from one's community can be understood by one's community as a sign of betrayal of that community. In the same vein, writing critically of one's in-group, feeling of not belonging or simply writing one's autobiography without racial matters being the primary focus can discredit an author as inauthentic. After all, an important question arises: if in light of the most recent biological and medical research it seems outdated or even inappropriate to speak of races, as there is only one human race, and no biological basis exists for the categorisation of humans into separate races, what sense does it make to insist on racial authenticity? According to Gilroy, such politics of identity contributes to limiting people in their humanity and serves as a fuel to racist movements and philosophy.

However, it cannot be denied that racial identity (just as gender or sexual identity) still plays an important role in how individuals see themselves and, perhaps even more important, how others perceive them. Linda Martín Alcoff[4] in her insightful 2006 work on various kinds of identities entitled *Visible Identities. Race, Gender and the Self*, defends the idea of racial identities (and other identities as well), in contrast with the approach argued by Paul Gilroy for whom insistence on racial identities, fixed and stable, entails problems and a lack of cultural exchange which, in turn, leads to misunderstandings and closed groups of people mistrusting other cultures. Linda Alcoff affirms that nowadays matters of identity are popular, extremely visible and can become an element in political fights for minorities' and human rights. In fact, she defends identity politics and does not see any danger identitarian politics might potentially entail. Moreover, she claims that it has become important to defend different kinds of identity (gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality and so on) because they are of great relevance to many people. According to her, identity politics needs to be discussed and the question of identity cannot be made invisible. However, the recent tendency in social and cultural sciences is the opposite. Because identity has become

[4] It is necessary to highlight that both scholars, Paul Gilroy and Linda Alcoff, represent two schools of thought in social sciences: Paul Gilroy is a proponent of social constructivism which, in what regards racial identities, sees them as purely social constructs. Linda Alcoff, in turn, advocates a social realism approach which highlights the relevance of identities seeing them as real, not imagined and wishes to maintain the epistemic reality of identities.

suspect, identity politics has been persecuted and severely criticised. She further argues that race and gender are identities that cannot be hidden for they are out there for everyone to see. She affirms as well that age can be masked, homosexuality can be rendered invisible and class too can be somehow disguised behind correct speech/accent or clothes, but race along with gender are impossible to hide:

> Race and gender are forms of social identity that share at least two features: they are fundamental rather than peripheral to the self – unlike, for example, one's identity as Celtics fan or a democrat – and they operate through visual markers on the body. In our excessively materialist society, only what is visible can generally achieve the status of accepted truth. What I can see for myself is what is real; (…) Secular, commodity-driven society is thus dominated by the real of the visible, which dominates not only knowledge but also the expression and mobilization of desire and all sorts of social practices as well. (*ibid*, p. 6).

However, it should be noted here that race is indeed possible to hide if one has skin light enough to pass for white which is not, altogether, an unthinkable and rare situation[5]. Nevertheless, for Alcoff race does matter also because it is overwritten on the body so that the whole world can see. In her work on identities and their importance she critically analyses the concerns indicated by philosophers like Jean-Luc Nancy[6] who express their concern regarding too much focus on identities. Ethnic cleansing had taken place because of identities and if societies do not curb the tendencies to highlight racial/ethnic identities more atrocities could take place in the West and other parts of the world. She enumerates

[5] Passing has been a centuries-old process in the United States where African Americans whose skin is light enough and whose body does not bear visible African origins. Such individuals would often "pass" into the Caucasian race or other races in order to avoid stigma attached to being Black, shun discrimination and climb the social ladder. There are several novels exploring the practise of passing, among them Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929) or James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912/2015) or, more recently, Danzy Senna's *Caucasia* (1998). Robert Fikes in his 2014 article on the phenomenon of passing observes though that this practise is gradually losing its allure due to the institutionalization of affirmative action and equal opportunity in the workplace, the emergence of the Black middle class and also demographic alterations in the American society with the growing number of immigrants from Latin America, Asia and Africa. Robert Fikes. (2014) "The Passing of Passing: A Peculiarly American Racial Tradition Approaches Irrelevance" https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/passing-passing-peculiarly-american-racial-tradition-approaches-irrelevance/

[6] Jean-Luc Nancy, a French philosopher born in 1940, has published more than twenty books on different philosophical topics. His academic interests cover such topics as the deconstruction of Christianity, Heidegger, Jena romantics. He is influenced by the work of Jacques Derrida, Georges Bataille and Martin Heidegger: https://iep.utm.edu/nancy/

those concerns expressed by Nancy who sees identity-based conflicts as a real threat to democracy and freedom in the West. Alcoff thus refutes his arguments about the struggle for autonomy in different parts of the world (Chiapas, for example), Muslim jihadist wars, military conflict in Chechnya, etc. saying Nancy presents a gloomy picture of the world overtaken by identity-politics and conflicts without proper contextualization of those struggles and conflicts. According to Alcoff, he conflates all conflicts into one question of identity without making any difference between religious, ethnic, cultural, mythical, historical or transnational identities (*ibid*., p.17). To Alcoff, a general attack on identities and identity-based politics and activism overlooks the complex nature of identity *per se* but also its importance in the daily life of each member of a given minority/group. In fact, she sees identity and politics which takes that concept into consideration as a genuine issue that must be approached with care, truth and without fear:

> In a climate in which one cannot invoke history, culture, race, or gender for fear of being accused of playing, for example, "the race card", or identity politics, or "victim feminism", our real commonalities and shared interests cannot even begin to be correctly identified. When I refuse to listen to how you are different from me, I am refusing to know who you are. But without understanding fully who you are, I will never be able to appreciate precisely how we are more alike than I might have originally supposed *(ibid.,* p. 6).

Both authors, Gilroy and Alcoff, discuss the matter of identity in an interesting way and their arguments are of great relevance, although each of them represents a different approach towards the politics of identity. However, their logic should be born in mind when analysing complex questions of identities. In Gilroy's understanding, obsessive focus on race and roots can cause a situation where people do not know anymore how to communicate and hide themselves behind their racial identities or use them to push their own agenda, often to the detriment of others. Such attitudes are frequently used for political purposes causing dissent, nationalistic approaches where racism and xenophobia are called upon in the name of protecting minorities' (or majority's) interest. Racial purity (as well as cultural purity, something cultural critics know does not exist) and the focus on racial authenticity are dangerous concepts which divide people and build walls, as shall be observed in some of the autobiographies analysed further in this chapter. Additionally, they are sources of anxiety, unresolved inner conflicts and foment a sense of constant inadequacy among individuals

who desperately strive to belong. Such an approach refuses to acknowledge that hybridity, transition, constant movement, fluidity and the intermixture of cultures and ideas contribute to more freedom (also personal freedom) and peace among different groups.

On the other hand, Linda Alcoff, being herself of Latin-American origin[7] and having felt on her skin the effects of racism and discrimination (*cf. Visible Identities*, *ibid*.) enriches and complements Gilroy's theory insisting on the importance of identity politics and its role in the contemporary society. Her approach is philosophical as well as psychological because she understands that identity is an inalienable part and right of every individual. As she claims, differences must not be avoided or feared as they do exist in the contemporary, hybrid world whether we like it or not. However, it must be also emphasised that politics of identity can prove, at times, treacherous even to members of a given community or minority if they are treated as means to obtain certain goals and not as autonomous and independent members of that community.

3.1. The Black and Lesbian Self mythically constructed in Audre Lorde's *Zami*.

Audre Lorde's[8] *Zami. A New Spelling of My Name*, her biomythography published in 1982 provides many examples of how the racial self is constructed and revealed throughout the narrative and how the author, although definitely identifying herself with the Black community in America and in the Caribbean retained her own individuality and refused to constrain herself within the limits of what others considered as "racial authenticity". Her entire text, imaginative and complex throughout, deals with the issues of (non)belonging, attempts to render her hybrid and fluid self and personality. Her autobiography discusses "race" but also reveals a complex figure who constantly reaches out to people (women in particular) of different "races" and ethnicities. Lorde refuses to be categorised by others as "only" Black, or "only" lesbian or "only" poet; she portrays herself as speaking from

[7] Also called nowadays "Latinx", a term which denotes people of Latin-American origin who were born, raised, and educated in the USA. It must be remembered, though, that the term Latinx refers to non-binary people who do not identify with their biological sex and do not define themselves as women or men. Adelaide Delgado, 2019. "Todo um universo latino-americano. O que significa "latinx"? *América Latina*, December 16, 2019: https://amlatina.contemporaryand.com/pt/editorial/what-is-latinx/

[8] Audre Lorde (1934-1992) was a renowned Black poet, essayist, activist. She described herself as "black, lesbian, mother, warrior, poet" and dedicated her life and work to fight racial and gender oppression and injustices targeting Black communities and women in particular.

different locations at the same time. She insists again and again that silence gives one's enemy a weapon to control the language and image used later against people like her – people who do not fall into one simple category, people who do not conform to passivity. If silence is not an option, what remains is language – poetry and prose. Her autobiography has been considered a powerful tool which she uses to construct her own image, chosen by herself and not imposed on her from the outside.

Before proceeding to the analysis of specific aspects of Lorde's narrative where she deals with complex questions of self and identity, it is necessary first to reflect on an important aspect of her autobiography. The first two chapters of this Thesis have been dedicated to the study of autobiography concentrating on different theories and schools of thought regarding life narratives with a particular focus on autobiography. It has been noted that autobiography cannot be constrained solely to a factual account of one's life and certain degrees of creative language, imagination and even unintentional lies are an inseparable part of the genre. It can be safely stated that the more creative, inventive, and vivid the language, including dialogues and other linguistic strategies such as poems, and so forth, the richer the autobiography. Obviously, readers have specific expectations from a book they believe to be an autobiography and, normally, they do not take lies easily. However, they also need to be aware that the author has the final say in the way the autobiography is written.

Thus, if closer attention is paid to Audre Lorde's narrative, the subtitle can prove to be slightly disconcerting. *Zami. A New Spelling of My Name.* ***A Biomythography***[9]. Bio+mytho+graphy is a new term that denotes a hybrid writing about oneself and one's life. The definition of the "myth" can be looked up in the Merriam-Webster Dictionary online:

1 a: a usually traditional story of ostensibly historical events that serves to unfold a part of the world view of a people or explain practice, belief, or natural phenomenon,

b: parable, allegory,

2 a: a popular belief or tradition that has grown up around something or someone,

b: an unfounded or false notion,

3 a: a person or thing having only an imaginary of unverifiable existence,

[9] Emphasis added.

b: the whole body of myths[10]

Thus, the term "biomythography"[11] leads the reader in the direction of a myth, description of an untrue event, an imaginary person, land, or time. Audre Lorde specifically chose this term to play with her readers (and critics) suggesting that she guides her narrative towards her imaginary self expressed through creative language. In the light of the above, it would be a mistake to expect solely factual descriptions and down-to earth facts in Audre Lorde's narrative. As a matter of fact, readers can never be sure if she is telling the truth while referring to some events in her life. The whole point of biomythography is to let the author exercise her authorial freedom as an autonomous subject creating her life story, not necessarily telling it "as is". Legend-making and myth-making are important elements in Lorde's autobiography and, it should be added, an intelligent authorial strategy to navigate the narrow constraints of traditional autobiography (as understood by first generation of autobiography critics). Hers is not a chronological, classical autobiography, written in a linear way. It also does not focus on Lorde's rise to fame as a renowned poet. Rather it concentrates on her formative years (1940s–1960s), her youth but, more importantly, the period where she realised who she really was and how she got there as a Black lesbian feminist poet. Thus, *Zami* expands and enriches the tradition. In her text Audre Lorde is more interested in portraying her external and internal landscapes than in telling her story as is.

According to María Calle (2002) for Lorde, biomythography is a method of self-exploration, and not a limited genre whose validity depends on the authenticity of her narration content. The impact the author has on her own narrated life and Self-definition is through words and shaping her narrative as she sees it fit. Self-naming belongs to her, before others can do it. Russel (2009: 59) claims that *Zami* seems, at first sight, to be a conventional autobiography where Lorde describes her life but then admits that the very subtitle "biomythography" forces readers to revise their initial idea and expectations about the book. Authorial freedom and imagination run deep throughout the text which is an

[10] https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/myth

[11] "Biomythography" is a literary term which refers to texts which combine myth, history, and biography. The term denotes narratives which construct and display multiple selves, subjects who write from different positionalities and who define themselves as possessing many facets and subjectivities which either complement each other or enter in conflict with each other. https://www.cerritos.edu/farbazaar/collectives_Biomythography.htm

uncompromising project to counter not only the rigidity of the genre but also readerly expectations. Right at the very beginning of the book, in the Acknowledgements section, Audre Lorde states: "From the bottom of my heart I thank each woman who shared any piece of the dream/myths/histories that give this book shape" (Lorde, 1982, unnumbered page). As can be seen, dream, myth and histories are important elements of her text which must be taken into account when analysing the work. The text becomes a collage, a narrative with a dream-like quality which defies the norms of many African American autobiographies which previously, going back to times of slavery, relied heavily on truth, facts, and collaboration from white sources whose aim was to prove that the text is a reliable source of information. As has been mentioned previously, in the fight against slavery, all autobiographical texts by enslaved people had to demonstrate their facticity, otherwise they would run the risk of being dismissed as fiction and lies and, as a result, be considered useless. The abolitionists who supported the authors and publications undertook efforts to testify to the texts' reliability.[12] In the light of the above, it can be argued that, to some extent, Lorde's biomythography cuts ties with the African American autobiographical tradition. Although she focuses on her racial self, the narrative strategy she opted for sends a signal that as an author, a Black woman and an artist, she feels free to follow her own path. She is not afraid to experiment with form and language.

One of the characteristics of Lorde's autobiography is that she does not confine herself to reveal just one facet of her self. Hers is a carefully planned strategy to create a complex, hybrid and fluid self which embraces her own race but is not limited to or constrained by it, although she confirms on many occasions that her race caused her pain and trouble. Audre Lorde weaves a fabric of her narrative which, at the end of the book, exposes a persona full of contradictions, identities which are at times difficult to conciliate, and which create frictions throughout the narrative.

Audre Lorde's race becomes the subject of her narrative on many occasions – it is definitely not a topic she would dismiss easily or choose not to talk about. The entire narrative is plenty of images of Black people, mainly girls and women, friends, her mother, family members, and later her lovers (among them white female lovers too). Roots, unlike in Paul Gilroy's theory, do play an essential role in Lorde's life and on the basis of those

[12] As has been discussed, in the narratives written by enslaved people white elite members such as anti-slavery activists, lawyers, writers, and so on gave credibility to Black texts by including commentaries in the text, usually as a form of the introduction or foreword to attest to the narrative's factuality.

roots (either real or imaginary) she gradually builds her identity throughout the biomythography. In the Caribbean, the small island of Carriacou[13] is her dreamed home, a source of self-love and self-affirmation. The deep love for the home located in the West Indies came to her as a heritage (emotional and cultural) through her mother and other Caribbean women whose memory Lorde cherishes and weaves into her text. Her mother, one of the central figures in the autobiography, is a source of knowledge about home, Caribbean women, culture, its myths, and legends. Storytelling is an essential part of young Lorde's life, a source of self-knowledge and her identity as a brown girl. The mythic home which she had never seen but only knew through her mother's eyes becomes an obsession, a place longed for and deeply cherished:

> Whenever we were close to water, my mother grew quiet and soft and absent-minded. Then she would tell us wonderful stories about Noel's Hill in Grenville, Grenada, which overlooked the Caribbean. She told us stories about Carriacou, where she had been born, amid the heavy smell of limes. She told us about plants that healed and about plants that drove you crazy, and none of it made sense to us children because we had never seen any of them. And she told us about the trees and fruits and flowers that grew outside the door of the house where she grew up and lived until she married. (…) This now here was a space, some temporary abode never to be considered forever nor totally binding nor defining, no matter how much it commanded in energy and attention. For if we lived correctly and with frugality, looked both ways before crossing the street, then someday we would arrive back in the sweet place, back home. (*ibid.*, p. 13)

This mythic, never-seen home, imbued with exotic calm, sensuous smells, and colours, located so far away from Harlem, created all expectations of a place where one would finally rest their bones, feel adequate and loved. Only in this place would one feel at home, as if

[13] The island of Carriacou (part of the Grenadine Islands, located in the south-east Caribbean Sea) becomes a mythic home to Audre Lorde. Through the language and memories of the place her mother Linda passed to Audre, the poet created an image of an island as a paradise for Black women. The island became a sort of utopia of home. By evoking the island's colours, smells and flavours as well as the vernacular language Audre Lorde immortalizes the island itself but also its strong Black women (Wilkinson, Audrey, 2023) "Biomythographical Home: Afric-Carribean Lesbian Goddesshood in Audre Lorde's Zami": https://vassarcriticaljournal.vassarspaces.net/issues/spring-2022/biomythographical-home-afro-carribean-lesbian-goddesshood-in-audre-lordes-zami/

one really and finally belonged. This idealised place became for Lorde a source of identity and of her true self. Only there, like her mother, would she feel she belonged.

In addition, Carriacou is inhabited by strong, no-nonsense women, just like her mother, who love and cherish other women. Forced to live alone as their men sailed off to support their families financially, Carriacou women turned to each other for emotional support and strength. They had to live separately from their men, build their houses, harvest limes, tend to corn and, consequently, created a net of female-only relations, networks, support groups and life partners. The legend of the island Lorde creates, the island with its women-oriented females, lesbian undertones, this nowhere-to-be-found on a map except in Lorde's heart (because officially the island of Carriacou is not listed on the school atlas Lorde uses during geography classes) becomes one of the earliest memory the author transmits at the beginning of her autobiography and is an important strategy as it becomes the basis for her racial and lesbian self. The fact that the island is not mentioned in Goode's School Atlas used by her school can have two meanings. The first one is that the island is only present in Lorde's memory and heart – a place invented through her mother's storytelling and embraced as a result of Lorde's feminist and lesbian identification. Clearly, having such an intense passion for her mother, Lorde treasured everything she transmitted orally to her: stories of home, the island's fruits, smells, tastes, and landscape all proof of their indelible roots. However, the absence of the island on an official map can also mean that the author critiques the Eurocentric approach towards other peoples and cultures. If the place does not exist officially on the map and it is also absent from society's imaginary. Its inhabitants, their culture and customs bear no impact on imperial or world politics. If something is invisible to the world's eyes, then the world is led to believe it does not exist at all. It then becomes even more urgent to link one's life, memories, emotions, and identity to such a neglected place. Like Lorde states: "It was our own, my truly private paradise of bluego and breadfruit hanging from the trees, of nutmeg and lime and sapodilla, of tonka beans and red and yellow Paradise Plums" (*ibid.*, p. 14).[14]

[14] A similar approach towards a quasi-mythic home in the Caribbean can be found in Paule Marshall's semi-autobiographical novel *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959) where the island of Barbados becomes the only place where the protagonist's father wishes to live, to reclaim his roots and identity. The island is romanticised, and racial identity becomes the basis of all a person is, even if it comes at the price of pain, conflict, and anxiety. It is important to mention that Jamaica Kincaid in some of her non-fiction, namely *A Small Place* (1988) where she analyses the current situation of Antigua, offers a sober critique of such exoticization of the islands, by the tourists and local people themselves, while obscuring real problems such as poverty, neo-colonialism, class inequalities and economical exploitation of the local people.

Throughout her narrative, Lorde returns to her Caribbean roots on various occasions, invoking the islands' exotic women, their skin colour, the texture of their hair, the fruits, spices, smells, and tastes. One such occasion is her first menses when the young girl smashes garlic and spices with her mother's mortar. The mortar used to this end is one of the most important tools in the house, something each self-respecting Caribbean family treasures most as it links the family back to their roots. The ensuing scene, where Lorde described carefully and with a great detail the whole ritual of grinding spices is filled with quasi-erotic and sensuous impressions, all related to her brown, now fully female (because menstruating) body but also linking her, through her mother's body and cultural heritage to her Caribbean roots and spices typical of her mythic home. The moist, aromatic spices link her menstruating body to the islands. The racial/cultural identity is again highlighted here as being of primary importance to the author. It is intimately associated with smells, colours, bodily sensations, and a larger-than-life Caribbean Island:

> The jarring shocks of the velvet-lined pestle, striking the bed of spice, travelled up an invisible pathway along the thread into the center of me, the harshness of the repeated impacts became increasingly more unbearable. The tidal basin suspended between my hips shuddered at each repetition of the strokes which now felt like assaults. Without my volition my downward thrusts of the pestle grew gentler and gentler, until its velvet surface seemed almost to caress the liquefying mash at the bottom of the mortar (*ibid.*, p. 79).

The excerpt is highly erotic, as other fragments of the autobiography are, and it becomes clear that Lorde makes a direct connection between the spices, the cultural/ethnic ritual of their grinding and the island of Carriacou where her mother was born. The racial self is expressed here through association with food preparation, bodily sensations, femininity (menstruation) and the link to the exotic island. The racial identity becomes eroticised and fully embraced, in contrast to often negative imagery of the racialised and exoticised Other presented in the American culture. The evidence shows[15] that the body of the (exotic) Other has often been displayed in the West (particularly Europe and America) to prove its medical or biological pathology, lasciviousness, and ugliness (Gilman, 1985; Washington, 2006). When Audre Lorde makes a strategical link between her body, race,

[15] As will be discussed in chapter IV.

and exotic islands, it is to reclaim her racial and ethnic heritage and put it back where it belongs, without shame or guilt.

Racial relations in America are not omitted or overlooked in *Zami*. Even though Audre Lorde does not write a text where she indulges in self-pity and Black victimisation, she nonetheless confronts American racism head on. She goes back in time to the period when she was a little girl and ponders on a situation that marked her youth and made her reflect, years later, on how Blackness is lived and experienced in America. She writes a sentence which even today is effective in the simplicity only an innocent child could express:

> As a very little girl, I remember shrinking from a particular sound, a hoarsely sharp, guttural rasp, because it often meant a nasty glob of grey spittle upon my coat or shoe an instant later. My mother wiped it off with the little pieces of newspaper she always carried in her purse. Sometimes she fussed about low-class people who had no better manners than to spit into the wind, no matter where they went, impressing upon me that this humiliation was totally random. (Lorde, *ibid*., pp. 17-18).

Her mother, thus, takes a stance of staged indifference when faced with the primitive racism that allows for a white person to spit on a black child. Ready to defend her daughter from the evils of the world, she makes her believe she is not the reason of such a scandalous behaviour. Although her mother never mentions the incident, it is certain that she must have kept the pain and humiliation to herself, without displaying it to the world. It is also somehow understandable why years later, not only in her autobiography but also in her essays Audre Lorde would claim that silence is never an option, it will never solve any problem, nor will it defend an oppressed minority against the oppressors. In one of her most eloquent and powerful essays on the matter of silence vs. denouncement of and speaking up against racial injustices entitled *Transformation of Silence into Language and Action* (1984/2007) she writes the following:

> And of course I am afraid, because transformation of silence into language and action is an act of self-revelation, and that always seems fraught with danger. But my daughter, when I told her of our topic and my difficulty with it, said, "Tell them about how you're never really a whole person if you remain silent, because there's always that one little piece inside you that wants to be spoken out, and if you keep ignoring it, it gets madder and madder, and hotter and hotter, and if you don't speak it out one day it will just up and punch you in the mouth from the inside". (p. 42).

Silence had been her mother's choice and, possibly to some extent, it did fulfil its role since young Lorde felt safe with her parents and did not experience too early all the anxieties many other Black children do when the outside world makes them realise they are Black and, by extension, supposedly second-class citizens. Silence, rejected by Lorde in adulthood, seemed to be the only legitimate strategy of coping with endemic racism and discrimination her mother could fathom in the 1930s and 1940s.[16]

Even though she renders the image of her mother as a strong woman, she admits, at the same time, that social and political conditions must have been difficult for a Black woman in 1930s New York. At the time of writing her autobiography she is fully aware Black adults had to confront white racism on a daily basis and her mother, although a heroine in her daughter's eyes, must have hidden all of the disillusionments her country put her through. The air of strength and lack of concern must have been not only a strategy of coping with racism but also a way to protect the children against the powerlessness of being Black. The same efforts her mother took to invest in her image as a strong woman are found in Lorde's autobiography and in her authorial effort to create an image she wanted to create for others to see – an image of a strong woman, warrior, and poet activist.

Within her family, racism was addressed very rarely, if ever. Both parents took pains to avoid any attitude of racial victimization. That does not imply Lorde's parents were ignorant of the reality around them. Quite the contrary, they firmly believed in the role and importance of education and instilled this value in their children as if all their fate depended on it. Definitely, merit was an important aspect in their lives. Lorde's parents believed, too, that their lives were entirely in their hands, as if no other external factors such as racism or classicism could thwart their plans. Still, living such a protected life, little Lorde quickly understood her people were largely underrepresented in all books she studied. Like other

[16] Interestingly, other African American autobiographers do mention the topic of silence as their parents' response to racism. A case in point is Anne Moody's autobiography *Coming of Age in Mississippi* (1968) where the author clearly remembers her mother's suffocating silence in face of Jim Crow laws destroying Black lives in the segregated South. Moody had been devastated and then deeply enraged by her mother's fear of white people and even a thought of talking back. She realised, however, that it might have been a consciously chosen strategy to protect the family from white revenge. Anne Moody's mother opted for silence as a weapon but, just like Audre Lorde, Anne Moody will later understand that silence will never guarantee freedom and basic human rights for Black people so she becomes an activist in the Civil Rights Movement to not only speak out but act against racial injustices.

Black autobiographers[17], she noticed a lack of positive representation of famous Black people in history or literature:

> All of our storybooks were about people who were very different from us. They were blond and white and lived in houses with trees around and had dogs named Spot. I didn't know people like that any more than I knew people like Cinderella who lived in castles. Nobody wrote stories about us, but still people always asked my mother for directions in a crowd (*ibid.*, p. 18).

Such racial invisibility can definitely lead to a sense of alienation, inadequacy, and non-belonging. Like with a non-existent place on a map, the Carriacou island, the none-existence of Black people in the books Audre was reading meant that Black Americans' existence is of no or little importance to white Americans. Invisibility or marginalisation were the only certainties the Black community could expect.

Lorde's racial self is born also through confrontation with racist teachers at school. One instance must have been of particular importance to the author as she includes it in her autobiography. In the process of learning to write, Lorde decides to drop the letter "y" from her name. What starts as a simple and trivial reason to change her name, develops into a meaningful act of self-invention and resistance to racism and categorisation from the outside. Initially, Lorde explains she dropped the last letter of her name simply because she disliked its "hanging" quality. The child's taste and imagination as well as aesthetic approach were severely resisted by both her mother and her teacher at school who insisted that she write her name as usual. Only on Linda's (Audre Lorde's mother) insistence would Audre include the letter in her name. At school she would repeat the "mistake", writing obstinately "Audre" instead of "Audrey" provoking her teacher's rage. When the girl finally managed to write down her name, in a diagonal way, on a white page, the teacher did not miss the opportunity to humiliate the child in front of the entire class. There is no doubt that this moment and the described incident is of great importance for Audre Lorde's self and

[17] The problem of underrepresentation is addressed in autobiographies by Assata Shakur, Elaine Brown, Anne Moody, among others. Those and other authors of autobiographies refer in their narratives that virtually no books they read contained any positive Black figures, protagonists from whom they could draw inspiration and strength. This problem will emerge also in the autobiographies of Faith Ringgold and Nina Simone scrutinised further in this Thesis.

budding identity. The act of writing one's own name, against all odds (insistent mother and uncomprehending teacher) is an act of resistance and self-invention.

Various Black intellectuals such as Henry Gates Jr. (1985), William Andrews (1993) or Patricia Hill Collins (2000) have paid attention to the fact that, historically, Black people in America have been deprived of their chance to self-name and self-define. During slavery they were given their masters' names, their own original names being ignored or forgotten, if not forbidden. Self-determination starts precisely with language and an opportunity to claim one's name. The very act of naming is an act of freedom and embracing one's own humanity against the world and white hegemony. Renaming and redefining oneself is a common trope in African American autobiography because it connotes the human right to freedom and self-determination[18]. It could be safely stated that this small, seemingly insignificant change in Lorde's name marks also the beginning of a new self and identity. Assuredly, it marks a defining moment when a person publicly affirms: I do exist, I am not invisible. By writing down a new version of her name, Lorde defies the rules according to which Black people have no right to self-determination. It turns out to be a public acknowledgement that those racist rules lost their legitimacy in a given person's life. An act of self-confirmation, a new name is a sign of dissent and a courageous embrace of one's racial self. Throughout the text, Lorde takes pains to claim many different identities. By enumerating her multiple identities and selves, she customarily starts with her racial identity – this one tends to be placed first. It would mean that although she is not obsessed with her Black identity, she acknowledges it, embraces it, and loves it. Other identities follow, depending on their importance in a given moment of her life. And thus, she speaks about herself as a woman, lesbian, warrior, activist, and poet. Later in life, although not in her autobiography, she will refer to herself as a mother and cancer survivor[19]. In this way she highlights the multiple positions and positionalities from which she speaks (Morris, 2002:

[18] As will be examined in other autobiographies, self-naming, changing one's name is a frequent act of self-preservation. Many African American autobiographies written especially in the 20th Century include a memory of changing one's name for different reasons: artistic, political, religious, legal. In some of these cases this act signals birth of a new, changed self and identity and sometimes even a radical break with the past, as was the case of Assata Shakur or Malcolm X.

[19] *The Cancer Journals* (1980) is another memoir penned by Audre Lorde where she provides an account of her experience of living with breast cancer. In the text she portrays herself as a Black feminist and lesbian fighting with the illness, its medical and psychological effects. In the book she rejects the idea of Black invisibility and silence and criticises severely American medical response to Black women survivors of cancer. *The Cancer Journals* deals with thorny issues of Black marginalisation, the politics of Black (scarred and female) bodies, social struggle and feminism paired with lesbianism.

167). It is a trait of hers that she refuses to be silent; she does not let anyone override her sense of selfhood and human dignity. More than that, her heterogeneous identities are a source of power to her, even if at times they seem to be irreconcilable.

As already mentioned, Lorde embraces her Black identity, but she never adheres to the strategy of victimisation. Nevertheless, this does not mean that she avoids the difficult topic of racism she had to face in various stages of her life. When she refers to her school years, she does admit she was a target of racist discrimination. It is, again, a very common trope in African American autobiography. The youngest years are, habitually, difficult because children are exposed to adults' racism and very often are unprepared to deal with it. Coming of age stories are usually filled with examples of outrageous racism on the part of white teachers and rare are memories written years later that would present white teachers as sensitive individuals protecting Black children from white supremacy. When Audre moves to a Catholic school, the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament are not much different than typical white teachers. The class is divided into two groups: the Fairies and the Brownies which already solidifies existing racial stereotypes. The old racial system of antagonism is again put in place by the Catholic nuns who, at least in theory (had they followed the precepts of Christianity which advocates love of all human beings), should have resisted the rules imposed by the external world. The Brownies was a group of children who used to break school rules and Lorde managed to be classified into the Fairies only twice that year. Thinking in symbolic terms, the Brownies being associated with indiscipline, breaking rules, and disobedience repeats the cultural pattern of associating brown and black with vice. Dark represents here what is incorrect, inadequate, and undesirable. On the contrary, the Fairies group is composed of children who are obedient, do not violate any rules and are generally considered adequate. The colour associated with the Fairies is white or light – already in Biblical terms white and light is the colour of goodness, the state of being sinless, sanctity[20]. Whatever is morally good is white; black is associated with sin, depravation, and disorder. If such cultural and mental patterns are applied to small children, their sense of adequacy,

[20] Even though the white colour has only good connotations in the Christian Bible (as mentioned in the body of the text), the colour and the concept of Whiteness conflate, according to some postcolonial academics, in the very Christianity and the moment Christianity became white. According to Martin Munyao and Philemon Tanui (2021), Christianity became associated with Whiteness when the project of colonisation started to take specific shape in many African countries. Providing an example of Kenya, the authors analyse how Christianity reinforced colonialism through the project of missions and evangelisation and how Whiteness became the way of life imposed upon indigenous communities under a guise of evangelisation.

desirability and belonging will be seriously impaired creating maladapted, hurt, and traumatised adults. The same school run by the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament regarded with suspicion any sign of success from Black children. *A priori*, a Black child cannot possibly achieve anything extraordinary and if Lorde excelled in reading, and she did as words and language became her lifelong passion, translated years later into poetry, her success was undervalued or discredited altogether.

The sense of alienation Audre Lorde felt is woven throughout the entire narration. Although she lives with her parents and sister, she often refers to her loneliness and non-belonging. Partly it can be hypothesized that this sense of inadequacy is related to her being and feeling Black. However, there is another part that should be mentioned, and it is her girl-oriented self. She dreams of meeting a girlfriend, a girl that would meet her emotional needs and fill her sense of void and loneliness. The long excerpt she devotes to a girl called Toni has all the characteristics of mythmaking and reveals a dreamlike quality, so often present in her autobiography. Characteristically, Toni looks like a brown doll and the colour of her skin is significant in Lorde's narrative. This girl is an incarnation of all Audre's dreams: she has eyes similar to her mother's, brown-reddish hair, and honey-brown skin. The text reveals erotic undertones when Lorde describes her urgent need to touch Toni's naked brown body. Many different interpretations could be made here, including one about early lesbian desires, but what is important to the discussion of racial self is, in fact, the colour of Toni's skin. It is not white, and also not very dark but honey-brown. This is the colour Lorde identifies with and through this description it becomes clear that she embraces not only her own skin but also the darker skin of other women.

However, it should be made clear that unlike some African American autobiographers who tend to relate mainly to Black people while seeking identification and similar experiences[21], Audre Lorde did not reject the idea of socialising or involving herself romantically with white women. Her acceptance of her racial identity and self does not make her blind to white female beauty. In her autobiography she refers to white girls and women she fell in love with, with whom she made love and tried to build bridges. And so, readers get to know Gennie, her first white love and with whom she exercises her right to traverse the city and become a *flaneuse*[22]. Then comes Peter, a white boy whose skin colour,

[21] For example, Assata Shakur's autobiography reveals these traits.

[22] The concept of *flaneuse* or female *flaneur* refers to women who claimed public spaces in the cities, daring to walk the city streets, urban spaces reserved traditionally to men. Virginia Woolf called that female venture to

as she argues, is a form of rebellion against the norms her parents imposed on her. Next appears Ginger, her colleague from a factory where she works. On her trip to Mexico, she meets white, upper-class Bea with whom she makes love. The climax of her lesbian relationships comes in the person of Eudora, *La Periodista*, the Amazon woman who had lost her breast to cancer. As can be seen, to Audre Lorde race does not matter so much when it comes to love relationships, which only means she was perfectly able to establish emotional connections with people of different race, gender and culture. In fact, according to Alexis De Veaux (2004), Audre Lorde's biographer, Lorde did not shun romantic relationships with white women. De Alexis describes Lorde as a person who did not confine herself to one group of people only, although she did search for a community of Black women with whom she could establish solid political and feminist links. At the same time, she created networks with white lesbians too but with them she did not feel fully herself either. Among white lesbians she was Black and so, an outsider, and with Black women she was lesbian and a butch and thus an outsider as well.

> As Lorde was to discover, the few black lesbians she encountered, in white bars rarely related to each other on the level of their shared racial reality; and they subsumed their identities as black women within their identities as "gay-girls". (…) Lorde's membership in the circle of white lesbian lovers and friends who became her community underscored a complicated reality: gayness was one bond of difference connecting them, but race was a difference separating them. (De Alexis, 2004, *ibid.*, p. 56).

Audre Lorde, in her autobiography does comment that the matter of differences is seen as an obstacle rather than an enrichment within and between communities. She observes how Black sisters wear defensive masks in the streets, how they fail to recognise each other's existence. Although Lorde seems to be aware of the reason behind this situation – she suspects it is racism and homophobia that teach Black lesbian women to be constantly on guard lest they be recognised for what they really are. Her observations form a severe critique of the Black community which fails to demonstrate solidarity. Lorde knows too well

walk the city streets "street haunting". For further information on the literary and cultural approach towards women roaming the streets consult the *Guardian* article published by Lauren Elkin "A Tribute to female flâneurs: the women who reclaimed our city streets". July 29, 2016: https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2016/jul/29/female-flaneur-women-reclaim-streets

and so do those women that unity could pose a real threat to white hegemony and the sexist and racist system. If the racial and gender links are broken within the community, if ties are loosened, then it would be much easier for the racist system to keep Black people apart. It pains her to pass her Black sisters in the streets and feel unacknowledged and unadmitted. She is looking frantically for her own Black community that can fill her with love and provide her with a sense of belonging and self-worth. However, everywhere she turns, she feels like an outsider ("sister outsider", as she calls herself). Either in racial or gender or sexual terms, people would insist on finding strangers and expel them from any group she met. Everywhere she turned, she would be confronted with people who turn their backs on difference, on anyone who did not seem to fit. She objects throughout her entire autobiography to such a ghettoized world. What she craved for was a true, real world where sisterhood would be possible across racial, gender and sexual lines.

The following excerpt illustrates aptly Lorde's philosophy and the values she tries to live by and transmit in her autobiography. The following quotation also reveals the fact that such an approach was ahead of her time: what she defended was to become known in 1980s as intersectionality[23] and was theoretically worked on in Women's Studies in the last decades of the 20th Century. Audre Lorde tries to show different communities the way not to close upon themselves and to treasure differences. Race was not, to her, the argument to reject the Other from her life. Quite the opposite, she was fully aware of the advantages of creating a society in which differences are appreciated and left in peace to thrive:

> At home, my mother said, "Remember to be sisters in the presence of strangers". She meant white people, like the woman who tried to make me get up and give her my seat on the Number 4 bus, and who smelled like cleaning fluid. At St. Catherine's, they said, "Be sisters in the presence of strangers", and they meant non-catholics. In high school, the girls said, "Be sisters in the presence of strangers", and they meant men. My friends said, "Be sisters in the presence of strangers", and they meant the squares. But in high school, my real sisters were strangers; my teachers were racists;

[23] The term "intersectionality" was originally coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (lawyer, civil rights advocate, and intersectional feminist) in 1989 and today is considered as an important theory, paradigm, and methodology. At its basis it recognises that people's existence is deeply impacted by social factors, relations (also of power) and identities. These factors, when combined, create intersecting forms of oppression or of privilege, depending on a person's context, ethnic background, gender, and sexual and religious orientation. Intersectionality helps identify structural barriers and promotes understanding of how underrepresented groups can be aided in their fight against discrimination and oppression: https://unwomen.org.au/our-work/focus-area/intersectionality-explained/

> and my friends were that color I was never supposed to trust. (…) We [friends] never talked about those differences that separated us, only the ones that united us against the others. (…) But we never ever talked about what it meant and felt like to be Black and white, and the effects it had on our being friends. (*ibid.*, p. 81).

This excerpt is dramatic in its emotional strength because it shows Lorde as a citizen of the world, accepting, embracing, and loving her racial self but perfectly aware that even Black people can create communities that ostracise others. While she craves for the emotional stability that acceptance by a group might provide and while the Black lesbian community is her first object of love, she does not limit her humanity to its racial aspects. Part of those observations on loneliness and being a "sister outsider" is a direct critique of (Black) society which has not the courage to accept difference and create strong emotional and political bonds that would turn solidarity into a weapon against discrimination and dehumanization of its members.

When she thinks "community", she longs for the community of Black women which had been separated by racism, sexism, and homophobia. She does feel lonely as a Black lesbian and her sense of disillusionment with the Black community stems from her observations. Each individual woman kept to herself and seemed deprived of that mythic link to other women: mothers, sisters, and companions. The fact that they were Black and lesbians made them believe they were doomed to loneliness and had no one to lean on:

> We discovered and explored our attention to women alone, sometimes in secret, sometimes in defiance, sometimes in little pockets that almost touched ("Why are those little Black girls always either whispering together or fighting?") but always alone, against a greater aloneness. (…) Too often we found ourselves sleeping with the same white women. We recognized ourselves as exotic sister-outsiders who might gain little from banding together. (*ibid.*, p. 177).

> Downtown in the gay bars I was a closet student and invisible Black. Uptown at Hunter I was a closet dyke and a general intruder. Maybe four people altogether knew I wrote poetry, and I usually made it pretty easy for them to forget (*ibid.*, 179).

This is quite a sad painting of the New York (Village) landscape where people of different races, sexual orientations and genders form separate groups with no intention whatsoever

to know each other. Lorde is a sort of linking point between those worlds. She is a human bridge trying to connect those worlds, but in the house of difference everybody is scared to death of those very same differences. People seem to be lonely islands, only sometimes brought together by tides but other than that solidarity and unity is unthinkable. As a lesbian, Lorde lives in two distinct worlds which never overlap. Other Black women and lesbians had been unprepared to recognise each other's existence. The glances would never meet and silence was the only reaction to a Black lesbian sister. In turn, when in the company of white lesbians, Lorde avoided bringing up the topic of race. In fact, it was a non-topic, a taboo better be shunned, as though mere speaking of race was a sign of racism. In these white circles, Lorde felt that her race somehow mattered, even if or perhaps because it was never mentioned. Consequently, in none of these two worlds could she feel fully herself to exercise her freedom to express her multiple identities. With Black girls she often did not acknowledge her homosexuality for fear of exposure and rejection. In the white gay community, she was invisible as a Black woman. In this way, she remained a constant sister-outsider[24], never fully accepted in any community. Anywhere she went, she was confronted with people's expectations of how she should behave, dress, and speak. Audre admits throughout her autobiography that this experience, although difficult and painful, did contribute to her becoming stronger. While seeking love and acceptance she was often judged, rejected, and rendered invisible. This taught her how to fight discrimination within and fragmentation of the communities she sought to join. At the same time, the process made her feel often inadequate, unattractive, and ugly.

Hers is not a romantic and uncritical view of intra and interracial relations within the American society. She realised all too well that Black communities were unable to provide what she had been looking for because they themselves were too fragmented, scared and closed upon themselves. At no point in her autobiography does Lorde romanticise the Black community, although, as has been observed, she embraces her racial roots and feels they are the source of her human dignity. She constantly reflected upon what Blackness meant to her and other people but refused to accept it as a romantic identity or ideal. This is also what sets her apart from other African American autobiographers who accept Blackness uncritically, looking for reasons to their misery solely in the outside world. The

[24] *Sister Outsider* is also a volume of Audre Lorde's short and insightful essays on various topics such as Black lesbianism, structural racism in America, the power of the erotic, the power and importance of language in resisting patriarchy and racism, and other related topics. The volume was originally published in 1984.

following excerpt from her journal notes from 1975-76 is a case in point. De Alexis provides a quotation in her biography of Audre Lorde to illustrate this fact:

> I have a right to be black. I have a right to be different and I have a right to survive. I have a right to join with other different human beings who are also black. Blackness doesn't mean we are one lump of chocolate poured on the face of eternity. Until each of us can love herself & himself fully, in all our contradictions, we will never survive as a people in this land because we will never survive as individuals. (Lorde *in* De Alexis, *ibid.,* p. 159).

There is no doubt that the author of this excerpt is deeply aware of the racial limitations of her people. Also, she is not afraid of speaking out when the community should be criticised. She herself knew best how the Black community could ostracise people and force them into sexual invisibility. Fear of rejection, racist reality, hegemonic white culture all imprinted distrust on Black individuals, but Lorde does not place all blame on white culture. According to her, what each Black person should do first, before joining the community, is to learn how to love themselves. Armed with such self-respect and love, they can join the community to make it expand and progress but also learn how to build bridges with other cultures and not remain closed and claustrophobic forever avoiding connections.

3.2. Nina Simone's *I Put A Spell on You*: an uncompromising, gifted Black Self.

Nina Simone's[25] autobiography, written in collaboration with Stephen Cleary, and published in 1991 presents itself as a more classic self-narrative than the previously examined biomythography penned by Audre Lorde. While Lorde's narrative is non-linear and spans only her teenage years, which she considered formative and essential to her coming of age as a Black lesbian poet, Nina Simone offers her readers a more complete, chronological picture of her childhood, youth and adult years as a world-famous composer and singer. While in Lorde's text there is relatively little information on her career and the

[25] Nina Simone (born as Eunice Kathleen Waymon (1933-2003) was one of the most known Black female composers and icons of American music. Renown mostly for her jazz and other genres of music, she earned a moniker "High Priestess of Soul" and is remembered and revered today mainly due to her contribution to Black and American music. Curiously, she is less known as the author of her autobiography, co-written with Stephen Cleary and published originally in 1991.

process of becoming a poet (for this information readers must consult extra-textual sources such as her biography, poetry, political essays, interviews, among others), Nina Simone's autobiography seems to be more factual and linear. The structure of the narrative follows the traditional pattern of the genre, although in some chapters she seems to fast forward to future events only to return to the current moment she is describing.

Bearing in mind that Nina Simone was an artist (composer and singer), it is interesting to examine her narrative to understand how she constructed her racial self in relation to other Black people and the Black community in general, autonomous and free-thinking as she was throughout her life. For the purpose of this discussion, it is relevant to analyse how she saw and understood herself and which identity came first, whether that of a Black person, of a woman or of an artist. How important was being a Black individual to her? Did her art impact her racial self or vice versa? How did Nina Simone express her loyalty to her people; did she identify uncritically with everything Black people did in her times and whether she was ever disappointed in them? It must be remembered that an autobiography is a narrative strategy to present one's self and identity publicly. However, Nina Simone had been a public figure long before her narrative was published. She was already known for her singing career, some controversial behaviour on stage[26], and her involvement in the Civil Rights campaigns of the 1960s. Nevertheless, her autobiography co-authored with Stephen Cleary is a unique source of information on her life, mental states, and career. Her performances, choice of attires during the performances (which gradually became more and more Africa-oriented), provocative behaviour, and even some of her lyrics shed light on her inner self and attitude towards the outside world. Nonetheless, her self-narrative is one of the most important and interesting sources for researchers in literary and cultural studies to understand how she really wove the fabric of her subjecthood. Most academic articles on Nina Simone focus on her performances, her involvement in the Civil Rights Movement through her art, her contribution to the current knowledge of the female music scene in America in the 1960s and 1970s. However, there is scarcity of academic work

[26] Both of her biographers, Nadine Cohodas (2010) and Alan Light (2016) claimed that Nina Simone had serious mental health issues that required psychiatric medication, although each of the biographers mentioned a different diagnosis, i.e., schizophrenia and/or bipolar disorder. Consequently, the mental health issues impacted her frequently erratic comportment on the scene and during her concerts. However, it must be noted that according to Feldstein (2005), erratic and "unruly" behaviour of jazz male musicians was generally accepted as natural or a sign of genius while when it came to women, it became interpreted as a sign of lack of discipline. With time, Nina Simone started to be seen as a "witch" rather, characterised as "mean", "angry" or "unstable". (Feldstein, *ibid.*, p. 1359)

devoted to her autobiography, and it remains largely ignored. This explains why then a thorough examination of Nina Simone's self-narrative can further the comprehension of her as a private person, a Black female artist, and a contributor to the African American autobiographical tradition.

Nina Simone (née Eunice Waymon) begins Chapter 1 of her self-narrative by already setting the tone that permeates the entire work. After she tells the story of Tryon, the town in North Carolina, where she was born, she moves on to speak about her grandparents and parents. And so, readers discover that Simone's great-great grandmother of Native American origins married an enslaved African. This is the first moment slavery is mentioned in Simone's text and it immediately signals that roots and cultural heritage are important to her sense of self. Describing her grandfather who was half-Native American and half-Black, she communicates to the reader that he, too, was born into slavery. In family photos, Simone's grandfather looks like a Black-skinned man with Native American eyes. The grandfather married a light-skinned woman, Simone's grandmother, who was also mixed. Her mother, a descendant of two mixed individuals was born in November 1902, and it seems important to Simone to write the following:

> Their third child, my mother, was born on 20 November 1902. She is still alive today and the blood in her veins is a rich mixture, drawn from white slave-owners, black slaves and the Indian people who were destroyed to make way for the plantation and the railroad. (Simone, *ibid.*, p. 2).

Such details regarding ethnic origins, mixtures of races and bloods included in the first couple of pages indicate that they are of great relevance to Nina Simone. The focus on her racial and ethnic heritage leaves no room for any reservation regarding her racial pride. She acknowledges her rich and complex heritage. Beyond that, she embraces it fully with racial pride but no vanity. She possesses less accessible information regarding the history of her paternal lineage, but it is relevant for her to remark that her father's family was enslaved too. The dark cloud of slavery that hovers above the American history, lingers over African American lives and casts its long shadow on future generations. It is unthinkable not to mention the effects of slavery on one's family while it is also a source of racial identity and identification with other Black people.

In the first chapter, Simone also discusses a peculiar situation she remembers from her native town. Her family moved to Tryon in 1929 where her father worked as a barber. Simone describes Tryon as a peaceful city characterized by unassuming and friendly relations between African Americans and whites. It was a special place to her where African Americans did not experience racism or the effects of segregation. There were no Black-only residential areas and African Americans could live in the centre of town, adjoining white areas. According to Simone, Black lives mixed freely with white ones. She did notice, however, that her father's barbershop mainly served an African American clientele. White men would frequent another barber. Perhaps the reason was that the owner of the second barbershop had such a light skin he could easily pass for white and white clients thought he actually was white. This fragment however seems to lack credibility and sounds contradictory. On one hand the town is desegregated, and both races coexist peacefully, while on the other racism seems to lurk beneath the surface: the illusion of the barber's whiteness is enough for the white clientele to flock to his shop. Obviously, if Simone's father's skin colour did not matter at all, he would have had white clients as well. Still, Simone insists on depicting the city as a quiet, happy place, desegregated long before *de jure* and *de facto* desegregation took place[27].

This romanticised view of the town does not imply that the author was blind to the real social issues that plagued the Black population. A few lines later Simone admits that, in fact, segregation and racial discrimination existed and affected the poorest African Americans. It was noticeable where it should not have been, where, theoretically, everyone should be treated equally: in church. Social division did not escape her attention when she frequented church - the Holiness church was meant for the poorest.

> Social life mainly revolved around church. The biggest churches in town were the Methodists and the Baptists, followed by the Episcopalians. At the bottom was the Holiness church, the Holly-rollers, who were looked down on by the others. It was a social thing, because the Holiness congregation came mostly from the poorest part

[27] To some extent it is possible to draw parallels between the mythic home of Audre Lorde's Caribbean Island, a quasi-paradise and the image of her hometown Nina Simone tries to transmit in the first chapter of her autobiography. Both places, although geographically and politically distant from each other, are depicted as peaceful places where Black people could thrive and live undisturbed. This is, however, the first impression because when analysed more carefully, it will become more obvious that Tryon is not such an idyllic place after all.

> of town. Of all the churches the Holiness was the most integrated, because at the lowest level Tryon was racially mixed anyhow. (Simone, *ibid.*, p. 5).

Despite the positive spin Simone tries to put on the town, racial prejudice mixed with classicism would soon emerge. Even the geography of the town is symbolic because the lowest part of it is inhabited by the "lowest" of its citizens – poor African Americans. Perhaps without even realising, Nina Simone is also transmitting another message, a thinly veiled criticism of intra-race relations where the rich and successful Black population is separated from the poorest. The language she uses to describe this social reality is unemotional and matter-of-fact. There is no outrage or anger detectable in this fragment of her narrative.

In fact, the neutral language and emotional level of her narrative can be ascribed to the social status of her family. Simone's father is presented as an industrious man with incessant ideas for new jobs and business ventures. The home environment she conveys is one of constant motivation and determination to move up the social ladder. This upward mobility is an important characteristic of the Waymon family; it is mainly Simone's father who insists on succeeding and never settling for less. The ideal was to constantly move up and never fall behind. Any African American family was motivated to succeed, to prove their worth as equally valuable as white citizens. A similar attitude was noted in Audre Lorde's family where racial matters were rarely, if ever discussed, and admitting to any forms of victimisation was unthinkable. What was important was individual effort, hard work and ambition paired with education. The cult of merit seems to have thriven in both families, as will be the case as well in Faith Ringgold's narrative. Industriousness, ambition and shunning self-victimisation were believed to be indispensable ingredients for success in many Black families who aspired to something beyond an attitude of constant self-flagellation because of their skin colour. It is, of course, another matter if such beliefs and attitudes always brought the expected results, i.e., dreamed success. Nevertheless, many children raised in families where hard work and ambition were important values perceive racial issues differently and see themselves as individual beings with their owns plans rather than as part of a Black amalgam.

While referring to her family's work ethic, Nina Simone presents the key to understanding her attitude regarding her racial self. She believed firmly in hard work as the

only way to achieve success and pursue her dreams. In fact, as will be examined further, her focus on her musical career throughout her autobiography demonstrates that, with the exception of seven years of her active involvement in the Civil Rights Movement, she treasured her professional life and identified herself with her career more than she did with the Black community. Since childhood, music had been her lifelong passion. Family life revolved around religion and music: everyone played and sang in church. Ever since she remembers, she was surrounded by music which, in time, became the centre of her life: "So when I was very young it was assumed I would have musical talent even if I didn't yet have strength to push down the keys on the organ." (*ibid.*, p. 14). In fact, she was expected to turn her attention to music and develop the gift God was believed to have bestowed upon her. There seemed to be no other way for her. She herself openly states that those times were not only the happiest in her life but also proved essential for her future career. The gospel music she played in church "slipped into her blood" (*ibid.*, p. 19) and became a part of her self and her body. Gospel, as she claims, turned into the lighthouse guiding her on the path to become an independent and mature artist. This stage of her life, as shall later be revealed, is also decisive because it marks her profoundly in the process of creating a new self and identity: that of an artist – not necessarily a Black and female artist (at least not initially) but "just" an artist, without any attachments such as "woman", "Black", or "jazz". Later, Simone resists any labels externally imposed on her personally or on her music.

Nina Simone's talent evolved largely due to her white sponsors. Interestingly, Simone does not refer to this fact with embarrassment or hint of awkwardness. In fact, it is quite common for Black artists to have a white sponsor financing their artistic or intellectual development[28], which complicated interracial relations contradicting, at times, the idea that white people only play the part of oppressors in African American lives. The first person to help Simone was Mrs Miller – the first white woman to ever speak to her. It is interesting to remark that the description of Mrs Miller bears an emotional imprint in its language: "Mrs Miller was about the first white person I knew at all, to speak to. I liked her – she was always very kind and she had shocking white hair, which I loved". (*ibid.*, p. 21). The sentence is short and matter of fact, and Mrs Miller is described only in positive terms. Nina Simone

[28] Such was the case of Zora Neal Hurston, Langston Hughes, Anne Moody, and other African American autobiographers. However, in some cases this fact was overlooked or, if stated openly in their autobiographies, criticised by their Black peers who saw the acceptance of white sponsorship as a sign of betrayal of Black values and racial pride.

shows that whiteness can be beautiful and does not evoke negative feelings or physical repulsion as shall be observed in the narrative of Rebecca Walker where white/thin women are contrasted with Black/round ones and whiteness brings to mind danger and repulsion while Blackness is associated with warmth and safety. Mrs Miller played an important and life-changing role in Nina Simone's existence. Upon discovering that the Waymon family could not afford piano lessons for her and having recognised unusual talent in the little girl, she offered to pay for her piano lessons along with another white lady, Russian pianist Mrs Muriel Massinovitch (who also gains Simone's appreciation and a positive description in her autobiography).

It should be noted that Simone made considerable progress in her musical education due to white ladies who created the Eunice Waymond Foundation whose aim was to fund her further education in music and secure her professional future. She is upfront about this in her autobiography but observes that suddenly her music and her professional life ceased to be private. The expectations of her sponsors of both races were elevated. She started to be called "Mrs Massinovitch's little colored girl" (*ibid.*, p. 24) – an expression that embarrassed her. Indeed, an apparent term of endearment can also be interpreted as a racially coloured way of saying that, talent aside, she was "only" a little coloured girl[29]. All in all, Nina Simone did pay attention to the details surrounding racial relations in her town. Its inhabitants wished to support the little talented girl, nevertheless, no matter how talented she was, she remained only a coloured girl, a species of her own, worthy of assistance but also of pity.

The period that ensues in Nina Simone's life – the period of hard work and countless hours spent learning classical music with Mrs Massinovitch is also one in which she takes notice segregation practises in her town. On her way to Mrs Muriel's house, Simone would sometimes buy a sandwich in a pharmacy and have to eat it outside. It is another small memory/incident with which she sprinkles her narrative lest her readers forget she is sensitive to racial issues, even if they do not overshadow her professional life and ambitions.

[29] This brings to mind a common practise used during slavery and Jim Crow times when adult Black men used to be belittled and called by white adult men "boys". This apparent term of endearment was meant, of course, to disrespect and deprive Black men of their masculinity, denying them status of adult, responsible men. Gene Dembry, (2018) "When Boys Can't be Boys": https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2018/11/02/417513631/when-boys-cant-be-boys

Simone's budding racial self/identity does not conflict, interestingly enough, with the classical music she is learning to understand, love and play. This is a fundamental argument in the matter on the autobiographer's racial self in relation to the outside world. Her practise began with Bach, followed by other great white composers such as Liszt, Beethoven, and other white composers. As she herself observes, she needed time to understand and create an emotional attachment to Bach. The following two excerpts are significant for the reasons that will be explained further:

> He [Bach] is technically perfect. When you play Bach's music you have to understand that he's a mathematician and all the notes you play add up to something – they make sense. They always add up to climaxes, so many waves have gathered you have a great storm. Each note you play is connected to the next note, and every note has to be executed perfectly or the whole effect is lost. Once I understood Bach's music I never wanted to be anything other than a concert pianist; Bach made me dedicate my life to music and it was Mrs Massinovitch who introduced me to his world. (*ibid.*, p. 23)

> My mornings in that house [Mrs. Massinovitch's house] were spent in the company of some of the greatest men that have ever lived (…). (*ibid.*, p. 23)

The importance of these two quotations cannot be underestimated. They have multiple meanings and reveal Simone's interesting outlook on music, life goals, her racial and professional identity as well as her approach to the white race. Firstly, the initial excerpt about Bach's role in her musical life is telling as it unveils her attitude towards culture created by the so-called "white men". If Black nationalism is considered, separatism and even fundamentalism expressed in many autobiographies, memoirs, and journals by, for example, Black Panthers activists, the overwhelming message is one of repudiation of white culture creations that should never be referred to, appreciated, and consumed by Black people.[30] According to many Black radicals, the oppressor's culture must never become a source of inspiration or beauty. Contrarily, Simone can see beyond racial divides and learns to appreciate classical music which was then a white domain. She is not humiliated by

[30] It is useful to refer here to the autobiography by Assata Shakur who altogether rejected all intellectual works by white people. Elaine Brown, a Black activist and member of the Black Panther Party, in her autobiography *A Taste of Power: A Black Woman's Story* (1992) betrays a similar attitude. Eldridge Cleaver in his *Soul on Ice* (1968) professes total rejection of all things white.

studying the white classical masters; on the contrary, she allows herself to be enchanted by the discipline, beauty, and perfection of Bach's music. His and other composers' race is no obstacle for her to delve into the world of music and artistic beauty. Beyond that, she realises they left a cultural heritage that belongs to all people, regardless of race. She does not compartmentalise when it comes to art and reveals an open mind regarding art as a force that removes barriers imposed by racially biased society. These two fragments are evidence that Simone considered herself first and foremost an artist, a human being whose race did not matter when it came to music and performance. She wrote that she did not feel limited for being Black (until later on) and refused to take on a racial burden which divided people. It should be noted that in her autobiography she followed the timeline of her life and although at the time of composing the text she already knew about all the aspects of racial discrimination, she chose to reveal her awareness of racial problems as she wove her text. Thus, readers learn only with time that she was becoming gradually aware of the social and racial problems around her.

Concomitantly, she was aware that classical music had been a domain of white people. Before everyone's expectations for her unprecedented success as a Black girl in classical music, she understood her particularity. She slowly began existing in two conflicting worlds: her family's where her talent was taken for granted and where she found no support since her mother believed it all emanated from God and could not be boasted about, and the public world with its expectations of success and fame. Outside of her home she felt proud to be a Black girl giving concerts and white people only confirmed that feeling. Possibly, though, the white townspeople had different expectations from those of her parents. To the Waymon family her success would be a racial one too if she only managed to break the racial glass ceiling. For the Black community in turn her success meant, as it did to her parents, that she succeeded as a Black person in the white man's world. Curiously, although her family avoided the topic of race, like Lorde's, and discussions on the meaning of race in the American society, they too expressed their hopes that she would succeed as a Black person in the world of classical music, traditionally a white domain. Simone herself notes the slight incoherence in her mother's desire. When her future is discussed by Mrs Miller, Miz Mazzy and her mother, to Mrs Waymon the issue has seemingly more to do with race than with the career itself. Her mother, who lived according to the rules of colour-blindness, dreamed that her daughter would become the first African American concert pianist. When race is never discussed at home, this dream means that the silence

surrounding racial questions is artificial and stems, perhaps, from her family's wish to protect her from the harmful effects of Jim Crow. When she gave her first concert, her parents were moved from the first row because of their skin colour. By then she was mature and courageous enough to take a stand and refused to play if her parents were not returned to their front seats. The incident is a marker when she begins to understand the complexity of white hegemonic culture. This is also the moment she begins to feel more mature, a little less innocent and a little darker:

> All of the sudden it seemed a different world, and nothing was easy any more. I really had thought that all white people were like Miz Mazzy and Mrs Miller, all kind and elegant, all polite. I had no reason to think otherwise: they were the only white people I had ever talked to for any length of time. But now prejudice had been made real for me and it was like switching on a light. (*ibid.*, p. 26).

As her world expanded, with it came the realisation that at home she would never learn about racism. It is outside the home and through careful observation that she understood where she lived. It started to dawn on her that the fact she could not play with David anymore, her white friend, had something to do with racism. Years later, Nina Simone's daughter says in an interview:

> When [my mother] talked about Jim Crow and segregation, she rarely referred to it at that stage in her life, even though it did touch her" said Nina's daughter, Lisa Simone Kelly. "She did tell me about times when she was told her nose was too big, her lips were too full, and her skin was too dark. I assume she was told that there are only certain things you'll be good for in your life. (Light, 2006: 32).

The racism she encountered throughout her life hurt her but she decided perhaps it was not the most important aspect of her life, she was larger than that. Her artistic career focus on hard work, discipline, and the aesthetic aspects of being a musician possibly overshadowed her racial roots. They were undoubtedly important but they seemed to be only a part of who she was. This is particularly true in the first years of her artistic career.

Those two approaches and the constant conflict between trying to become a concert pianist and her racial loyalties began taking their toll in the shape of a profound sense of loneliness and alienation she refers to often in her autobiography. The years of life dedicated

solely to her career, the numerous hours spent by the piano, the separation from her peers whose lives were not focused on success bore their brunt and, possibly, contributed to her subsequent mental breakdowns and serious mental health issues. As she tells in her narrative, she even rejected a prospective husband, Edney, who wished she would quit her musical education and marry him. In a truly feminist manner, she claims to have decided to invest in her professional future, going to a musical school instead of marrying him.

Her race does not seem to be an important matter when she is in New York, studying under the direction of Mr. Carl Friedburg in her preparation for the entrance exam to the Curtis Institute of Music. As she admits: "My tutor was Dr Carl Friedburg, a great teacher, very gifted. I was the only black student he had, but nobody made any mention of it and the fact was of no interest to me" (*ibid*., p. 39). Interestingly, Simone's narrative throughout the book is sparkled with these kinds of observations and comments. On the one hand, she is well aware of her Blackness and the obstacles it creates on her path. On the other, especially when it comes to her professional life, she refuses to view her skin colour as an impediment or a source of trouble. She seems to believe firmly in an essentially colour-blind nature of art and music. Matters of race only bring discord and blur the line between the aesthetic and the mundane world. Maybe she simply wants to believe that her race bears no mark on her life and she is larger than her racial identity. The long fragments in her autobiography that focus on musical techniques, classic composers she studied, music teachers she worked with, endless hours of preparations for the exam, among others, testify to the fact that music was her life. She seems isolated because of her separation from Black peers, however. Throughout most of her autobiography she insists on her individuality as a human being and musician. This individualism is not a particularly frequent feature of traditional African American autobiography: loyalty to the community, even at a price, is one of the commanding features.

The moment she discovers she was not accepted into Curtis despite all the months of preparation is revelatory to her. It is a blow for which she was unprepared and she tries to justify her failed attempt through racism. Sometime after the exam results had been announced, she hears from her uncle that Curtis rejected her because she is Black. She does not understand, for if Marian Anderson, another Black woman, had passed, why not her? The only plausible explanation was racism paired with poverty. In addition, failure to enrol at Curtis carried other consequences: her family and white sponsors had expectations set on

her. She had let everyone down and saw her career as a classical pianist thwarted by this unexplainable incident:

> I was born into a small community that saw me as an infant and predicted great things. I was raised in a family that watched me perform prodigious musical feats and told me to be thankful that I had been chosen as special by God. I was taken up by strangers – black and white – and adopted as their own. The direction of my life was determined by their ambitions and their money and I was promised a future I had no part in choosing. In return for this great act of faith by everyone I ever knew I applied myself with dedication and turned my back on everything but the fulfilment of our destiny. (*ibid.*, p. 41).

In the above excerpt the key expression which deserves particular attention is "our destiny". Whose? Assuredly, not the destiny of her white sponsors. These two words possibly mean that becoming a classical piano player was the fulfilment of her, her family's, and the Tryon Black community's destiny, and perhaps beyond. It was a sought-after accomplishment not only for her but for the entire Black community who supported her either financially or emotionally along the way. It was an achievement the Black *milieu* longed for: fame, success, and proof that they could excel in the areas traditionally reserved to whites. Clearly, somewhere deep down, race did matter to Nina Simone, even if she tried so hard to bypass it. "(…) how in the name of God was I going to be the first black classical concert pianist – which she [Simone's mother] had always told me was what I was going to be – in my spare time?" (*ibid*. p. 42). In this sentence Simone could not be clearer about what her life dreams were, musically, career wise, but also as a Black person. She was unable to leave her racial roots behind because her success was her community's success and evidence that they could do anything as a Black person.

As her family never prepared her for racism, Simone grew up believing the world was open to her and talent sufficed. The rest would come through hard work, determination and strong will. Meritocracy, however, proved to be an illusion for many Black people. Through the unfortunate story of the Curtis Institute, Nina Simone learned that her skin colour would always affect her life but also that the weight she gave to that realisation was entirely up to her.

Like in Audre Lorde's case, Simone too changes her name, although for slightly different reasons. She transitions from Eunice Waymon to Nina Simone. Nina was taken

from one of her boyfriends who would call her "Niña" and Simone after a French actress, Simone Signoret[31]. The adoption of a new name is, yet again, a signal that changes are to be expected and that a new self is being born. To Nina Simone her new artistic pseudonym sounded sexy and sophisticated. Although her new name was not chosen for reasons related to political activism, it did mark a new beginning in her life as her career started becoming more dynamic. She began playing at night in bars and teaching music during the day to earn money for her musical education. She spent summers being Nina Simone in Atlantic City playing at the Midtown Bar and turned back into Eunice when she returned to Philadelphia. She, thus, shifted between cities, names and social *millieux* trying on selves and identities like clothes. Leading different lives, socialising with different groups, encountering other cultures and expectations made her self become more torn and alienated. This alienation leads to a profound sense of loneliness which, in turn, leads to the rushed decision to marry Don Ross, a white man she later realised was not the best candidate for a husband.

As mentioned before, many African Americans rejected the identity chosen for them by the white society. The freedom to choose one's own name or fate, like in case of Audre Lorde has paramount importance as it helps secure and exercise one's agency. In the course of her career, Nina Simone resented any labels fans, music journalists, agents, or anyone else tried to impose on her. Throughout her autobiography she insists there were certain expectations of musical style, technique, or behaviour because she was African American. She resented being classified as a jazz musician only because no one knew where she fit in terms of genres. She, however, liked to think of herself as musically versatile. Simone insisted throughout her career she was a classical concert pianist who was bold and talented enough to bring new and unexpected motifs to her music. She considered labels constraining and created to box people in. She also resisted them because critics expected her to perform "Black music", whatever that meant. Her skin tone forced her into the ample jazz category that included many African American musicians and created the expectation that she would fit into it too. Nevertheless, Nina Simone firmly rejected such categorisations. As an artist she insisted on being free to decide what she wanted to play and compose; she refused to be constrained by cultural patterns, expectations, and her own race:

[31] Simone Signoret, originally Simone Kaminker (March 25, 1921-September 30, 1985), was a French actress known for her portrayal of romantic heroines and strong older women.

> They [critics] finally ended up describing me as a ´jazz-and-something-else-singer´. To me 'jazz' meant a way of thinking, a way of being, and the black man in America was jazz in everything he did – in the way he walked, talked, thought and acted. Jazz music was just another aspect of the whole thing, so in that sense because I was black I was jazz singer, but in every other way I most definitely wasn't. (…) And I didn't like to be put in a box with other jazz singers because my musicianship was totally different, and in its own way superior. Calling me a jazz singer was a way of ignoring my musical background because I didn't fit into white ideas of what black performer should be. It was a racist thing; 'If she's black she must be a jazz singer'. It diminished me, exactly like Langston Hughes was diminished when people called him a 'great black poet'. (*ibid.*, p. 69).

This excerpt renders evident Nina Simone's view of her role as a musician and a free human being. She definitely does not identify with the label "Black singer" not because she is in denial regarding her race but because such labels and racial/cultural expectations facing people of colour belittle them and confine them to stereotypes thought out by white people and accepted by many Black people too. Simone's consideration is highly relevant because it refers to the human freedom to live and act without the constraints of racial expectations. Is there, really, an uncontaminated "Black art"? Do Black artists always need to embrace their race and act/create as Black people? What are the implications of a Black artist renouncing their roots and being "just" an artist? Is that a betrayal of their race? Or does it mean embracing their humanity?

Nina Simone's approach (that will change during the seven years of her involvement in the Civil Rights Movement) stands in direct contrast to her close friend Langston Hughes' attitude on the same matter. In 1926 he published a short essay in the *Nation* entitled "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain". In this insightful text, Hughes analyses the reasons why some African American artists wish to shed their racial identity and become "non-raced". In Hughes's perspective no African American poet who wishes to be viewed as a poet only (without being characterized as Black) ever becomes great and achieves success because they are never fully themselves:

> One of the most promising of the young Negro poets said to me once, "I want to be a poet--not a Negro poet," meaning, I believe, "I want to write like a white poet"; meaning subconsciously, "I would like to be a white poet"; meaning behind that, "I

> would like to be white." And I was sorry the young man said that, for no great poet has ever been afraid of being himself. And I doubted then that, with his desire to run away spiritually from his race, this boy would ever be a great poet. But this is the mountain standing in the way of any true Negro art in America--this urge within the race toward whiteness, the desire to pour racial individuality into the mould of American standardization, and to be as little Negro and as much American as possible. (Hughes 1926/1999, p. 55).

Hughes claims that white culture has nothing to offer Black artist and that they can never be home if they renounce their race. Understandable as these arguments are, it is also important to note Simone's point. It cannot be said that she seeks to be white for she never tried to pass as white. As has been mentioned in this section about her autobiography, she embraced her racial heritage and delineates that in many passages. Her Blackness never caused her shame or embarrassment, but she had a strong individualistic sense that deterred her from the mainstream. Due to the specificity of her profession and years of solitary study, she became a lonely island turned inward. She was also keenly aware that labels like "Black artist" or "female artist" could severely limit and reduce an individual to their racial or gender identity whereas each person is much more than the colour of their skin. In addition, racial stereotypes have been traditionally used to diminish Black people's humanity and dignity so she instinctively turns from them. She wishes to feel free as a singer and composer, not obliged to act according to her community's expectations. This tension between being African American and having a real or fictitious duty towards her people and being a free artist, undeterred by cultural and social expectations is consistent throughout the autobiography until it reaches a climax marked by her decision to become involved in the Civil Rights Movement due to the influence of her African American peers such as Langston Hughes, James Baldwin, and Lorraine Hansberry. According to Gaines:

> Simone credited her friends in the African-American intelligentsia for facilitating her political education in the 1960s, offering a set of African-American strategies for critical analysis of the situation. Prominent among them were socially engaged writers and dramatists (…). Significantly, these figures were outspoken critics of American racism whose literary and dramatic works reflected this critique. Of further importance is that Simone's political tutors, like herself, brought to their works a sense of race complicated by gender difference, underscoring a sense that race and gender are always critically entangled (Gaines, 2013: 250).

In her autobiography, Nina Simone does indeed reflect on the fact that she began learning and discovering about the fate of her people, the political aspects of Blackness, Jim Crow and rampant racism in contemporary America from her intellectual friends she met mainly in the Village Gate, New York in the 1960s. Lorraine Hansberry was the main "culprit" in Simone's process of coming to terms with her racial roots and her eventual obligations as an African American singer. These two women became close friends and Hansberry's impact on Simone's political and racial epiphany cannot be underestimated. Politics and jazz mixed under one roof in a popular club located in the Greenwich Village, NY. It turned out to be the fertile ground for political activism and consciousness raising. The famous figures Simone met there were outspoken critics of American racism and its pervasive, all-encompassing nature. As she writes in her autobiography, she started educating herself by reading Black fiction, poetry, and non-fiction. The intellectually and culturally challenging atmosphere of those meetings and friendships could not but leave their mark. As she began gaining notoriety as a singer, she slowly started to understand she could remain indifferent to the racial oppression surrounding her no more. Before she threw herself fully into the Movement, she went on a trip to Africa with a 30-persons' delegation where she breathed African air for the first time. One can argue, however, that even in Africa her general view and understanding of the continent left much to be desired. Her comments during her visit to Lagos, Nigeria are somewhat naïve and typical of an African American seeking spiritual connections she hopes to find on the African continent:

> All around us were black faces, and I felt for the first time the spiritual relaxation any African-American feels on reaching Africa. I didn't feel like I'd come home when I arrived in Lagos but I knew I'd arrived somewhere important and that Africa mattered to me, and would always matter. The people of Lagos never made me feel anything less than welcome but it wasn't Nigeria I arrived in – it was *Africa*. (*ibid.,* p.81).

This excerpt illustrates how her first contact with the African continent is one of a person with deeply romantic views of Africa: she speaks of it, wiping out Nigerian specificities and is unaware, at least in that moment, that Africa is not a homogenous continent with a mass of identically-thinking people, all with the same culture, displaying no political differences, happy to welcome naïve African Americans to their territory. She forgets that Africa is comprised of completely different countries each struggling to a greater or lesser extent with

their own political, economic, administrative, and postcolonial problems. This first visit to the continent did leave an imprint on her, nevertheless, which later translated into different, more ethnically oriented attires, greater interest in African affairs and a desire to move there one day, when life in America became unbearable.

Her close relationships with her liberal friends made her question anew her priorities as an African American singer. At a certain point she admits to being too individualistic and selfish in her approach to life. Her *mea culpa* relates to her sense of having ignored the fate of her people, leaving them to their own devices. She reaches a moment in life where career is not enough and she needs something deeper and ethical to give her life a new purpose:

> At the same time I started to pay closer attention to what was happening in my country, especially to the advances of my own people were making with the civil rights movement. I had not made a connection between fights I had and any wider struggle for justice because of how I was raised: the Waymon way was to turn away from prejudice and to live your life as best you could, as if acknowledging the existence of racism was in itself a kind of defeat. (…) I understood for the first time the power of collective action. But I didn't make the jump to thinking I had a part to play in what was happening. (*ibid.*, p. 86).

At this moment in her narrative, she shifts from an individualistic self to a collective self. The passage above clearly marks a change in her understanding of racial connections and the importance of taking a stand. Gradually, the lonely island called Nina Simone floats towards her community and develops a sense of purpose and belonging. For the following seven years, Civil Rights activism and protest songs will fill her life completely, leaving no room for any other priorities. She dives into the Movement against her husband's will and, as she later admits, those were some of the best years of her life, as they gave her direction and goal.

As has been mentioned, she credits Loraine Hansberry, who educated her in politics. Their friendship, intense and sincere, revolved around political discussions, intellectual questions, and the Movement. It was through Hansberry that Nina Simone saw herself in a new light: an activist who possesses the tools to fight injustice. Between Chapters 6 and 8, Simone speaks incessantly about her understanding of the Civil Rights Movement. Those nearly three chapters (given that in Chapter 8 she begins mentioning her disillusionment with her people and the Movement) seem as if they were taken from history books. What

occurs in the narrative is that Simone the Activist describes in detail her path to civic consciousness; a nearly opposite position on Black matters in contrast to what she discusses in previous chapters. In this regard her account resembles conversion narratives and spiritual autobiographies like the one penned by Malcom X – the author first confesses to living a sinful/ignorant life but surrenders to truth and light after a spiritual crisis. It does not mean that Nina Simone admits to wrongfully living and repents her previous erratic lifestyle, but with the epiphany (or epiphanies as some other factors or events could be thought of that influenced her change of attitude, such as aforementioned friendships with Black intellectuals, the killing of the activist Medgar Evers and then, the final event, the murder of four African American girls in a church in Birmingham, Alabama[32]) she undergoes a radical change forgetting, at least for a time being, her individual self and embraces the values and goals of Black resistance.

This new consciousness is showcased in the autobiography when she speaks about history of the Movement or analyses people such as Rosa Parks (although here she fails to discuss the activist as a multifaceted person and presents her as a woman who just refused to give up her seat on a bus). In fact, Simone mentions Rosa Parks on two occasions and never goes beyond the obvious and stereotypical image that accompanied this activist well beyond her death. An interesting point to note is that Simone's narrative plays an important role in establishing that what is personal is, concomitantly, political. For example, she mentions that while Martin Luther King was writing his letter from Birmingham jail, she was on stage during a concert in Chicago. In this way she establishes a link between individual and collective memory and history.

The church bombing in Alabama was the last drop that overflew the dam of rage and helplessness; it was a moment which proved critical in Simone's own involvement in the Movement.[33] The killing of four girls becomes the turning point that propels her into more

[32] The 16th Street Baptist Church bombing in Birmingham, Alabama took place on September 15, 1963, killing four young girls and leaving 14 people wounded. It must be remembered that in the 1960s the city was one of the strongholds of white supremacy and proponents of racial segregation. The Baptist Church was known as an important religious centre but also a routine meeting place for civil rights organisers. Several of the protest marches began right at the steps of the church. According to historical sources the September 15th bombing was the third bombing in 11 days after a federal court order came ordering the integration of Alabama's school system. As a result of the terrorist attack violent mass protests erupted across the country: https://www.history.com/topics/1960s/birmingham-church-bombing.

[33] Curiously, the girls' murder in the Alabama church is also a turning point for Anne Moody which she describes in *Coming of Age in Mississippi*. When she learns about the bombing, she undergoes a violent and sudden change: she turns against God whom she considers guilty of everything done to African Americans in

active involvement. As a direct result of this bombing, Simone, desperate, broken-hearted, and filled with rage composes her most famous song which became an emblem of protest songs and of her own involvement. *Mississippi Goddam* is her first Civil Rights song and, as she admits, it burst out of her in torrents. Alan Light claims in his biography of Nina Simone that the song created a chasm in her career: she was blunt in her lyrics denouncing Southern horrors and demanding justice for her community. She curtly said what other artists had long wanted to express. The song was so angry and disquieting that several radio stations in the South refused to play it under the excuse of its inelegant language and blasphemy (Light, *ibid.*, p. 99).

The next seven years were filled with concerts during which Simone would teach her audience about racism in no uncertain terms. As she claimed, she was proud of herself. She felt self-respect then because, apart from earning money, her music had a purpose and she dedicated her life to something that would, she believed, impact society and her people. Her concerts and behaviour on stage became increasingly politically oriented and Nina Simone took on another identity - that of a political activist. According to Gaines:

> Simone places herself in a tradition of transgressive black women singers when she invokes Billie Holiday who had died in police custody a decade earlier. Simone's creative interpretation of Holiday's death suggest an act of black imagination, while indicating the stakes of the song, oriented around an urgent political need for new black leadership. (Gaines, *ibid.*, p. 251)

In Chapter 7, while she continues her narrative on the Civil Rights Movement, she also reveals her political philosophy and her stance on the differences between races. She admits to being attracted to the idea of Black separatism and toward a nation for Black people, while influenced by the political thought of Malcolm X and Louis Farrakhan. The idea of a peaceful fight for Black rights did not appeal to her as she herself noted that a non-violent strategy failed to secure freedom and basic human rights for African Americans. Still, as an independent thinking woman, she also realised that whichever race was in power, human rights abuse would take place:

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the South and changes her political views from relatively moderate, based on Dr King's strategy of non-violence, to methods later accepted and implemented by the radical activists of the Black Liberation Army and the Black Panther Party.

> In the white man's world the black man would always lose out, so the idea of a separate black nation, whether it was in America or in Africa, made sense. But I didn't believe that there was any basic difference between the races – whoever is on top uses whatever means they can to keep the other down, and if black America was on top they'd use race as a way of oppressing whites in exactly the same way they themselves were oppressed. (Simone, *ibid.*, p. 100).

It is a relatively original opinion from a person who supported more radical strategies of fighting white hegemony. In fact, this reflection reveals that Nina Simone not only believed in the common humanity of both races but had no illusions about her own. She comprehended that drive to power and the need to oppress the weaker is a human characteristic, regardless of race. In this sense, her people were not better human beings and had no more value than white people. It is a sort of critique addressed to the Black community and demonstrates that Nina Simone did not romanticise her people, although she understood that in the current situation it was her community that suffered from oppression, discrimination and rampant racism which killed even little children.

Into the 1960s Simone's work continues to be politicised and her songs show her uncompromising stance towards the state's mechanism of oppression. She was put under FBI surveillance like many other Black activists of the era (Gaines, *ibid.*) but continued to perform outright revolutionary songs on stage becoming, in this way, the icon of the Movement. On stage she is transgressive, provocative, and even scandalises when she feels the audience does not respect her music and political stance (Brooks, 2011). In her autobiography, she continues to describe historical events such as the assassination of Malcolm X, examples of racial persecution and her ever developing racial consciousness. The Vietnam war makes her even more critical of America and bolder in the expression of her opinions. Everything taking place in the world impacts her private life and philosophy profoundly. In Chapter 8, Simone relates how riots, killings, a general atmosphere of fear and living on edge wove into her private life making what was private public. For the first time in the narrative, she speaks about her Black face in the mirror – how she really sees her dark skin and what it means for her to be Black in racist America: "I was a black-skinned woman in a country where you could be killed because of that one fact" (*ibid.*, p. 104). This sentence is truly meaningful because it shows how her racial self has matured and how she has shifted from a colour-neutral position to deeper awareness of signification of her skin

colour. If in the beginning of her autobiography, Nina Simone embraces her racial heritage and never feels ashamed of it, toward the end of the narrative her race becomes a source of bitterness and she sadly realises that her mere Blackness exposes her to danger. The analysed sentence also demonstrates that Simone gains full racial consciousness and identifies herself as an African American with all the risks it entails. She also shares her perspective on how her personal dreams and ambitions were overshadowed by loyalty towards Black people and the need for urgent action. Passivity and indifference were no longer enough; such attitudes solved nothing nor did they contribute to her people's well-being.

Closer to the end of her autobiography, Simone reports feeling alienated, separated, and lonely again. She feels cut off from the Movement due to her professional obligations; she complains she does not belong and the community she loved so much to which she dedicated several years of her life did not love her back well enough. Because she did not share the daily struggles or was physically close to her people, and because she joined the Movement on an on-and-off basis, she felt deeply guilty when people were being killed while she was giving concerts.

At the same time, she felt gradually more alone without any emotional support from her community. The second time she refers to her Black face in the mirror is less optimistic than the first time. At the end of 1960s, that is at the end of her own involvement in the Movement, she noted in her autobiography that she saw two women in the mirror: one was the woman who loved herself as a Black woman and the other was a Black woman whose face only pained her. Her self is torn between loyalty and obligations to the Black community and her wish to remain a detached singer, dedicated to her art and free of racial complications. Disillusioned and depressed by the failure of the Movement, with the increasing number of activists being killed, the FBI's persecution, she feels betrayed by the Movement, by her own ingenuity and her political involvement which, as she feels, made her ignore her own daughter and fail as a mother. In March of 1970, she decides to withdraw from the Movement and political activism feeling she had done enough and gained nothing in return:

> In March 1970 I played a concert in Newark, New Jersey, in front of segregated audience – entirely black – and I was full of hate, tearing spitefully into political leaders of all races. Backstage after the show people said I was an inspiration to continue the struggle, but that was the end of it all for me – the beginning of my withdrawal from political performance. (*ibid.*, p. 118).

"I was full of hate" are the words she uses when she describes her concert for only African Americans. This is strong wording that demonstrates how critical and tired Nina Simone became of her own people and the Movement's failure she partly ascribed to her people. She no longer feels joy in the presence of her people; what she feels is only disgust and disappointment. These are understandable emotions after seven intensive years of supporting the Movement. However, they also disclose that loving one's people does not come automatically and that racial solidarity and a quasi-obligation to identify with one's community, against personal inclinations, can come at a high price: nervous breakdowns, disillusionment, depression and even hatred. Nina Simone dedicated several years of her life and career to Black people, their fight for a better America and basic human rights for themselves. Nonetheless, her disillusionment with the Movement, lack of visible results, disappointment with politicians and witnessing her own dreams wasted, do not cancel her racial self. It is carefully constructed throughout the narrative but Simone clarifies that she was constantly torn between her dream to live as a free, racially neutral woman and her sense of obligation to contribute to social justice at a later stage of her career. She strove to live like the Negro poet discussed in the Langston Hugh's essay referred to earlier in this Chapter, not because she wished to escape from her race but because she was aware that people's skin should never determine what a person is allowed to achieve or not. Her individualism, characteristic feature of her self, in addition to an upbringing that instilled hard work ethics and meritocracy, and her artistic soul prepared her for a loner life in pursuit of her private goals. Nevertheless, as has been established, ostracism and alienation from the community can follow suit, the community that can enfold someone when their rules are followed or reject them if they dare to criticise or step on their own.

3.3. Faith Ringgold's *We Flew Over the Bridge* and the quiet certainty that her Self is hers to create.

Faith Ringgold's[34] autobiography is also written according to the rules governing traditional autobiography. In this sense, although its structure is different from Nina Simone's, both autobiographies bear certain primordial similarities. *We Flew Over the Bridge*

[34] Faith Ringgold (born in 1930 in Harlem) is a painter, mixed media sculptor, performance artist, teacher, and lecturer. She is best known for her quilts and political paintings such as The American People Series. https://www.faithringgold.com/about-faith/

is divided into three main parts and each one is divided into chapters. And so, Part One (entitled *Harlem Born and Bred*) has two chapters, Part Two (*Men, Marriage and Motherhood*) is composed of three chapters and finally, Part Three (*Making Art, Making Waves and Making Money*) features six chapters. Individual chapters are also thematically divided. Despite their being obvious narratives, stories, and memories overlap, they fast forward or rewind like a tape. The internal structure is coherent and logical, and because of that the autobiography can be deemed as traditional. Another similarity it shares with Nina Simone's autobiography is that Faith Ringgold's narrative is also about a female artist. Here, as in the previously examined work, readers will encounter a strong woman sure of her background, racial roots, and concrete plans. It will be observed how in some regards both artists' outlooks on life and their selves as racialised women overlap at times but there are significant differences in the construction of their life narratives and the images they wish to convey. Also, as in Simone's case, Ringgold's autobiography *per se* has been of relatively little academic interest. She is famous for her art, feminism, and political conscience but her life narrative has been rather ignored.

In her insightful and informative book on Faith Ringgold, art historian Lisa Farrington (1999) claims that she is one of the most interesting and dynamic American artists who faced both racial and gender discrimination in the 1960s and 1970s. It was during those two life-changing decades that Faith Ringgold took a decisive stand as a woman and a Black artist against the racial discrimination of Black artists. It will be discussed that the efforts of the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Liberation she witnessed from her beloved Harlem proved to be a turning point, like in Nina Simone's case, to speak out against centuries of discrimination. However, before Ringgold's narrative reaches the turbulent 1960s and 1970s and examines her role as a Black artist, the first part of her narrative must be scrutinised to trace the fabric of her self-narrative and understand how she viewed herself as an African American girl living in Harlem.

From the very beginning of her autobiography, it becomes clear that Faith Ringgold is a born storyteller[35], a quality she acquired, if not inherited, from her mother. In the Preface

[35] The oral storytelling is a powerful tradition and tool passed down from generation to generation among people of African descent. The tradition contributed to the survival of the culture but also proved to be a tool against cultural erasure. It was considered that Black women were main vessels of memory transmitted through words and storytelling and grandmothers passed this art to their daughters and granddaughters. Janice D. Hamlet (2020) "Discovering Great-Great-Aunts Mary and Martha: The impact of the Oral Storytelling

she insists that storytelling had always been crucial in her family: she listened to stories and spoken word was ever present in her family, which deeply impacted the way she perceived her life as a story to tell. Additionally, from a tender age she used images and art to render her experiences and life events immortal. Due to the fact that she suffered from asthma as a child, she would often be confined at home and thanks to those days she developed a vivid imagination which she translated into artistic expression. Already at this stage glaring differences between Audre Lorde, Nina Simone and Faith Ringgold can be noted. Lorde barely spoke about her professional career and chose to focus on her racial and sexual self, her coming of age as a Black lesbian, deeply concerned with building bridges between communities. In turn, both Nina Simone and Faith Ringgold clarify from the beginning that the emphasis lies on their future professions and life passions as a musician and a painter respectively:

> My life as an artist began as a child during the many hours I spent bedridden with asthma, picturing my small world and the people in it. By the time I became a teenager I started using my art to tell my story. When images were not enough, I added words to my pictures and later quilted them. (Ringgold, 2005: ix).

As is frequently the case in African American autobiography, Ringgold's narrative in Chapter 1 starts with the sentence "I was born". Yet, it is noteworthy that despite the apparent connection to enslaved people's narratives in which the clear statement of being born functions as a strategic move because their birth was seldom remembered or mattered to the white master, in Ringgold's case this sentence is not an expression of self-confirmation. She insists throughout her narrative that she does not need to convince anyone of her existence. Ringgold is too confident in her right to exist to be bothered to reclaim her humanity through such strategies. Still, it is important to remark that, at least linguistically, she establishes a point of connection with this rich tradition in African American autobiography.

Throughout the chapter devoted to Ringgold's family - her parents and extended family not even once does the author mention the word "slavery". Unlike in Simone's narrative where she begins by tracing her great-great-great parents' history invoking their

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Tradition: https://www.sigtheatre.org/events/201920/gp/discovering-great-great-aunts-mary-and-martha-the-impact-of-the-oral-storytelling-tradition

Native and enslaved heritage, thus setting the tone of slavery and racial roots that permeates the entire account, Ringgold opts for a cheerful description of her family. She concentrates on her earliest memory as a loved child growing up in a loving family. Memories of teasing, provoking, joking and of storytelling are the ones she cherishes the most and that dominate the early part of the narrative. Interestingly, when she speaks about the day she was born, her narrative gains a feminist slant as she focuses on the conditions women had to endure in1930s hospitals. Humiliation and violence were often the order of the day:

> The nurse, a stern black woman, tried to tie Mother's hands with a cord. Mother protested, saying she would rather die than be shackled, and promised to be good. (…) The nurse became furious and nervously slapped Mother's face, and crossed Mother's legs together. (*ibid.*, p. 3).

Here Ringgold does openly state that her mother's abuse was perpetrated by a Black woman and the mention of the nurse's race leaves her readers wondering. Violence, after all, can also be inflicted by people of the same race and gender.

As previously mentioned, Ringgold devotes a considerable part of her narrative to describing her happy childhood and she specifically chooses to underline discipline implemented in the family. Notably, Ringgold grew up in the 1930s, a period of financial crisis for both races. This entailed a strict upbringing, without acceptance for deviations from expected norms. Children were expected to obey adults and behave. Her mother was the main disciplinarian at home. As the author explains, times were different (in comparison to the time in which she writes, several decades later) and raising children was about education, care, and attention, not love. Love was felt and understood through daily care, not words. Her family was not rich but they never went hungry. Still, Ringgold says that poverty (brought about by the Great Depression) was not a justification for disorderly behaviour. It provided more closeness and unity for the Black community, however, it did not excuse looking haggard, unkempt, or unclean:

> Being poor was acceptable. Everybody was poor except rich white people, and we never saw any of them except in the movies. There was no television to flaunt before our eyes the good life of the "Joneses" next door. Our teachers were mostly Irish Catholic, and many of our classmates were Jewish refugees who had recently come to America to escape Hitler. Their parents worked with our parents, so we knew firsthand that white people could be poor. (*ibid.*, p. 14)

Being dishevelled was unacceptable to African American families as that would indicate a lack of pride and of proper upbringing. Poor Black people had no time or opportunity to reflect on their poverty and lack of civil rights, as she notes. Again, the above excerpt indicates lack of any racial hostility towards the white community. As a matter of fact, in the beginning of her narrative, Ringgold does not seem to feel threatened by whiteness, even though she knows she is African American. She expresses her understanding of the difficulty of human fate - that both races can fall prey to economical turbulences and in the face of a financial Depression, people from both communities suffer from injustices. Poverty, thus, can go beyond racial constraints.

Moreover, she makes an interesting and telling observation which counters the stereotypical image of the poor Black family relying solely on welfare. She claims that after the New Deal welfare programme was established for the poorest, actual poor families did not dare apply for financial support because it came with the label of poverty-stricken. Although impoverished and hardly making ends meet, poor Black families were too proud to ask for state help lest they be stigmatised. Indeed, through this fragment of her narrative, the author reveals her deeply human approach not only towards her community but towards all people, no matter the race.

Ringgold's ethnic identity is referred to when she speaks about Harlem; it is a source of racial and cultural identification and even pride for her. As she states in the title of Part One, she feels deeply connected to Harlem; years later she remembers it with nostalgia and pride. She also observes that Harlem is not the same place anymore–a place where people could leave their houses and flats open. Harlem was so safe during her childhood that homes were left unattended and there were no break ins because neighbours were watchful and united. With time however, those close bonds started to loosen, and the area began undergoing negative changes, especially with the advent of street gangs of which Ringgold is highly critical. She is precise in her geographical descriptions of the Harlem she knew as a little girl, naming the street they lived on and the ones nearby. The map of Harlem is imprinted on her memory proving how strongly linked to this place she feels.

Even though Ringgold renders a positive image of her life in Harlem, she is not oblivious to Jim Crow laws and the general discrimination of Black people. She refers to a situation which becomes the basis of her reflection on the cultural invisibility of Black people in 1930s America. Each summer the family would go to Atlantic City on a greyhound bus

and the height of the summer was the Miss America Day Parade. Ringgold noticed that none of the participants was Black. The whole family tried to enjoy the event but this invisibility was what perplexed them for years to come:

> We all tried to be enthusiastic about Miss New York, but what really spoke to us was that none of the participants was black. Most people accepted this, but not my mother and her friends. They knew that the Miss America Pageant would not be truly representative until they put a "little black gal" up there on one of those floats. But I never saw a black woman on one of those floats in all the summers we spent in Atlantic City. (*ibid*., p. 12).

Ringgold duly notes that Black bodies were underrepresented, if not completely deleted and marginalised in people's imaginary. More than that, although African Americans were present in the labour market in the North, they were unacknowledged officially in cultural events and, as Ringgold relates later in her narrative, on the national artistic scene. However, the language she uses to speak out against racial discrimination and disregard for Black presence is not inflammatory, unlike in some Black Power autobiographies such as Anne Moody's or Angela Davis'. Faith Ringgold dominates her language and insists on being moderate, elegant, and tasteful. Hers is never a racially inflected language filled with self-pity and hostile feelings towards the white community. Even when faced with outright racial and gender discrimination in the 1960s and 1970s, rejected by the artistic establishment despite being an already experienced artist, her rage and disappointment remain under control. Throughout her narrative she continues to control the image she transmits and is careful not to render herself as a self-victimising, hateful Black female artist, no matter how disillusioned she has become even with the Black artistic *milieu*.

Regarding her artistic development and early years, she comments on a grave issue she encountered when trying to select her professional path. Always deeply drawn to art, she could not, however, imagine becoming an artist precisely because she felt she had had no inspiration, no Black female artists to lean on:

> Art was the one thing I had always loved to do. Yet, because I had never heard of a black artist, male or female, when I was a child, I did not think of art as a possible profession. In retrospect, I think I must have taken art for granted at this time – as something to do rather than be. I knew that I wanted to communicate ideas and

> thereby make a contribution to society; and to do that would require a college education. This had been drilled into my head by my mother and Uncle Cardoza from the day I was born. (*ibid.*, p. 21).

The situation bears some similarity to reflections expressed in Audre Lorde's and Nina Simone's narratives. Both autobiographers grappled with the same issue of lack of representation in their respective texts. Audre Lorde references finding no Black people (little Black girls or women) in the literature she would passionately read at the library. There was no one to lean on in the books she read, no one like her with whom she could identify, learn from and make her feel she was not alone and that her existence mattered. The same takes place in Nina Simone's autobiography. She dreamed of becoming the first classical concert pianist as she had never heard of any Black person achieving success in the world of classical music. She too craved for racial representation and found none. All of this exposed the autobiographers in question to acute anxiety with regards to their futures, both in racial and professional terms. The realisation that the literary and cultural world marginalise Black bodies is an agonising experience capable of derailing a person from their path to personal and professional success.

At school, Faith Ringgold has a similar experience of uncertainty, loneliness, and alienation to Audre Lorde's. However, her sense of alienation was caused by her peers. The author does not gloss over children's cruelty; in fact, she openly states that children of all creeds and colours can be cruel to each other and that bullying is a frequent phenomenon. Again, she does not diminish Black children's faults but implies between the lines that there are no great differences between races. All people, regardless of their race can be cruel. It reminds the readers the philosophy Nina Simone expressed when she discussed her decision to retreat from political involvement. She too understood that no race is better than the other: whichever is in power, the other is oppressed because power and oppression are linked. Both autobiographers, thus, indicate a similar philosophy on the differences between races: none is more ethical and the drive to hurt and humiliate is a human feature all races share.

At the same time, Ringgold admits that her community bore the brunt of racial prejudice, naturally since whites were in power and dominated the political, financial, and artistic scene. In comparing the schools she attended in Harlem like P.S. 90 to P.S. 186, she

states that the integrated school (P.S. 186) was a better institution which offered both white and Black children much better conditions, equipment and teachers. P.S. 90 was a segregated school and as such was underfunded and offered low-quality education. Here, and also in subsequent parts of her autobiography where she focuses in detail on her teaching career, Ringgold is uncompromising and clear in her diagnosis of the educational situation in the city of New York. The fact that desegregated schools (that had white teachers) had more resources to teach children while segregated schools tackled underfunding, lack of equipment, rampant racism and discipline issues is proof of institutional racism pervading the entire social fabric of the US. This structural racism in education later became a point of conflict between parents (Harlem Parents Committee) and the Board of Education with parents demanding equal treatment for all schools and students (*ibid*. p. 22). As Ringgold clearly claims, racial prejudice was omnipresent and there seemed to be no way for the Black community to escape it:

> Prejudice was all-pervasive, a permanent limitation on the lives of black people in the thirties. There seemed nothing that could really be done about the fact that we were in no way considered equal to white people. The issue of our inequality had yet to be raised and, to make matters worse, prejudice was blindly accepted as beyond anyone's control. From time to time, some kid would blurt out "You ain't better than me", but that was hard to prove in the thirties. (*ibid*., p. 23).

Stories of teachers disregarding Black children echo Audre Lorde's about the racist Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament. In this regard, Nina Simone's narrative is silent. All the Black children were considered unteachable lazy profligates. Faith Ringgold recalls her history lessons which today would be considered a disgrace. Slavery was presented as Black people's fault and it was said that some of them even enjoyed the lack of freedom and would not know what to do with freedom had they been granted it (*cf*. p. 24). This brings to mind the observations on memory and re-writing of history made by Pierre Nora (1989) and Edward Said (2000). The "victors", those in power, tend to control whose story is told and whose shall be silenced or completely distorted. What Faith Ringgold depicts is the re-writing of the Black history in white America portraying the community as lazy, unaware of their needs and priorities. And this is an institutionally approved of history taught to new generations of Americans. Assuredly, school years were not easy for Faith Ringgold and her peers, but again it is worth noting that her writing style remains relatively neutral. She

identifies with her community, which can be observed each time she writes "our" and "we" ("*our* inequality", "*we* were in no way considered equal") and this choice of words leaves no doubt as to her sense of pertaining to the Black race. Interestingly, in analysing Nina Simone's choice of words, it can be observed that she is rather turned inward, perhaps more individualistic in her linguistic approach than Faith Ringgold who openly embraces her belonging. In terms of collectivity translated into language in Simone's narrative, her text is more individualistic; there are fewer expressions denoting racial solidarity throughout the autobiography than in Ringgold's case.

It is also characteristic of Ringgold's narrative to include the social, historical, and political realities of her time. Although she is highly concerned with her life as an (female) artist and this is the dominating motif of her entire autobiography, she enriches her reflections and narrative with her personal view on the current state of affairs in America. Her life does not happen in a social and cultural vacuum and she insists on explaining that, in the end, what is personal is always political and people are not isolated islands; instead, they live together in society, even if they treasure their individuality, personal plans and ambitions. This aspect of her narrative grants the reader a complete picture of her life and the perception that she did feel part of a greater context and lived a reflective life. For example, Chapter 2 (*Growing Up on Sugar Hill in The 1940s*) starts with an analysis of the political situation America found itself in (during WWII) and how it impacted not only the country but particularly its Black population. She describes the war effort: Black men enlisting, women's contribution working in military plants. She recounts women's financial independence due to working outside the home, as was her mother's case (*cf.* p. 26). Ringgold faithfully renders the general atmosphere of her times, consequently expanding the image from "I" to "us". She understands that "I", no matter how important to herself, is a drop in the landscape of historical and political events.

If on the one hand, Faith Ringgold is mature in her approach towards her community and is in perfect unison with her racial background, on the other, she does not seem engrossed by the skin colour of her friends. It is rare to encounter descriptions of people in which she focuses excessively on people's skin colour, as is the case in Audre Lorde's narrative and Rebeca Walker's memoir. For example, she describes a birthday party she threw when she was still a young girl, 13 years of age, and it is striking because the reader has no way of knowing the skin colour of the children invited. She reports the event in the following way:

> First some girls came in twos and threes, followed later by the boys. Later when Mother opened the door, she found a hallway full of boys, each one carrying a gift for me. Mother stood aside as they filed by her chorusing, "Hi, Ma Jones". Those who were not new to our house gave Mother a bear hug and a kiss on a cheek. The "coolest" boys were the last to arrive, some so "cool" that I had never even met them before. (*ibid.*, p. 29)

There is not a word on the children's skin colour, and it is but one of many examples of the way in which Ringgold refers to others. Of course, eventually she does mention skin colour but it bears no weight in her feelings toward those people. Clearly, the author reveals what shall be called a deeply humanistic approach to other people, regardless of race and refuses to divide the world along colour lines. Surely, she does notice and write about colour prejudice and the racial discrimination she and her people fell prey to, but colour consciousness does not dominate her thinking and does not make her categorise people into racial (or even gender) compartments.

Nevertheless, racial and gender discrimination were a daily and inalienable part of her life and she faced prejudice too often. The first big test of her tenaciousness comes when she tries to study art at City College in New York. It is then she discovers she is unable to attend the School of Liberal Arts because of her sex. However, that did not deter her (although it was a difficult experience to accept), and she chose instead to enrol in the School of Education where she was allowed to major in art and minor in education. That permitted her to stay in touch with art through professional channels and to not give up on her dream. Her description of the ridiculous situation in which many women found themselves demonstrates that obstinacy and determination aside, Faith Ringgold slowly began developing her feminist identity and self. Later in her life, when she experiences motherhood and generational conflicts with her two daughters, the generational difference they display in their approach to gender issues becomes a source of suffering and misunderstandings.

Like Richard Wright who suffered rampant racism with the astonishment at his plans of becoming an intellectual[36], which contradicted all cultural expectations for Black men at the time, Faith Ringgold also experienced racism related to her professional ambitions, as early as a student. In City College she met racist professors who thought it was their

[36] Richard Wright shares a similar experience in his autobiography *Black Boy* (1945).

obligation to dissuade her from pursuing her dreams, only because of her race. If no famous Black artists existed, what chance did she stand of becoming one? White people's expectations regarding Black students and the Black community in general were as low as possible – it went against the norm for a Black girl to achieve success in the area of fine arts. The following excerpt from her autobiography illustrates well the general atmosphere Ringgold was surrounded with:

> Many of my teachers tried to discourage me from being an artist. Their efforts only served to inspire me to prove them wrong. For example, I got a D in drawing from a teacher. I don't remember his name but I do remember that he painted portraits of rich people on horseback. He laughed at a drawing I did for a test he gave. "What's this?" he asked me derisively, pointing to the mountains in my composition. "Mountains", I explained. "You'd better write it on your drawing or no one will know", he said coolly. In my embarrassment I hurriedly wrote "mountains" on the paper I handed in. (…) A year later, during class one day, this same man took me aside and apologized for having told me once that I couldn't draw. It was a lesson about what teachers should never do – and I learned it the hard way. (*ibid.*, p. 35)

Similar experiences repeat themselves on various occasions, even when Faith Ringgold achieves enormous success as an artist. When she makes observations on the endemic racism existent in college or in the art world, she always does it with the quality of a researcher or a detached observer. Nothing escapes her attention and she is unwilling to leave certain phenomena uncommented, even though her remarks never show trace of rage or negative emotions. She notes for example the specificity of racial relations at her college, commenting that Black students tended to socialise among themselves, sitting at the "black table", avoiding their white peers. Ringgold observes that the white faculty and colleagues thought that Black students were self-segregating, unwilling and unable to break the racial divide and join them. Still, according to Ringgold, what the white students and professors failed to grasp was that it was their racist behaviour and prejudice that pushed the Black students away, keeping them on guard:

> We were expected to prove that we were ready to integrate with whites. Nobody had begun to place the burden for racism on whites, an urge necessity of change in their behaviour. Faced as we were by unsurmountable racism, it was still our fault if we were not accepted as equals. (*ibid.*, p. 36).

The quality of these remarks demonstrates that the author is an astute observer and that her writing never really diminishes white people, even if she offers a searing critique of white hegemony and racial practises. As has already been mentioned, this linguistic and cognitive quality of her narrative is maintained to the end, even when she touches upon difficult personal issues such as drug use by her brother and husband, gender prejudice existent in Black artistic circles or painful conflicts with her daughters. The above quotation also reveals that, although Faith Ringgold was perfectly aware of the political and racial reality in America from the 1940s to the 1970s, she did not allow herself to be overwhelmed by hatred towards white people or by the injustices bestowed on her community. She was too focused on her artistic plans and too ambitious to be discounted. Hard work ethics, instilled in her by her parents (like in Nina Simone's case) did not allow her to self-flagellate and seek any excuses in the outer, white world. Quite the opposite, she is highly determined to succeed against all odds.

And so a considerable part of her autobiography describing her adult years is devoted to the pursue of her artistic career, the importance of professional independence as a woman (in such sections she betrays a strong feminist consciousness), the period in which her art began developing a clearly feminist and racial dimension, and so forth. While Part One in her autobiography deals mainly with her childhood, family life, school years and college as well as her budding racial and artistic Self, Part Two focuses exclusively on strictly private issues such as marriage, her profound relationship with her mother and the difficult love between herself and her two daughters. Part Three of the narrative (*Making Art, Making Waves and Making Money*) is an interesting depiction of herself as a fully realised Black female artist. The "Black female" artists are nouns employed with full understanding that they both refer to questions of identity. They are chosen here because in the later stage of her career, Faith Ringgold identified deeply with them, although until that point in her autobiography, she rarely speaks of being a Black female artist. The change in her came about gradually but the more she advanced in her artistic development, the more she realised that external conditions of prejudice, both racial and gender could not leave her unmarked and indifferent. In this sense, the path of her racial and female self-development resembles that of Nina Simone who, with time, understood that her skin colour and gender would always impact her art, the way she was seen and what was expected of her.

The racial discrimination started to be felt in Ringgold's early career when she saw herself obliged to deal with acute prejudice while trying to secure her job as a teacher. She

recollects her Black colleagues telling her she would find it impossible to get a job as a teacher. Instead of looking for a job teaching high school, she was advised to look for a teaching position in primary schools where it was easier for an African American person to be hired (Farrington, *op. cit.*, p. 14). A respite from racism came when Ringgold went to Europe with her mother and daughters in 1961. She felt a considerable difference being Black in America as opposed to Europe. The family got used to this "European colour-blindness" quite quickly. As Ringgold notes in her autobiography, in Europe nobody seemed to notice that they were Black: "The concierge was a lady and was typical of the people we met in Europe: cordial, hospitable and seemingly colour-blind. In no time we became accustomed to the strange absence of racism" (Ringgold, *op. cit.*, p. 137). Undoubtedly, here Faith Ringgold demonstrates a romantic and unrealistic view of Europe as Nina Simone did when she set foot on the African continent for the first time. A lack of deeper insight into more troubling aspects of European history and culture such as colonialism and ever-present racism caused Faith Ringgold to readily believe that Europe was a continent free of racism. When in Italy, Ringgold basked in her African American origins as they were perceived as unique and exotic to Italians. There she felt like a rare piece of art deeply appreciated by charming Italians and, again, she failed to see the underlying issue of European exoticisation of the Other:

> Everyone was aware that we were Americans, and we were particularly special because we were also black females. Europeans knew what was happening in America. The Italian radical press carried front page stories with large pictures of Freedom Riders and marching ministers in the South. We were not only three generations of a family, but heroines as well. Look what we had escaped in the United States. (*ibid.*, p. 137)

In Italy they were indeed a sensation with Italian men making them feel like goddesses. They not only stared at them but also called them "Bellas Negras"[37] (p. 138) and touched them as if they were ebony sculptures. This fascination with seemingly non-racist treatment, however, reveals a deep disillusionment with American society in which Black people, no matter how successful, were always regarded with suspicion and humiliated on

[37] The expression "Bellas Negras" employed in Ringgold's autobiography is incorrect in the Italian language. The correct version would be "Donne nere belle".

every occasion. The trip to Europe, although too short for the four women to comprehend the political and historical complexities of its past and links to colonialism and slavery, seemed sufficient for them to understand their true status in America and how slow coming changes were.

At a certain point of the autobiography, Faith Ringgold confronts herself with the issue of Black art; she starts to wonder if Black art even exists. Does art really have colour? If yes, what does it mean to her, specifically, as an artist? Although already an established art teacher, Ringgold was yet to determine the direction of her art. The 1960s were turbulent times in the American history, particularly for African Americans. For Ringgold, it was also the decade in which she communicated to her seriousness as an artist. Techniques aside, (a shift from muddy to vivid colours), she began changing her subjects. She also relates in her text the difficulty in finding a proper gallery to accept her work. The Ruth White Gallery was one of the places where she tried but her efforts failed – Ruth White suggested rudely that Ringgold's art was not good enough to be displayed there and promptly rejected her. As the author reveals in her autobiography, the rejection left her undeterred in finding another gallery where she could display her paintings:

> She [Ruth White] said something to me that, whether or not it was meant to, helped me as an artist. "Do you know where you are?" she asked. "Yes", I said. (…). She pointed to my "French" paintings. "You", she said, placing a stress on the word *you*, "cannot do this". I know what she meant as I saw Birdie's eyes go immediately to the walls of the gallery where there were the examples of work very similar to mine. (*ibid.,* p. 144)

The personal pronoun "you" uttered with barely hidden indignation in Ruth White's tone clearly meant, "you, a Black artist". This along with other factors such as the Civil Rights Movement, propelled Ringgold to direct her art to the current topic that caught the attention of the nation: racial relations in America. Unlike in Nina Simone's case, Ringgold was not directly influenced by a specific person, friend, or a colleague-artist. Her epiphany was not sudden, it came as a result of years of observing her countrymen and American racial politics which left no freedom for Black people to enjoy. Ringgold's political awareness and maturity stemmed from her own clashes with racism and prejudice in school, in the streets of Harlem, at City College, from observations she made in Europe and the discriminatory treatment she received from the art world. As Farrington (*op. cit.*) observes,

current events in America which involved two races in incessant clashes, "became the subject of Ringgold's first mature works, entitled American People Series" (p. 19) and denoted her gradually intensified political and racial awareness. Art became a weapon through which Ringgold could speak out against the injustices meted out to her community. She states in her autobiography:

> That summer of 1963 was the beginning of my mature work. I planned to paint five paintings in my new style, which I called "Super Realism". The idea was to make a statement in my art about the Civil Rights Movement and what was happening to black people in America at that time, and to make it super-real. (*ibid.*, p. 144).

The series that includes *Between Friends* (Fig. 1.), *For Members Only* (Fig. 2.), or *Watching and Waiting* (Fig. 3.) all focus on uneasy and deeply troubled interracial relationships. *Between Friends* is particularly meaningful, portraying two women, a younger Black woman, curvaceous with round and soft contours, and a second white woman, visibly older, with a pointy nose and less rounded breasts. Both facing each other, the Black woman's face expresses emotion (a half smile), perhaps she has questions for the white woman but there is no hostility in her face. Opposingly, the white woman looks emotionally cool, as though she feels superior and outright hostile. "In her own relationships with white women, Ringgold could sense the invisible racial chasm that separated them, and she tried to capture this feeling in Between Friends" (Farrington, *ibid.*, p. 20). The painting is particularly rich in meaning also as it shows that there is a way for women of both races to embrace their differences. The women in the painting are facing each other but they are also standing in the door which could perhaps symbolise a passage onto the other side, towards the Other. The passage and the path are there, only one of the women must make her first move.

A large portion of Chapter 7 entitled *Is there A Black Art?* is dedicated to Ringgold's paintings and artistic techniques which attests to the importance of her professional life. She gingerly explains the subjects of her paintings from the American People Series and comments on the fulfilment she feels upon finding a new turn in her artistic life. The goal of telling African American People's stories overwhelms her professional life, impacting her private life too (her increased dedication to her art caused her to be apart from her husband

for a longer period[38]). It is also a period in which Ringgold educates herself intensely as to the history of her people and the Black intellectuals who impacted the Movement and her political philosophy. It is worth noting, however, that while mentioning such names as Malcolm X, Dr Martin Luther King Jr. or James Baldwin, she fails to acknowledge any female contribution to the Black struggle for justice:

> James Baldwin had just published *The Fire Next Time*, Malcolm X was talking about "us loving our black selves" and Martin Luther King Jr. was leading marches and spreading the word. All over the country and the world people were listening to these black men. I felt called upon to create my own vision of the black experience we were witnessing. I read feverishly, especially everything that James Baldwin had written on relationships between blacks and whites in America. (…) But I had something to add – the visual depiction of the way we are and look. I wanted to express this moment I knew was history. I wanted to give my woman's point of view to this period. (*ibid.*, p. 146).

As mentioned above the excerpt, while discussing the contribution of Black intellectual men to the political philosophy of the Black revolution, Faith Ringgold overlooks women's contribution to it. She does not mention Black female intellectuals who, either through activism or pen, left their indelible mark on the Movement.[39] Similarly to Nina Simone who focuses mainly on Rosa Park's refusal to give up her bus seat ignoring the entire path Parks had made as an activist, Faith Ringgold glosses over the female contribution to the development and success of the Civil Rights Movement.

Faith Ringgold's feminist consciousness developed rather slowly and by the time she entered the Movement supporting it through her art, women's issues were not of her immediate concern. Nevertheless, in the final part of that sentence, which illustrates her civic and political awareness, she remarks her desire to make a *female* contribution to the Movement through her art, as if she felt or realised that a female point of view might differ from a male's. Or that women might display a different, equally valuable understanding of

[38] The fact she mentions on several occasions in her autobiography and the reader cannot but feel the artist felt guilty about the fact she placed her art before her husband.

[39] In the 1960s, the period Faith Ringgold describes in her autobiography, several Black women had already been known for their involvement in the Civil Rights Movement and prior to it. Suffice to mention Ella Baker (1903-1986), Daisy Bates (1914-1999), Fannie Lou Hammer (1917-1977), Dorothy Height (1912-2010) or Septima Poinsette Clark (1898-1987).

the current times. This signifies that in her multiple identities Faith Ringgold also identified with women. In fact, in a later phase of her career, she insists on the feminist aspects of her art and pays homage, through her paintings, quilts and sculptures, to the African American women who built Black culture in America and proved to be the guardians of Black traditions.

Although later parts of her autobiography frequently mention her involvement in the Movement and heightened political consciousness, it is worth commenting that, in parallel, she was developing as an artist and that entails an investment in her individuality as an artist. Art can be, and in her case was, politically engaged, and Ringgold fulfils the promise of a Black art (a concept that Nina Simone had trouble understanding at first). Ringgold first had to discover her individual self as an artist, her talents, tastes, and techniques before she could offer that art to the service of her people. When she discusses the importance of artistic progress, development, and perspective, she clarifies in her narrative that she starts to feel more certain and stronger as an artist. She mastered her painting techniques and acquired control of her medium and subject. Like Nina Simone in her autobiography, Faith Ringgold too devoted significant parts of her autobiography to her profession, discussing the choice of colours and her new approach to black and white colours. According to Farrington:

> Ringgold utilized a new approach to color in Black Light, intended to express what she termed "essential truths" about blackness. (…) The Black Light Series represents a new commitment on the part of the artist to the symbolic of color. Ringgold began to investigate ways of using black pigment as a metaphor for her racial orientation. (Farrington, *ibid.*, p. 59).

The black light technique is the expression of her commitment to the radical idea of "Black is beautiful". It was a way to counter the cultural discourse of black being ugly and its association with everything pathological. Her growing interest in African rhythm, pattern and repetition translated her growing maturity as an artist deeply influenced by her African roots. As she explains in her autobiography, her idea was to invest in light browns, blacks, and greys to illustrate the palette of colours she found on African American skins, hair, and fabrics.

This is described as a process of finding her own artistic voice and an attempt to differentiate herself from other artists. At the same time, she admits to feeling lonely and cut

off from her Black colleagues. She had worked alone so far but felt that isolation did not aid her to progress artistically. Here she critiques the Black artistic community. At first, she tried to communicate with non-artists about her art but those attempts only seemed to deepen the distance between her and other people. Only her mother proved to be an attentive listener as well as the only person she could turn to when in need of communicating her doubts. She claims that her art was misunderstood or, even worse, misclassified by her peers and critics. Usually, her work tended to be labelled as "protest" or "history" art - labels she deeply resented. The following excerpt taken from "Being my Own Woman" published in 1987, although extensive, illustrates well how she felt about her art and the way people tried to categorise it:

> People called my paintings protest art, political art, and some even referred to them as history painting or social realism. (They were mostly people from the "old school" who had been badly burned during the communist scare in the fifties. They wanted to keep their noses and palettes clean. So art for them was an untitled abstraction, a fragment of an idea, something nobody could understand much less condemn.) However, I called my art Super Realism because I wanted to make people feel as if the people in my paintings were they, themselves. Black artists also objected to my painting white people. The younger ones did not understand my freedom to do it. The older ones considered my steely-eyed white faces as going too damn far. Many black artists were lagging behind the movement. They were reading Baldwin, but they were not listening to Malcolm. They were cautious, half- stepping, as they said in the sixties. Trying to get by in the art world. Trying not to have their differentness noticed. However, they knew something I did not know. That there was no support of art or artists in the black community. And there was not much to be gained by losing possible friends and contacts in the white art world. (Ringgold, 1987: 31)

Just like Nina Simone, Faith Ringgold felt overwhelmed and constrained by the attempts to classify and categorise her work. People with traumatic experiences caused by racism and prejudice tended to describe her art in a way she refused to accept. For the same reasons, these people steered away from politically engaged art lest they be labelled "protest artists". Faith Ringgold concluded that if art was abstract enough and nobody grasped it, then nobody would condemn it. Other artists from previous generations also tried to avoid outright political subjects. Their goal was survival in the white-dominated cultural scene and market in the 1960s and 1970s America, so they took pains not to attract attention to

their race. "Art is art. Quality is important thing. It doesn't matter what color you are was their message" (Ringgold, 2003, *ibid*., p. 147), says Ringgold offering her critique of the Black artistic *milieu*. In other words, Black artists knew that if they invested in their Blackness and created racially-inflected works, they would stand no chance against white artists who did not have to make any political statements because their race was taken for granted. In fact, white artists are never considered racialised because "white" is not a race. White artists were unmarked, racially neutral and in a white supremacy society, that presented itself as a huge advantage.

The comments Ringgold makes regarding Black artists are highly politicised and constitute, at the same time, intentionally poorly veiled criticism of Black hypocrisy and fear of the white establishment. Clearly, in the context of the era, Ringgold's art and persona could be seen as highly provocative if not dangerous and uncomfortable to artistic circles that counted on white support to enter the most important art galleries in the city. Faith Ringgold's art was uncompromising and unapologetic in her direct treatment of the racist and colonialist history of America. When creating art using the American flag[40] (the painting *American Flag is Bleeding*[41], Fig. 4.) to depict the genocidal past of the nation, it is clear she must have been considered *persona non grata* in artistic circles, Black or white. An attack on the American flag, which has historically been a symbol of American history, greatness, and democratic values, must have reverberated among Ringgold's Black and white colleagues. Her art was also condemned by her peers, especially younger and radical ones, for her inclusion of white faces–considered a betrayal of the Black community and its values. Hence, Ringgold objects to the instrumental treatment of her art and race by all her peers. Whereas it is somehow "understandable" that she would be either ignored or pressed by the white establishment for her artistic choices since they exposed white hypocrisy and centuries-long injustices, it is more problematic to account for the fact that the Black community exercised their pressure on Ringgold and other Black artists too. Racial and

[40] In 1970 Faith Ringgold helped organise the "People's Flag Show" at the Judson Memorial Church in Manhattan's West Village. The exhibition showed more than 100 works all related to the American flag and was meant as a protest against the laws that curbed artistic freedom in what concerned the use of the American flag in art. As a result of the exhibition, Faith Ringgold and two other artists, John Hendricks and Jean Tuche, were arrested.

[41] The American flag, treasured as a sacred object and symbol of the nation, was often used in art created by dissenting Black artists in the 1960s and 1970s. It was used, as a subversive political symbol, for example by Betye Saar in her *Black Crows in the White Section Only* (1972) or by David Hammons's 1969 *Pray for America* and *Injustice Case*.

cultural expectations of what should and should not be done by a Black artist can prove thoroughly stiffening and disheartening. Nevertheless, the artist refused to give way to those pressures and stood by her personal/political choices. In this regard, she demonstrated that her community did not always offer the expected support and emotional refuge. In fact, quite the opposite, it could clip one's wings and severely restrict their individual and artistic freedom.

Racial, cultural, and political pressures apart, inside the Black artistic community, Ringgold faced sexism and gender prejudice too. Her disappointment and anger were channelled into a new path of feminist art, as later appears in several paintings, quilts, and sculptures. Confronted with some Black male colleagues' mansplaining and superior attitudes, Ringgold understood that feminist issues were her issues. In reaching out to Mr Romare Bearden, Norman Lewis, and Richard Mayhew, "old men of black art" as she describes them (*ibid.*, p. 159), in an attempt to establish links with other Black artists, she relates in her autobiography how she was treated by them, particularly by Bearden. When she sent him a letter explaining that she was looking for a gallery to exhibit her works along with a couple of samples, she received a rather patronising reply. In his answer, Bearden explains to her how good paintings should be executed and, uninvitedly, offers lessons and advice. Ringgold remembers how enraged she was at him and his sexist treatment of her as if she were a child taking her first steps in painting. Finally, when she manages to get her paintings exhibited in the Spectrum Gallery on West 57th Street run by Robert Newman, she is the only Black female artist showcased.

Farrington confirms that Ringgold became a committed feminist in 1970. In the same way experiences of racial prejudice built her racial conscience and forced her to speak out, the sexist attitudes she encountered in Black artistic circles made her see how the patriarchy victimised women and allowed only for male success and fame. This newly created consciousness was applied in paintings and other forms of art where she drew inspiration from famous African American women such as writers, slave rescuers (Harriet Tubman, for example) and politicians (Shirley Chisholm[42]), including citations and fragments of prose/speeches in her art, especially in quilts. "By co-opting the language of other African-

[42] Shirley Anita Chisholm (1924-2005) was the first African American woman in Congress (1969-1983) and the first Black woman to seek presidential nomination in the US (1972). Chisholm published her autobiography *Unbought and Unbossed* in 1970. https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/shirley-chisholm

American feminists Ringgold reaffirmed her personal quest for self-awareness and definition, and her belief that art must do more that portray formal beauty – it must share insights as well" (Farrington, *ibid.*, p. 115).

3.4. Rebecca Walker's hybrid Self and performing racial identity in *Black, White and Jewish. Autobiography of a Shifting Self*.

Rebecca Walker's[43] autobiography is one of the most untraditional, postmodern self-narrative among the four texts analysed in the corpus of the Thesis. Firstly, Walker is the youngest of all the autobiographers, born in 1969, she is 39 years younger than the oldest Black author (Faith Ringgold) studied in this chapter. She was born exactly when the Civil Rights Movement was drawing slowly to its end and the Black Power Movement was gaining popularity among the Black population disenchanted with the Movement's lack of visible results. One year earlier, in 1968, Dr Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated and along with him the dreams of millions of Black Americans who still believed in a non-violent strategy to gain their basic human and civil rights. Therefore, Rebecca Walker did not witness the Movement but she was fortunately spared living in the times of Jim Crow laws.

Hers is an autobiography/memoir defying the traditional rules of the genre. The narrative is not organised into chapters, as with the previously examined autobiographies, but instead into geographical locations. So, readers are faced with sections entitled, for example: *Jackson*, *Brooklyn*, *Atlanta*, *Washington D.C*, *San Francisco* – places between which Rebecca was transiting like when Nina Simone was transiting between Philadelphia and New York and in each place she wore a garment of a different self. Only one section of the text carries a different name unrelated to the geography of her physical and emotional mobility: *How Memory Works* and it is comprised of highly insightful remarks on workings of the memory, the process of writing autobiography and what it entails for an autobiographer to recreate memories. Walker, too, focuses on her youth, the process of coming of age and her college years. Only on the last pages of her autobiography does she give her readers a glimpse of her adult life when, as a mature woman she has a serious

[43] Rebecca Walker (born in 1969) is an activist, essayist, and founder of Third Wave Fund working with and on behalf of transgender young people. She has published a number of articles, essays and books on feminism, multiracial identity, motherhood, masculinity, etc. https://www.rebeccawalker.com/about-rebeccaw

conversation on the topic of biracial origins with a woman who attended her conference or when she mentions co-parenting her female partner's child.

To some extent, Walker's text bears resemblance to Audre Lorde's in that it is almost entirely devoted to the matter of racial self and identity and how it positions itself in the world and in relation to white and Black communities. There is visible tension present throughout Walker's narrative regarding her origins and an attempt to comprehend her own racial mixing. Her origins, at the time she was born considered to be somewhat problematic, absorb her constantly, making the narrative a compelling recounting of her experience growing up as a biracial child. Rebecca Leventhal Walker was born in Mississippi (being born in The Magnolia State also has a profound impact on her budding racial self) to the African American writer Alice Walker and the white Jewish civil rights lawyer, Mel Leventhal. Rebecca insists throughout her narrative that she was born of love, she is not a tragic mulatto.[44] Ralina Joseph (2009) confirms in her article on Walker's autobiography that this tension between being the Movement Child and Tragic Mulatto is what drives Walker's narrative from the beginning to the end. On the one hand, the author tries to seek ethical and political value in her mixed origins, on the other hand, she tries to escape a burden (self-imposed, perhaps) of being a hybrid child which was, in 1969, still unthinkable. Miscegenation, even at the end of the Civil Rights era, was not well seen. As she recounts, she was born in the middle of the segregated South, her birth certificate says Black mother and Caucasian father, and the nurse expressed her astonishment and disbelief at the birth of a biracial child:

> And then, on my twenty-first birthday, Daddy remembers something I've not heard before: A nurse walks into Mama's room, my birth certificate in hand. At first glance, all of the information seems straightforward enough: mother, father, address, and so

[44] The figure of the "Tragic Mulatto" appeared in American literature in two short stories by Lydia Maria Child, *The Quadroons* (1842) and *Slavery's Pleasant Homes* (1843). Child's protagonists were light-skinned women who could, indeed, pass for white being the offspring of a white slaveholder and a Black enslaved woman. In Child's stories, the so-called "tragic mulattos" do not realise they are mixed but upon discovering the truth and their father's death, they were enslaved as their "negro blood" was discovered. In the 20th Century, cultural representations of biracial protagonists focused on pathology. As a result of their mixed heritage, American society believed that "tragic mulattos" led miserable lives filled with self-hatred, suffered from depression, alcoholism, betrayed signs of sexual perversion and often took their own lives. In some cases, when their skin was light enough, they succeeded in passing, performed a white racial identity and often lived in self-denial. American literature offers many examples of tragic mulattos' stories, often solidifying the stereotypical approach in the process. Some examples of such literature are: Vera Caspary's 1929 novel *The White Girl,* Geoffrey Barnes' novel *Dark Lustre* (1932), Nella Larson's 1929 *Passing*, etc. David Pilgrim (2000), "The Tragic Mulatto Myth": https://www.ferris.edu/JIMCROW/mulatto/

> on. But next to boxes labelled "Mother's Race" and "Father's Race", which read Negro and Caucasian, there is a curious note tucked into the margin. "Correct?" it says. "Correct?" a faceless questioner wants to know. Is this union, this marriage, and especially this offspring, correct? (Walker, 2001: 12).

Regarding the issue of the "impossibility" or "correctness" of Walker's identity, Ralina Joseph analyses Walker's narrative and concludes that:

> (…) Walker illustrates the impossibility for a contemporary 'mulatta' to move beyond historically anti-black images. Even when she paints herself as the hopeful Movement Child, she ends up becoming 'the tragic mulatta caught between both worlds like the proverbial deer in the headlights', the innocent victim of racialization, frozen in place as the embodied experiment victim of black bodies colliding with white. (Joseph, *ibid.*, p. 13).

To complicate this problem even further, it must be remembered that Rebecca Walker's Jewish origins[45] come into play on many occasions in her text and they, too, reveal themselves to be problematic and further contribute to the anguish of the already fragmented and torn racial self. Here, being Jewish is not "only" a white identity. According to Lori Harrison-Kahan:

> Jewishness [is deployed here] to expose the special construction and plurality of whiteness as well as to challenge existing theories of mixed race identity that rely on binary configurations. Occupying more than one position at once, Jewishness simultaneously signifies whiteness and racial otherness; furthermore, the confusion over whether the label "Jewish" refers to race, ethnicity, religion or culture is

[45] It must be noted that although in Rebecca Walker's narrative her Jewish family is not portrayed in a favourable way, showing ethnic and cultural tensions in her father's family and their patronising attitude towards her African American mother, historical evidence shows that there has been a long-term political alliance between Jewish and African American communities. There is a long history of Black-Jewish collaboration in the fight for civil rights and freedom in America, at least since the early 20th Century. Such organisations as NAACP (whose first two presidents were Jewish – Joel and Arthur Spingarn) and the National Urban League were founded by Jewish prominent intellectuals and the Civil Rights Movement was financially supported by Jewish advocates of freedom. Both groups shared a status of discriminated minorities which brought closer their mutual needs and political interests. Thus, the two communities worked on issues related to housing, education, employment applications, challenging racism and discrimination. Nevertheless, it should be also noted that tensions arose between the communities, especially when Black radicals started to see the Jewish members of the American society as white and thus, as part of the oppressive forces: https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/black-jewish-relations-in-the-united-states

> emblematic of its complex meanings across categories of identity. (Harrison-Kahan, 2005: 22)

As will be further analysed, racial categories (Black, white, and Jewish) are also related to question of class: (Jewish) wealth and (Black) financial difficulty.

That Rebecca Walker is deeply affected by colour-consciousness is clearly visible in the language she deploys to refer to people. When discussing Faith Ringgold's autobiography it has been mentioned that direct references to people's skin colours were made infrequently. In Walker's memoir, it is the opposite: almost all her memories of people she socialised with are colour-imbued. For example, she notes her cousin Linda has reddish-brown skin (Walker, *ibid.*, p. 14). There is also Mrs Dixen, a light-skinned lady who cleaned the house. And when Walker and her mother listen to music at home, the description includes the colour of both protagonists' bodies: "Sometimes we fall asleep there, after the arm on the phonograph swings itself back into place, my little copper form pressed against the smooth warm length of my mother's cherry-brown body" (*ibid.*, p. 16). Walker's Jewish grandmother is white, like her son, and Mrs Cornellius to whose house she goes after school is brown-skinned. When she is at school in Washington, shifting between places after her parents' divorce, she always takes mental notes of her peers' skin colour. A few kids are white, the majority are brown – she is the only light brown child, somewhere in between white and brown. At the same school Walker gets to know Marc, whose skin, like hers, places itself somehow between two worlds. As Marc is being bullied at school for being half-brown and half-white, Walker conforms to the politics of the school and avoids him lest her peers think she is Black, and as a result, rejected. She says:

> The only kid who is light like me, not white and not brown either, is Marc. (…) In school I don't talk to Marc, I am too afraid that the other kids will see that I am like him, yellow and awkward and afraid instead of cool and tough like I pretend to be. (Walker, *ibid.*, p. 94).

Fear of rejection makes her turn her head away, pretending not to see someone to whom she could become close. She is afraid of humiliation. Racism destroys not only the deepest sense of human dignity but also, or primarily, intra-racial relations, turning people against each other, not allowing them to acknowledge their mutual existence as was also

the case in Audre Lorde's narrative where Black lesbians passed each other in the street avoiding each other's eyes. In Walker's narrative, colours carry emotions too. There is an interesting fragment which could be compared to the briefly analysed painting by Faith Ringgold, *Between Friends*. It has been said that the Black woman in the painting has round shapes and contours and is generally associated with positive emotions, empathy and expects friendship from the white woman she faces. In turn, the white woman looks stern, austere, and pointy – she is visibly emotionally detached from the Black woman, as though there were no chance for friendship or understanding. Rebecca Walker offers her readers an excerpt where she speaks of colours too and how white and brown/black carry different connotations to her. When her father divorces her mother and meets a white, Jewish woman (to his Jewish family's appreciation), Walker makes an interesting observation: her mother's brown round body (associated with maternal care and femininity) is substituted by a white pointy one (*cf.* p. 57). The connotation of the brown, curvy body is affection, warmth, maternal care, and love while the white pointy shape brings to mind coldness, aloofness, and insecurity. A pointy white object can even be associated with a white weapon, a knife or another sharp object: such an object will never be a source of love and life to the author.

Spending her life between her mother's world and her father's Jewish culture, she feels deeply uprooted and alienated. Shifting between homes, cities, schools, and peers unbalances her and becomes a source of severe anxiety and self-doubt. After months of spending time with her mother, she must drop everything, the Black self she managed to build among her mother's friends and other Black teenagers, she must wear a cloak of Jewishness and pretend she belongs. Again, using colours, she renders her emotional state. The new house her father and stepmother have in Washington D.C. is described as cold and detached. It sports different colours from her mother's (featuring vibrant browns, reds, oranges, and blues). Her stepmother's house where she will live for the next few months is decorated in whites, beiges, and browns. It does not exude love, emotions, and affections. It is reserved and does not offer emotional safety.

Although Walker is drawn to her Black roots, mainly through her mother, she does offer a critical analysis of Black politics and the colourism implemented in Black Power circles. She ascribes blame for her parents' separation to politics of colourism which contributed to a growing distrust and mutual rejection among many Black people. To radical activists in the Black Power Movement, any biracial relationship was *a priori* suspect and a betrayal of the race. Only Black-on-Black love was approved of and, in certain extreme

cases, the lighter the skin a Black person had, the easier target of discrimination within Black circles they became[46]. Black women were particularly blameworthy if they were in relationships with white men:

> With the rise of Black Power, my parents' interracial defiance, so in tune with the radicalism of Dr. King and civil rights, is suddenly suspect. Black-on-black love is the new recipe for revolution, mulatto half-breeds are tainted with the blood of the oppressor, and being down means proving how black you are, how willing to fight, how easily you can turn your back on those who have kept black folks enslaved for so long. (*ibid*., p. 60).

Walker advances with uncompromising critiques of her own Black community which also turned racial issues into politics that impacted Black people's private lives. This time, oppression did not stem from white politics, although it had been justified by self-defence in the face of endemic racism, but it came from the inside, from people who seemingly forgot how to support each other. The politics of colourism[47] and thinly veiled racism taught even Black people to differentiate between dark-skinned and light-skinned peers, either consciously or subconsciously.

Everywhere Rebecca Walker turns, she must adapt to rules and expectations of the *milieu* that hosts her. When she spends time with her Jewish family (her paternal grandmother) she feels awkward and out of place. Her grandmother's house observes Jewish rules and traditions. The elderly woman considered the neighbours of Puerto Rican origins unclean and unworthy, though. Through simple childish expressions, Walker notes in her narrative that her grandmother is racist. Her great grandmother, of rich ethnic origins, ignores the brown girl refusing to speak to her. Great grandmother Jennie was born in what

[46] This is, in fact, reverse colourism "colourism" generally defined as "a discriminatory practice by which lighter skin tones, straight hair, and relatively more Eurocentric facial features are preferred over darker skin tones, kinky hair and more stereotypically Afrocentric facial features" Monk, Jr. Ellis P., (2021). "The Unceasing Significance of Colorism: Skin Tone Stratification in the United States": https://direct.mit.edu/daed/article/150/2/76/98313/The-Unceasing-Significance-of-Colorism-Skin-Tone

[47] The term "colourism" is believed to have been coined by Alice Walker in 1982 to denote "prejudicial or preferential treatment of same-race people based solely on their colour". According to Kimberly Norwood (2015), colourism is not racism, however those two phenomena are related as colouring involves preference of light-skinned people over dark-skinned ones in different social, legal, and cultural contexts. https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/law_globalstudies/vol14/iss4/8/

was then Russia, in the city of Kiev[48]. When asked about the story of her life, great grandmother Jennie offers only superior silence, not even looking at her great-granddaughter. This makes the girl feel inadequate, unloved, and unwanted. Walker learns from her father that grandma Jennie is Jewish and was persecuted as such in Russia and when she went to America, she was then ostracised as a Communist. Being a victim of discrimination in both countries, she allegedly developed a strategy for coping with it. She interiorised her fears, according to Walker's father, hiding her emotions and doing her best not to expose herself. Interestingly, Walker later uses this knowledge of her multiple cultural heritages to shock people. She uses, on many occasions, her racial and ethnic hybridity to see others' reaction. Her multiracialism will become, apart from a source of anxiety, one of power over others:

> For many years I tell people whom I think will be shocked about my Slavic, Jewish ancestry. I get a strange, sadistic pleasure from watching their faces contort as they reconsider the woman who was more easily dismissible as Puerto Rican or Arab. On the subway, surrounded by Hasidim crouched xenophobically over their Old Testaments, I have to sit on my hands and bite my tongue to keep from shouting out, "I know your story!" I don't feel loyalty as much as irrational, childlike desire to burst their suffocating illusions of purity. (*ibid.*, p. 37).

This is a slightly controversial excerpt because, aside from speaking out against racial and ethnic discrimination and denouncing her personal experiences, she, on the other hand, proceeds to label a Jewish person she sees in the public transport. She automatically categorises the Hasidic person immersed in religious study as racist or xenophobic, even though she does not know if that is the case. In this fragment, she reveals her fears and anxieties, as well as interiorized racism by labelling a person she knows nothing about, except that they are white and Jewish. There is no doubt that she, an adult writing her autobiography, remembers her teenage fragile self taking a strong stance against her Jewish family's rampant racism and sense of superiority. Like Lorde, she refuses to be silent about the problem of racial divides, especially if they run in families. She portrays her family world as a place where children are taught to see through lenses of "us" and "them" where, usually, "us" is better than "them".

[48] Today the capital city of Ukraine.

Reflecting on her Jewish family throughout her narrative, she notes that the cultural diversity her family was committed to becomes a source of concern to her grandmother who had resolved to remain loyal to the "values" of racial and ethnic traditions and expected her sons to marry Jewish girls. Instead, Walker's father married a Black woman and uncle Jackie married a Catholic Italian girl. Her grandmother expresses the concern that she will never have truly Jewish grandchildren. The race issue is a bone of contention between Walker's mother and her mother-in-law, making it hard for Alice Walker to turn away from what she sees in the family and the way she is ostracised as a Black woman. Walker in time becomes aware of her mother's choice to avoid family meetings and her absence at the Jewish table screams out the truth. This (non)presence is felt by Walker as a proof of her own inadequacy and acute sense of non-belonging. The fact that her mother is unacknowledged means that she, as a brown girl, is rejected too. It makes her feel suspended between two worlds, two families, two cultures and ethnicities. As she admits:

> Her presence at the table would grant me the great luxury of being able to love my family members unreservedly, to take them irrevocably as my own. (…) Haunted by her absence, I pull back cautiously and feel, even as I laugh and play with my cousins, as if some part of me is alien to the others, as if I am in the family through some kind of affirmative-action plan and don't entirely belong. (*ibid*., p. 47)

The Jewish community she encounters after she moves into her father's house again is described in negative terms. First of all, Walker observes she is one of three Black kids on campus which makes her, again, an outcast. As was with Marc, she notices that they never interact with each other, as if afraid of being discovered. Being Black in white circles can prove to have deadly consequences: ostracization, rejection and bullying, and what Walker most wants in life is to belong, no matter the price. Her narrative focuses again on her peers' skin colour (white and spotless) and their family's financial status. The Jewish community reveals to Rebecca to be frivolous – full of rich kids, trendsetters, well-dressed young people always trying to attract attention. Her peers carry big golden stars of David around their necks – symbol of their belonging and, in her eyes, of the financial status and alleged superiority. Walker states in her narrative that, with time, she becomes immersed in Jewish culture: she attends her friend Jodi's bat mitzvah in Livingstone, New Jersey. However, the choice of language unveils her disrespect for Jewish culture and its rich traditions, or perhaps an ambiguous approach towards the financial status of her friends:

> Jodi's bat mitzvah in Livingstone, New Jersey, is the first I experience, and it is there I learn about the whole culture of the bat mitzvah: the big, gaudy, hysterically expensive coming-out-as-a-Jew party, the bag full of envelopes that Jodi and her parents empty onto the kitchen table after everyone leaves, checks totalling nearly fifteen thousand dollars spilling out in every direction. (*ibid.*, p. 116).

It is, indeed, a curious description, a definite outcry against the artificial way of life and excessive wealth that creates divides between people. Harrison-Kahan (2005, *op. cit.*, p. 23) offers an interesting analysis regarding Black-Jewish relations in America claiming that Jewish people have, historically, been considered as multicultural but also adhering to white values of hard work ethics and financial and educational success. Drawing on Glazer, Harrison-Kahan states that after the period of the Civil Rights Movement, the African American economic situation worsened and their financial progress slowed down, also due to the rise of the Black Power discourse with its focus on separatist politics, whereas the Jewish community invested in economic success and progress leaving the Black community behind. African Americans began questioning Jewish loyalty to minority rights and issues as well as the reasons for their involvement in the Civil Rights campaign. Harrison-Kahan continues:

> Today, while Jews are at once seen as another minority, sharing history and struggle with their African American brethren, they are also viewed as benefitting from the racism of the United States. Cultural critics such as Michael Rogin have argued that Jews became white in relation to, and at the expense of, blacks. (Harrison-Khan, *ibid.*, p. 23).

The scholar's explanation sheds some light on what can be interpreted as a negative attitude towards the wealthy Jewish community shown in Rebecca Walker's autobiography, although it is, of course a hypothesis as the autobiographer herself never clearly explains her ambivalent attitude towards her father's cultural heritage. What is certain is that the racism she encountered in her father's family, the rejection of her mother as a Black woman and the superficiality she witnessed among her Jewish peers did impact the way she felt about her Jewish origins. In fact, it must be noted that the title of her autobiography refers to her Jewish roots which she, on one hand cannot deny, but which she, at the end, partly repudiates, preferring her mother's cultural roots.

Walker is constantly tense over her Black self when in the company of her Jewish friends. She is always carefully guarded so that her Blackness goes unnoticed by her white friends. She explains feeling awkward and out of place when in the company of her white peers. Her body feels unnatural, and she seeks a way of looking and sounding normal: "I watch myself try to will my body into some kind of normal posture, into some semblance of ease and comfort to disguise my feeling of not belonging. I watch myself perform, shift, contort, sweat." (Walker, *ibid.*, p. 178). This is a particularly insightful excerpt testifying to Walker's sense of not inhabiting her own body, no matter where or with whom she is. What is more, these two phrases denote that she acts and performs as someone she is not. Whatever she does, she fears she will be denounced by her body, behaviour, and speech. Her sense of non-belonging is felt primarily on the bodily level: it is in her skin she feels awkward and inadequate. As she claims, she feels like an impostor, wobbling on the edge of a lie that could be exposed any time. However, it is not only racial non-belonging; it also stems from the acknowledgement that her wealthy Jewish friends are arrogant and snobbish. While at the school camp desperately wanting to fit in, Walker adapts her behaviour and style to existing informal rules, wearing designer clothes and adapting her language and mentality to the *nouveau riches* community:

> When I am at the camp I wear Capezios and Guess jeans and Lacoste shirts, and I assume the appropriate air of petulant entitlement. And yet I never get it quite right, never get the voice to match up with my clothes, never can completely share free of my blackness (…) (*ibid.*, p. 180).

She interiorises her peers' style so deeply that she even permits herself to use racial slurs in relation to a Jewish girl, calling her "such a fucking Jap" (p. 179) and gossiping about her with her friend, Pam Manela. And she notes further: "Jap is a word we throw around at camp, a word that is always in the air, lurking behind the gold *chais* and purple polka-dotted Le Sportsacs, the care package and big black trunks. We call ourselves Japs, make fun of what a 'Jap camp' Fire Lake is. It means something repulsive, gauche, flashy (…)" (*ibid.*, p. 179).

No matter what she does at the camp, however, she never feels white enough, Jewish enough, or rich enough to be an option for Jewish boys. She does not meet Jewish standards because she does not visit Israel periodically as other peers do and does not own

fifty bags from Le Sportsacs. She claims that her body hides a dirty secret, it bears the shame of being tainted by wrong blood.

Her troubled self shifts each time she changes her physical location. Every time she must move because her parents' divorce agreement stipulated that she would spend two years at each parent's place alternately, she needs to pack her things, traverse cultures, and identities to try to find her place on the other side of the racially dividing line. She takes with her the new identity and leaves the old one behind. It is as if she becomes a new persona altogether because the worlds she inhabits never really overlap. Her body becomes a physical bridge between those two, seemingly opposing worlds that never converge. In each world, she is forced to accept her new peers' rules, cultural expression, and different language: she wears a mask again, never quite able to decide which self: white, Jewish or Black is her authentic one. Constant moving, crossing borders, shifting between cities, districts and houses require a superhuman effort and always crafting new strategies of self-affirmation. In order not to become completely invisible, even to herself, she must learn how to forget what she is leaving behind when she closes the door on her current life. She notes that returning to New York will require starting afresh, with her memory wiped of previous experiences, love, friendships, and people. She will have to negotiate her place in the world anew, fight to belong in the city. To protect herself, she opts for voluntary amnesia: the act of forgetting is an act of mercy and self-preservation.

> I'm only in the present, driving up to the airport, waiting still on the escalator as it carries me closer to the gate. I'm an amnesiac because if I weren't I'd be feeling all of that loss, all that tearing away, and who wants to feel that? (*ibid.*, p. 164).

As a result of shifting between houses, families, cities and environments, the author feels empty, uprooted, and anxious. The houses she inhabits do not serve a purpose anymore – they are only artificial containers for her alienated body. In the process of trying to remember and forget, pack and unpack, move in and out, negotiate her position in new circles, Walker becomes an entirely different person in different circumstances, like a chameleon, she adapts herself and her skin to the different backgrounds she inhabits. This capacity of adapting to new circumstances and wearing different masks is a strategy of self-preservation. It is only at the end of her autobiography that Rebecca Walker finally solves the internal conflict of who she really is. Before that, she spends a considerable amount of

time and energy in order to understand her options and accept her fragmented self. In the meantime, nomadism is such a heavy burden that years later, when she composes her autobiography, she devotes it almost entirely to the long, painful process of seeking her roots and constructing her self from the pieces three separate cultures had to offer her. She has to integrate all those geographical, emotional, cultural changes and the subsequent sensation of never really feeling like a whole person.

It is curious to note, however, that between both Black and Jewish culture, between her father's and mother's world, she seems to be more herself, or more at ease when immersed in her mother's culture. Through her mother, Walker meets other Black women who discuss racism, sexism, and politics. The sisterhood of the 1970s is not only discussed but also experienced in other women's houses: colours are present everywhere and the smell of incense permeates the spaces Walker occupies when she is with her mother. Wherever she goes, she is her mother's daughter: Alice's little girl. During her mother's poetry readings, she is recognised, loved, and appreciated. Alice Walker's fame extends to her daughter and she basks in her mother's reputation. She is no longer an anonymous girl. Her existence is fully confirmed and acknowledged when she spends time with her mother. The opposite happens when she needs to inhabit her stepmother's world where she is unknown and feels unloved (although she cares to explain in her text that her stepmother did make efforts to raise her properly and ensure she did not want for anything).

Although Walker acutely misses her mother's world, in Black schools she is faced with racism too. At the New Traditions Center, a San Francisco experimental school, she feels rejected for not being dark enough. Boys darker than her hit her for being "yellow". The racial bullying she deals with is a clear sign that the Black community fails to provide her needed protection and acceptance. The aforementioned colourism is a tool of intra-racial oppression and exclusion of children who are not dark enough. She makes further criticisms of her Black peers while discussing her Black friends from San Francisco. Those friendships were often fragile based rather on uniting against someone else, someone weaker, than on true values or common interests. Walker explains she socialised with people who hated her and bullied her because of her skin colour: to them she was not dark enough and, hence, untrustworthy. What united those girls was violence and, perhaps, self-hatred. Susan was one such girl – aggressive and verbally abusive, but the three of them, Walker, Lisa, and Susan stuck together against all odds. The Black community is again described as violent, forceful (even for girls) and unrelenting. The weaker members are subdued, abused, and

bullied. According to the autobiographer's narrative, the stronger and more aggressive elements of her Black community had the power to decide who would belong, what the rules were and who would not be considered worthy of integrating the group. It is a different kind of violence from the one exercised by white oppressors; it is practiced within and can be equally destructive and self-negating. Instead of solidarity, Walker collided with a wall of indifference, rejection and ostracization from her Black peers. Such ostracization and intra-racial abuse is often justified by white hegemony and oppression and the second-class position African Americans occupy in American society.

The artificiality of racial construction and the idea of race often having a performative nature are illustrated by the author's account of interracial relationships, specifically the story of her close, white friend Lena. The girls never discussed race, Lena acknowledged Walker's Blackness but, at the same time, never brought up the subject. This is similar to Audre Lorde's situation when socialising with her white lesbian friends. They, too, feared any mention of race, considering any conversation on the matter an implication of their own racism. Nevertheless, both girls were brought up closely and, once the friendship cooled for various reasons Walker alludes to in her text, she strongly missed Lena. Despite Lena's whiteness, Walker loved her deeply as a friend which proves not only that her Black racial self was accommodating of white people, but also that racial divisions are artificially made, imposed on people of different ethnicities by prejudice and political interests. The author notes that racial divides categorise people and impose stiff identity constraints on them. Very often, as she elaborates, communities claim people for themselves, not allowing them to freely choose their human relationships, limiting their choices to racial ones. The two houses of difference, as Audre Lorde puts it, claim both girls and force them to make impossible choices. There is no permission to transit between racial and cultural borders; one must declare their loyalty to one group only otherwise they run the risk of being labelled a traitor or inauthentic. Walker makes it clear for her readers that to belong to a certain group, in her case, the Black community, one needs not only to have dark enough skin but it is equally important to be familiar with cultural codes such as music, dressing, speaking, and acting in a certain way. She explains below why she could not keep Lena as her friend:

> Lena and I were as close as two girls could be, and then things get in between us, things like language and fashion and color. (…) It is more than growing apart, what happens between me and Lena, it is not knowing how to grow together, not knowing

> how to bring her into the world that is slowly claiming me, marking me, not knowing how to teach her how to walk and talk so that she can fit into my world, not knowing how to let her be her and fit in without doing any goddamn thing. (*ibid.*, p. 144).

Artificial frontiers obsessively guarding racial and cultural purity and authenticity contribute to alienation between people. If we recollect the insightful observations made by Paul Gilroy in his critique of "pure" race, guarding roots, instead of routes and focusing on identity, the implications of identity politics become transparent. Audre Lorde's house of difference might never be possible because identity politics spread fear of all differences which, according to Lorde's dream, should enrich human existence instead of limiting it and destroying people in the process. To some extent, Rebecca Walker's critique of intra-racial relations and her constant fight to belong is even harsher than ones offered by Audre Lorde, Nina Simone, and Faith Ringgold. Walker's account leaves no doubt as to the destructiveness of obsession over racial and ethnic purity and so-called authenticity. It can destroy friendships, communities and individuals who are ground by the machine called "community". Of course, that does not mean that community cannot be and is not a source of strength and identity. In fact, Walker's entire autobiography is a cry for acceptance and roots; she seeks her own community where she could grow and find herself. Love and support offered by her peers would be invaluable, especially since her family life was far from perfect and her parents rather failed not only as disciplinarians but also as guardians who did not provide her with the emotional protection she needed and sought elsewhere.

While living in the Bronx, Walker immerses herself in the Black community again and this time there is a shift in language and behaviour. She is yet again expected to act in a way that confirms her racial authenticity. Language (more vulgar), topics of conversations and drinks change as she shifts between different worlds. Her skin colour ("I am young, copper-coloured, *ibid.*, p. 195) impacts her relations with boys and once more she deals with the fact that some African American boys prefer white, blond, and blue-eyed women, which makes her disconcerted and unsure of herself. The Bronx is rendered as a dangerous place, full of drug dealers – the man who sold her mescaline dies some time after she experiments with drugs. In the Bronx she lives with her father and her white stepmother. Walker duly notes the class differences which map the geography of the district: Riverdale is an area that overlooks the Hudson River preferred by rich people while the Bronx itself is dilapidated, with deserted and dirty streets and, one imagines, inhabited by the poor Black community.

However, to Walker, the Bronx signifies a place she really belongs to. It is a neighbourhood rich in ethnic diversity and she finds herself shifting again between two worlds, cultures and people. It is where she is called "a puertoriqueña, a mulatta, a girl of color with attitude" (p. 200). She is a city-girl, a *flaneuse*, finally, as it seems, on the path to becoming herself. Although she now feels at ease at her father's home, it is still not a space she can invite her Bronx friends into: she would be too ashamed of her father's economic status, as though it were a betrayal of her Black peers, as if Black people had to be poor to be authentic. Nothing in her father's apartment attests to her Blackness. In it, she feels like someone different from whom she is when in the company of her friends from the Bronx. Her two worlds are completely disconnected, as separate as they can be. When her father drives her to school in a Volvo, she prefers to get out before they arrive and walk to her friend's house. Slowly, she starts to be ashamed of her father's whiteness and Jewishness while she is Black. This time it is him who does not belong to her world: he is an outsider and she an insider in the Bronx:

> I belong because my skin says I do, because people don't question me, don't look at me and think of all the wack shit that white people do. They don't assume I have money or that I don't respect them. I can walk like I know, I can cock my head to one side and look at someone like they better step off, but my father? I worry that he's just another white man walking down the street, an easy mark. (*ibid.*, pp. 202-203).

Undoubtedly, toward the end of the narrative, Rebecca Walker comes to terms with her duality and the process of healing begins. She finally feels that her skin grants her passage to places she desired that now her father cannot access. Still, when her father and his wife move again and settle in Larchmont, a wealthy white area, Walker is uprooted once more. But she starts to see an advantage to her cultural and racial hybridity: she realises that in living with her Jewish father she has access to white upper-class culture and mentality. Had she been cut off from her Jewish roots, she would have known only the Black reality. This is indeed a new outlook on her life and cultural heritage and such an approach can bring deeper insight into the complexities and richness of cultural communities. She does not share such an open perspective until this point, constant moving has been described as a source of pain and confusion. Then she recognises that all the relocations, from San Francisco to Washington D.C., to Brooklyn, to the Bronx and Riverdale, to New York and

now to Larchmont, afforded her knowledge she would have never acquired had she stayed only in one place as the majority of her peers did. When her friend Allison enquires about San Francisco and she is able to provide an informed opinion, she suddenly understands she possesses a key to different worlds. She can transmit her own personally acquired knowledge and that makes her feel important and useful. She possesses something her friends lack: a cosmopolitan outlook on America. She knows worlds that never overlap and it is not only about geography but culture, conduct in different places, language used in all of them. She becomes a bridge between those worlds and translates different cultural languages for people who belong to only one place. Her hybrid body serves the purpose of translation and mediation between people who would otherwise never understand what really separates them:

> When Theresa asks me about my friends there, when she asks me what the other kids are like, I tell her about Allison, about Allison's house and Allison's maid. I tell her that Allison wouldn't last five minutes at 141 with her uppity attitude. She'd get her ass kicked. I laugh with Theresa as I say this but in the pit of my stomach I feel some guilt, like I'm betraying Allison, choosing sides because it's convenient. I love her but it's too hard to be the translator, the one in between, the one serving as the walkway between two worlds. (*ibid.*, p. 212).

Her familiarity with two cultural languages is an asset that requires tact and loyalty to old friends because cultural translation should not equate to gossip. Nevertheless, it can be observed that Walker finds a new role in each of the worlds she inhabits. She risks being considered inauthentic by either community if they find she transits too easily from one to the other. Her bilingualism and cultural hybridity are advantageous to her once she finally comprehends that drawing from two cultures and embracing both ethnic heritages are personally enriching.

The tension between her racial selves and conflicting identities present throughout the narrative relents once she realises that she benefits from her family's wealth. At the end of her autobiography, she describes the symbolic act of changing the position of her last names, leaving her mother's name last in order to grant it more visibility:

> In twelfth grade I decide to move Leventhal to the more obscure middle position in my name and add Walker to the end, privileging my blackness and downplaying what I think of as my whiteness. After all, why should my father get all of the credit?

> Why should that line, that clan of people who have been so resistant to my birth, be allowed to claim the young woman I have become? (*ibid.*, p. 312).

In this way, she exercises her freedom and right to self-determination, like other autobiographers examined in the present work. Her decision can be interpreted on several levels. In becoming Rebecca Leventhal Walker, she highlights coming to terms with her Black roots, embracing them without reservations. Her long-term struggle with her conflicted and torn self ended, she healed and felt relative peace. Also, it is important to note that her decision is deeply feminist in its expression. To some extent, Walker rejects her father's Jewish roots and adheres to feminist values which highlight visibility of the female lineage. Like when she learned from her mother that she had an enslaved ancestor and internalized that new knowledge, now she acquired feminist or womanist maturity to give voice to her mother's ancestry. It can also be interpreted as her mother being a central figure in her life, the one who gave her life, passed on her African legacy and taught her to love herself. Matrilineal bonding was strongly developed, embraced, and publicised. Last but not least, the shifting of her mother's name to a more prominent position signifies that Rebecca Walker created no bond with whiteness. As she says at the end of her autobiography:

> When I change my name I do so because I do not feel an affinity with whiteness, with what Jewishness has become, and I do feel an affinity with blackness, with an experience of living in the world with non-white skin. (*ibid.*, p. 313).

Further in the text she blames her father for his family's racial prejudice, for complying with white values such as money, success and selling out to integrate. According to her, he also changed from an idealistic white man who took risks in defending Black citizens into a contented lawyer pushing toward the American dream and forsaking his former values.

Whiteness and Jewishness, associated with her father, symbolise a void to her, an absence. She feels this privation when comparing herself to darker people and acknowledging there is a part within her that will never be filled: her whiteness, devoid of colour, "unfeminine", i.e., round and curvy, emotionally unstable, neurotic due to her Jewish heritage. This description might seem untoward considering race is a social

construct, not a biological quality, but despite feeling at ease with her racial heritage, Walker still dramatizes her whiteness and rejects her Jewishness blaming them for her internal shortcomings.

This chapter was focused on the examination of four autobiographers' attempts to weave their textual selves around the topic of racial belonging and the conflict and tension between an individual and the community. It has become clear that, although all of the authors do identify with their Black communities, they also see the complex relation between being women and Black. Their ethnic environments prove to be challenging because they never fully accept them and the price of unconditional belonging reveals to be very high in emotional and professional terms. The attempts to belong often bring pain and disillusionment, however each of the author finds the way to solve the crisis and negotiate their way into the community without having to forsake their individual freedom and sense of agency. As has been concluded the relationship between the individual "I" and the Black *milieu* is often fraught with tension and requires effort to maintain individual and artistic autonomy, while striving to belong to the authors' communities. None of the authors disavows their cultural and ethnic heritage, yet the process of weaving their textual selves in relationship with the Black community is a complex one which requires political, cultural, emotional, and authorial expertise.

The most dramatized aspect of racial (non) belonging can be found in Rebecca Walker's autobiography, while Faith Ringgold reveals the most balanced approach towards her racialised selfhood. The strain placed upon the relationship between the community and the individual "I" is most visible and permeates the entire autobiography penned by Walker. Since the first page of her autobiography she paints a gloomy portrait of her struggle to find her roots and confirm her humanity in the fact she is Black. As has been mentioned, she desperately longs to be accepted and belong, however as the narrative develops, the readers understand that Walker does not romanticise her Black community. Rejecting her Jewish origins which are symbolised by her father and her racist grandmother, she negotiates her way through the cultural meanders of Black performativity rites, however she is fully aware of artificiality of racial construction. She comments on many occasions on the fact that in order to belong, she had to act in a specific way, speak according to the community's expectations, place her body in a way that would testify to her authenticity, dress in a required way. She realised, in the end, that racial authenticity is a requirement placed on individuals who strive to be considered as worthy of belonging. It is, at the same time, an

artificial prerequisite, born out of sense of power over others. This brings to mind the critique penned by Nina Simone who, too, understood that no race is better than the other: if given enough power, they will abuse that power and dominate the "race" that is considered minoritarian. This is, in fact, a human characteristic to oppress those who lack any agency and social and political or economic power. This is also an observation made on several occasions by Faith Ringgold who in her autobiography noted that both communities – white and black – could be poor and thus, powerless.

It should be also concluded that Audre Lorde's biomythography bears some similarities to Rebecca Walker's self-narrative. Audre Lorde too places her racial identity at the central place of her text, however hers, although critical and realistic, is a narrative less fraught with tension. She wants to belong to her Black community but she does not reject her white peers, particularly white women with whom she establishes links of love and appreciation. She becomes a human and cultural bridge between the white and the black world, particularly through the use of the erotic. Women of both races are admired, appreciated, and desired by her. By reaching out to white women and loving them either romantically or erotically, she establishes a link between them, in spite of all differences between those two worlds. In turn, Nina Simone and Faith Ringgold weave their textual selves in relation to their communities by focusing more on their artistic careers, although the issue of their role as Black female artists in the contemporary society is present and important throughout the texts. Both of them highlight their status as hard-working Black women, artists first and foremost, although they both affirm that through art and activism, they strove to contribute to their communities' improvement. However, they both admit as well that their expectations as female artists were often neglected, if not betrayed. It is particularly visible in case of Faith Ringgold who was rejected by her Black male peers and devalued as a woman artist. It is possible to conclude that for all four authors analysed in this chapter, racial subjectivity is of great relevance and each one of them finds her way to navigate the complexities of Black communities which exercise pressure how to act, behave and how to create art so that they can be deemed authentic members of the group.

Chapter IV

Writing the Autobiographical Body

Introduction: The Stereotyped Black Body and Controlling Images.

The denigrating images regarding Black and female bodies persist in contemporary American society and carry the stamp of historical racism. Therefore, the main goal of the fourth chapter of the Thesis is to analyse the autobiographers' works to understand how the corpus authors viewed their own bodies in a world that has tried to marginalise them as Black bodies ascribing them the pariah status within the white society. This chapter takes as its central point of analysis the second axis of the research proposed in the Thesis and endeavours to discuss the way the four autobiographers wove their textual bodies. Each of the autobiography shall be scrutinised in order to better understand the link between the narrative, the body, the self and how the body is constructed in the narrative. The chapter will examine how the authors establish a link between their own bodies and the representation of their selfhood and how their autobiographies as written texts, become a *locus* of bodily identity, paired with a sense of self and how the self is housed in the racialised body. It will be analysed whether the bodies described in the four narratives become visible, or if they become a subject of silencing and omission. Also, the chapter will scrutinise if bodies become the source of (racial or feminine) pride or a source of anxiety and discomfort, how the body is described and remembered, in what situations and context, whether it is a source of pain, if it houses happy or uncomfortable memories. As shall be examined, in some cases the question of textual body will not take the central place in the autobiography. In some cases, it will be of less concern to the autobiographer, although it must be remembered that relative absence might be as important as excessive presence. As has been mentioned before, each author has (or should have) authorial freedom to weave their narrative as they wish and unwillingness to write about certain subjects and memories must be respected. The absence of the body or its relative scarcity throughout the autobiography signals the authorial strategy to protect one's intimacy but it can also be explained by the wish to follow certain societal norms and expectations.

Before proceeding with the analysis of the proposed autobiographies, the first part of this chapter shall address the question of the link between text and body and the cultural aspects of the Black bodies' representation in the white society drawing from studies

dedicated to questions of structural racism embedded in the American society. The discussion of the abhorrent approach towards Black bodies in the American society shall constitute a contextual background which will establish the premises of the analysis of the corpus authors. Each autobiography shall be then analysed through the lens of the material body, bearing in mind the cultural and political aspects of the treatment of Black bodies in America.

Corporeality is an inalienable part of human existence and daily experiences. This is particularly true for Western patriarchal culture that ascribes an immanent material body to women[1]. The female body has been set as mainly a fragile one with a gender-related determinism which compulsorily links women to motherhood and all other biological and cultural aspects of being female. Men, in contrast, have been regarded as transcendent beings, for whom the body had less relevance. In Western philosophy and culture, women have been associated with the fragile physique, the sphere of the domesticity and the affective. Men, in turn, have created for themselves a status of public figures, subjects who strive for public recognition, leadership and rational selfhood, divorced of emotional dimensions. Mary Rawlinson (2016) affirms that women were associated with the body rather than the mind and thus were expected to dedicate themselves to the affective realm within the family. The masculine self appears as a source of rationality and integrity fulfilling dutifully their citizenship in the realm of the public. According to Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1949) and Luce Irigaray in *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1985) the mind and reason are seen as masculine, whereas the body, emotion and the irrational are seen as feminine.

As has been discussed in the first two chapters of this Thesis, literary studies conducted by scholars of the autobiographical form ignored or misinterpreted the male view

[1] For a long time, the body has been associated with women and men have been represented as creatures of the mind. Feminist critique has come to undermine the Cartesian duality of mind/body and how it impacted women's corporeality, the way women have been perceived as material bodies and, as a consequence, their bodies became commodities. (Brail *et al.*,1998.) The opposition between mind and body has come to represent for feminists the opposition between men and women, between male and female. This opposition contributed also to portraying women as less rational, more emotive, maternal, more natural than men. A very interesting analysis of the female body and how women are perceived as Others because they are embedded in their physical bodies is presented in Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949): Feminist Perspectives on the Body (revised version 2019): https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminist-body/

of their own bodies written into autobiographical narratives, even claiming that life narratives written by men shunned the topic of the body[2].

Eakin (2008, *ibid*.) argues that feminist critiques of male autobiographies overlook certain dimensions of those texts and, he further claims that many male autobiographies do, in fact, speak about the body. Even if the body is absent from the discourse, which occurs in several male (and some female) autobiographies, such absence is meaningful. It is often imposed by external conditions, cultural dictates of masculinity which are symbolised by the intellect rather than the body. The latter has always been treated as feminine terrain and has frequently been compared to a land that needs to be conquered. Thus, women are often reduced to their biological functions of reproduction. But, as humans, we possess and are bodies and all our experiences are strictly linked to our skins, the first border between us and the world.

As has been asserted, female autobiographies focus heavily on the many aspects of being a female (body) and corporeality has remained at the centre of autobiographical narratives penned by many women. Scholars who did their research on male vs female autobiographical literature, compared writings by both sexes trying to demonstrate the differences between male and female self-writing. However, it has been explored in the initial part of this work as well that, frequently, scholars of autobiography succeeded in proving their point which also reflected their personal cultural biases and expectations. This means that, as observed by Leigh Gilmore in her *Autobiographics* (1994, *op. cit*.), scholars are not immune to cultural bias and they, too, can propose theories which confirm their pre-established opinions rather than facts.

The material body, the human skin seen as a boundary between external and internal reality is hidden in plain sight in many autobiographical writings, mainly because it is the only barrier separating people from the world and other human beings. It is an instrument for experiencing oneself through the eyes of the Other. If, in addition, the body is Black, i.e.,

[2] Masculinity as a scientific area is nowadays gaining more ground and visibility. There are gradually more texts and critical analysis interested in men and embodiment, especially at the intersection with Feminist, Gender and Queer Studies. (Carter, Philip, 2019) However, it should be noted that autobiographies written by men also reveal their corporeality, even if it is not always at the centre of the authors' attention. With the advent of queer and trans activism and related studies, it has been observed that also more critical attention has been paid to corporeal self-representation of trans and gay men, their sexuality and embodiment. Academic works on the topic have been published analysing cultural, political, and literary aspects of new masculinities (e.g., Malatino, 2019; Robinson, 2022, Garland and Travis, 2022)

(even in the 21st Century) considered different and, often, devalued, discussing, and examining the question of corporeality becomes even more pressing. When a Black body, historically and traditionally marginalised and silenced, becomes the object of a self-narrative, critics must look at how any autobiographical text gives visibility to such a body and how it is rendered in the narrative aspect. The body becomes a carrier of dignity and self-esteem, but it must be kept in mind that it also makes part of the self, it has a direct impact on creating the self, thus writing the (autobiographical) body becomes the *modus operandi* of writing the narrative self too. This, in turn, can be a political act of reclaiming and affirming an identity, the act of saving one's life, name and reputation.

In the case of African American women, this issue is relevant because they have been particularly marginalised, dehumanised, and deprived of their womanhood. Historically, Black people have been considered and treated as subhuman. According to the colonisers' point of view, Black people had no written language, no past, or history. The Black body was subject to humiliation, pseudo-medical analysis and discourse, inhumane experiments, measurements meant to demonstrate its pathologies, all with the intent of proving its near-animal status. It had been scrutinised and epistemologically violated to ascertain its inhumanity. Sander Gilman's study (1985) confirmed that white bodies were considered the norm while Black ones were seen as illicit, sexually excessive, and pathological. This was especially true for Black female bodies and, as several feminist scholars assert, even today, they continue to be policed, judged, and devalued (Carby, 1985; Collins, 2000)[3]. Black sexuality was considered pathological and repugnant, being compared to the sexuality of monkeys (*cf.* Gilman, 1985, *ibid.*, p. 230). Such images, boosted by medicine and pseudo-science contributed to viewing Black women as a symbol of uncontrollable and sick sexuality, in contrast to white women, perceived as a symbol of chastity and womanhood. Sojourner Truth, in her famous 1851 speech *Ain't I a Woman*?, denounces the hypocritical culture where a Black woman's body continues to be seen as female due to her reproductive capacities but, at the same time, can never reach the status of womanhood enjoyed by a white woman because Black enslaved women work and toil like animals. In addition, Black women were sexually harassed and abused due to the twisted logic that they could be

[3] According to Naa Kwate and Shatema Threadcraft (2015), Black women in United States continue to be policed aesthetically and morally. For example, they are often portrayed as fat or/and obese as a result of lack of self-discipline and, as such, still need policing for moral failures. In turn, Gallego (2016) claims that Black bodies still symbolise commodification, fetishization and hyper-sexualization (p. 74).

assaulted precisely because their bodies were considered subhuman and unwomanly. In the capitalist logic of slavery, Black women were not considered, in fact, women. In the 19th Century, Truth had managed to establish a link between chaste white women and the sexual promiscuity associated with Black women. The goal was to contrast both groups demonstrating the pathological condition of the sexually promiscuous Black body. Even if white women were oppressed by the patriarchal system, they were, nevertheless, always above Black women, situated at the bottom of the social hierarchy (Mama, 1995).

The 19th Century was a particularly fertile period for racist theories whose goal was to clash races and prove that Blacks were, somehow, guilty of their enslavement. The Black body became an object of "scientific", biological, cultural, and even religious scrutiny in order to demonstrate the superiority of white bodies. In *Dictionnaire des sciences médicales* (1819, *cf.* in Washington, 2006: 83), the sexual nature of Black people (it can be seen how sexuality is strictly linked to the body and skin colour) was presented as "voluptuous", completely unknown in the Western world, due to the fact that their sexual organs were considered abnormal. The physical aspects of Black bodies were obsessively examined and exhibited. Clearly, it was not only female bodies that were exposed to Western gaze. Samuel Phillips Verner, a missionary-explorer, sold to William T. Hornaday, the then director of the Bronx Zoological Gardens (Washington, *ibid*, p. 76), twenty-three-year-old Ota Benga, a Mbuti widower from southern Africa (the Democratic Republic of the Congo today). In 1904 Ota Benga was presented during the Universal Exposition in St. Louis, Missouri and then in 1906 in the Zoological Gardens in Bronx. The African man was locked in a monkey house: "he was given a bow and arrow to brandish, his cage was littered with bones, and his two cage mates were Dinah, a gorilla, and an orangutan, called Dohung" (Washington, *ibid.*, p. 76). An African American clergyman, Reverend Dr MacArthur, denounced the situation, however local newspapers ignored his desperate pleas to reconsider the exhibition as inhuman and outrageous. Episodes such as this were not rare and similar cases have been reported where Africans, snatched from their continent, were gawked at with wonder and amazement in America or Europe. Probably one of the most known cases is that of Saartje Baartman, a South African woman born well before Ota Benga, in 1789, whose body was mercilessly exposed to European laughing audiences, and became the object of white people's medical curiosity and unhealthy lust. Baartman belonged to the Khoi tribe, known

for possessing "dramatically endowed features and especially their large, fleshy buttocks" [4] (*ibid.*, p. 83), and these features were characterised as evidence of lewdness and sexual prowess. What followed after Saartje Baartman was considered a biological freak, bore some resemblance to medical research but was, in fact, a sign of obsessive, lustful and undignified interest in the Black female private anatomy. White people coined a nickname for Baartman: "The Hottentot Venus", and she was the object of medical pilgrimages; her body was measured and scrutinised. Her extended inner labia, dubbed "Hottentot apron" (*ibid.*, p. 83), was called *sinus pudoris*, the Latin term for "veil of shame". Clearly, intimate female anatomy became a symbol of shame and pathology for the human (Black) body. "Medical analysis" continued, as it has been revealed that Baartman's body was subjected to rape and exposed to the most intimate and humiliating violations and examinations. As Washington affirms: "she was displayed nude or bedecked in animal skins with accoutrements – spears and bones – that her handlers thought fitting for a 'Hottentot', as her people were disparagingly called by Europeans" (*ibid.*, p. 84). She was violated not only physically but morally, since she was also deprived of her own name, and, as discussed in the previous chapter, the act of naming is a form of claiming authority over one's(self) or the Other. Baartman's life, her unfortunate death, and the fact that her dissected body was displayed for many years after her passing, illustrate how Black bodies were treated and regarded in the Western world. Behind the pretext of medical curiosity lied sick obsession and lust for Black bodies – a fact confirmed in many narratives written by enslaved people, particularly women who attested to all forms of physical and sexual abuse they endured at the hands of their white masters. The Black (female) body became a symbol of pathology, inhumanity, and lasciviousness. It was viewed as bestial, grotesque and hypersexualized at the same time. As further studies (Hooks, 1998; Collins, 2000 *ibid*, etc.) have demonstrated, these negative and sexualised images of Black bodies persist well into the 21st Century, and stereotypes linked to Black female bodies continue to thrive in contemporary Western culture. As Carol Henderson (2002: 3-4) claims:

> The corporeal body has continually served as an emblem for the conceptualizations of national identities. As a sign, the body's narrative prowess stems from its contentious development as an ambiguous social entity. That is the body's identification. The very way we assess and contextualize social, political, and ethnic

[4] Medicine terms this condition as *steatopygia.*

> representations within the national public sphere revolves around the rhetorical fluidity of the American politics.

The discourse, either political or cultural, around Black bodies is still dominated by images of (sexual) violence in the case of Black men who are often portrayed as sexual predators lurking behind corners or park trees to rape an innocent white woman[5], or sexual lewdness in the case of Black women who, even today, are stigmatised as prostitutes or "welfare queens". Patricia Hill Collins (2000, *op. cit.*, p. 76) speaks of the so-called "controlling images" which still hover over white American society and harm Black women. In the white imaginary, Black women depend heavily on social welfare, are overly sexual, act as strong, emasculating mothers (matriarchs) or, alternatively, are seen as Jezebels. Such controlling images contribute to the scenario where Black women are at fault for their own misfortune, also because they destroy their own men and families by being too strong and masculine, not allowing their men to be men. Dorothy Roberts, in turn, speaks about an "explosion of rhetoric" where poor Black women are blamed for their sexual and familial choices and, consequently, they perpetuate social problems:

> We are in the midst of an explosion of rhetoric and policies that degrade Black women's reproductive decisions. Poor black mothers are blamed for perpetuating social problems by transmitting defective genes, irreparable crack damage, and a deviant lifestyle to their children. A controversial editorial in the Philadelphia inquirer suggested coerced contraception as a solution to the Black underclass. (Roberts, 1997: 3).

Roberts asserts that the white society still upholds negative images of Black female bodies whose reproductive capacities must be curbed and governed in order to save the community from their own biological and class misfortunes. Black women, because of their race and social class, must be controlled and eugenic contraception must be implemented

[5] The 2019 miniseries "When They See Us", directed by Ava DuVernay is a good example of the stereotype of the Black male sexual predator. It is based on a true story of five African American teenagers accused of the rape of a white woman, Trisha Meili in Central Park, New York on April 19, 1989. Convicted of the crime despite the lack of evidence, the five young Black men served their sentences and the charges were dropped years later when the real rapist confessed to the crime. Jamil Smith, "I Felt I Had to Make It": Ava DuVernay on Why the Central Park Five Story Still Matters" in *Rolling Stone*, May 29, 2019: 'When They See Us': Ava DuVernay on Her Central Park Five Miniseries - Rolling Stone

against their will. Black bodies are, in this context, not only devalued but mistrusted: adult women are not found capable of handling their own lives.

These denigrating images of Black bodies persist in contemporary American society and carry the stamp of structural racism. They have been denounced by Black women, scholars, and activists but they seem to be deeply embedded in the American imaginary and demonstrate how the hegemonic culture views African Americans even in the 21st Century. Hence the importance of analysing how the corpus authors counter those images and how they re-create the image of their Black physique.

4.1. Queering the Black Body: Audre Lorde's *Zami*.

Audre Lorde's autobiography, *Zami*, whose biomythical characteristics have been examined in detail in the previous chapter, is a fertile narrative with respect to textual representations of the body, not only of the author but also of other women, regardless of race. The book offers interesting descriptions and reflections on how Audre Lorde saw herself as a Black, lesbian woman and on how she regarded other women, including her mother. Lorde scholars have penned multiple studies that passionately focus on her sexuality which is, undeniably, linked to the body. In fact, a striking number of works exist on one of Lorde's identities – that of a lesbian woman, on the power of *eros* in her life and poetry, on the strength she drew from being sexually and romantically involved with other women and on her ability to create myths. As Lori Walk in her 2003 article "Audre Lorde's Life Writing: The Politics of Location" writes:

> In addition to exploring the reality of multiple-selves as they are played out in her own life, Lorde creates her own solution to the tension between fluidity and coalition politics by using the erotic, the lyrical, and the mythological to create a "home" for herself in which to rest from constant struggle of "becoming somebody else on the way to myself" (…) She evokes lyrical and erotic energy in order to construct her own political power and creativity (Walk, 2003: 816).

In academic studies, Lorde's body is often linked to other women's bodies and to the way she defined herself: a lesbian warrior. As the above excerpt demonstrates, she is a warrior who has to constantly fight for her life and chosen identity, against everyday racism in America. Ruth Ginzberg's 1992 article on Lorde entitled "Audre Lorde's

(Nonessentialist) Lesbian Eros" highlights, again, the power of the erotic in her life and writing, and she rightly observes that "erotic" for Lorde is more than mere pleasure or the right to be "simply" happy - it is strictly related to her political choice; being a lesbian, loving other women's bodies and finding a home in their arms is, in fact, an attempt to fight political, cultural and gender loneliness:

> She sees the erotic as a virtue: a social, political, and epistemic capacity that tempers the individualistic sense of self. (…) She further claims that the suppression of this gynocentric, or lesbian eros, is one of the major social arrangements that has perpetuated the oppression of women. As such, it deserves further philosophical attention. (Ginzberg, 1992: 74)

Many other scholarly works on Lorde are dedicated to the meaning of lesbian *eros* and the lesbian body in her writing. As a matter of fact, their importance cannot be underestimated, especially considering that Lorde herself highlighted her lesbian identity whenever she could. In many interviews, poems and even in her autobiography she opted to emphasise her homosexual identity and all the emotional and political wealth it brought her.

However, there seem to be some aspects understudied in Lorde, for example her attitude towards her own body as she describes it in *Zami*. Although the biomythography is rich in descriptions of other female bodies, often in the context of sexual-lesbian desire or the willingness to build bridges among or with other women, it is important to keep in mind that Lorde had a very personal and intimate view of her own material body and what it meant to be a girl becoming a woman. Clearly, many of those descriptions carry deeply political, antiracist messages. But some of them reveal a girl unsure of herself, filled with anxiety and desire at the same time because she does not feel that she fits the pattern of female beauty.

One of the most iconic and also most commented excerpts from *Zami* regarding Audre Lorde's body is placed right at the beginning of the book, in the Prologue. It is one that could be used in any gender studies course as it provides material for discussion on non-binary gender identity:

> I have always wanted to be both man and woman, to incorporate the strongest and richest part of my mother and father within/into me – to share valleys and mountains

> upon my body the way earth does in hills and peaks. (…) When I sit and play in the waters of my bath I love to feel the deep inside parts of me, sliding and folded and tender and deep. Other times I like to fantasize the core of it, my pearl, a protruding part of me, hard and sensitive and vulnerable in a different way. (…) Woman forever. My body, a living representation of other life older longer wiser. The mountains and valleys, trees, rocks. Sand and flowers and water and stone. Made in earth. (Lorde, *ibid.*, p. 7).

This rich description offers ample space for interpretation and reveals the interesting philosophy Audre Lorde had of the female body, in general, and of her own body in particular. It can be surmised that she sees other female bodies in a similar way, since she describes them throughout her autobiography in deep poetic and vivid language, revealing her profound fascination with them. Still, the above excerpt speaks directly to her own young body and how she sees herself as a mixture of her mother, with typically female curves, and of her father, with his elongated, masculine parts. What is particularly interesting in this rendering of a female body is the comparison between the body, the skin and surface to the earth, land, and geography. Female curves bring to Lorde's mind valleys, possibly full of shadow and peace. The same body, her womanly shapes, features protruding parts compared to typically masculine mountains, perhaps strong and resistant. This fantasy, to be a man and a woman at the same time is, in fact, reality because her female body has curves, caves (she terms it, "within me") and protruding parts (what she calls, "the pearl"). The description of her most intimate anatomy is equally poetic and intensely erotic; it is concomitantly masculine and strong (hard) and delicately female (sensitive and vulnerable).

At first glance, Lorde seemingly tries to smuggle gender stereotypes and essentialism into her text when she refers to femaleness as sensitivity and vulnerability, however what she does is to confirm that every woman can possess male and female characteristics which are already demonstrated on the level of the body. Thus, the female body is simply human in its uniqueness as it shares traits common to both sexes. The metaphor of the body as a map or land returns at the end of the description when Lorde speaks of her body as mountains, valleys, trees, ricks, sand, flowers, and stone. This is the moment when a parallel can be drawn to postcolonial male African intellectuals who rendered Africa as a woman and the African woman as land. Catarina Martins, in her 2011 article, "*La Noire de…" tem*

nome e tem voz. A narrativa de mulheres africanas anglófonas e francófonas para lá da Mãe África, dos nacionalismos anticoloniais e de outras ocupações[6], speaks about the phenomenon of portraying Africa as a masculine construct of a woman-land, sexualised and rendered as a mother which, in her opinion, reflects the patriarchal dimension of decolonisation and constructing the canon of African literature without paying attention to feminine/feminist aspects of African nation-building and canon-creating. While for postcolonial feminists such a vision proves to be a problematic one because it deprives African female writers of their agency and of the opportunity to impact their cultures and politics, here in this excerpt the link between body and earth brings to mind strength, femininity and ancient wisdom which are all condensed in the figure of the mother. The female body is old in its ancient sagacity and resilience through the female lineage: grandmother, mother, and daughter. Although the father is mentioned, it is the matrilineal side of the family that matters and bestows strength and discernment upon her. She is wise because she understands the potential of the female body, the Black female body, in particular.

The last sentence of the Prologue (*Made in Earth*), which touches on the nature of Lorde's body, refers her readers to the geographical and map-related dimension of the body. However, it can also be interpreted in a different way. This description hearkens back to the Book of Genesis where the man, Adam, is made of earth "*[(…) then the LORD GOD formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life (…)*] while the woman, Eve is made from Adam's flesh *[(…) And the rib that the LORD GOD had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man).*]"[7]. In following this lead, an interesting possible interpretation emerges. Audre Lorde reshapes and re-interprets the Biblical myth of creation and subverts the seemingly superior position of Adam in the Bible as the first man, the one who received the privilege of naming the animals and Eve-the Woman herself. As a "name-giver" the man positioned himself as a ruler of the world, the one above all creatures. In *Zami*, Eve, the woman, is made exactly like the first man: of earth. She is created like the first human being and like all other living creatures. She is not

[6] The tile of the article originally written in the Portuguese language has the following English translation (translated by the author of this Thesis): "La Noire de …" has a name and a voice. The Narrative of Anglophone and Francophone African Women beyond Mother Africa, Anti-Colonial Nationalisms and Other Occupations".

[7] Genesis 2:4-25 ESV - The Creation of Man and Woman - These - Bible Gateway

made of Adam's body, and, thus, is not subject to him.[8] And so she is not second but equal to man. Lorde's reimagining of the creation myth might have massive consequences for all women, especially for those who use their lesbian identity as a political position and refuse to be dependent on their male counterparts. By loving women in her autobiography and choosing predominantly female characters in her text and life, she refuses to perpetuate the myth of subordinate Eve.

Poetic language is intimately linked to the body throughout Audre Lorde's autobiography. As she falls in love with words and as reading and writing become her life-long passions, she discovers that with the help of language she can name what she treasures so much: her own body and that of her mother's. The link between becoming a poet and a strong, dream-like relationship with her mother will be the focus of the next chapter, however, it can be already affirmed that language and an ability to name her body parts is what makes the handling of her body so unique. If in the Prologue the body becomes a symbol for earth, later in the text language stands for the cartography of the body. The terms she uses to denote her intimate parts were passed on to her by her mother and are a direct cultural heritage of the Caribbean Islands where her mother was born that she cherishes through her storytelling. This intimate cartography of the body is the strongest legacy from Lorde's mother – these were whispered words kept at the core of her soul. The body and the erotic were intimately linked and created one inseparable image that impacted the way Audre Lorde viewed her own body and her budding femininity. Poetic language stirred the imagination and honed creativity. Caribbean heritage was vivid and animated the lives of women from the West Indies who dealt with pervading racism in American society[9]. This

[8] It is important to note that contemporary Theology does not view Eve being made from Adam's flesh as the justification for her subjection. Modern Bible scholars emphasise the fact that Eve was created as Adam's equal, as his aid, not as his servant but as a remedy to his loneliness. She is the agent of love and *misericordia*. The gender roles ascribed to the Biblical story of creation were developed later on, with Plato and Aristotle influencing some Doctors of the Church such as St. Thomas of Aquinas or St. Augustine, who viewed women as temptresses. (Napora, 2017).

[9] The Creole-speaking Caribbean islands inhabitants use their languages as tools against oppression, discrimination and (post)colonial racist practices. The *lingua franca* such as Pidgin has been developed by enslaved people for them to be able to communicate without having to resort totally to the master's language. However, in the eyes of Western scholars, these languages were deficient and undisciplined. The languages acquired the status of inferiority, even among their "native" speakers as they brought with them stigma of low-status, slavery, and self-contempt. (Sindoni, 2010). Given this context, it becomes even more obvious that Audre Lorde, by using, loving and giving visibility to the language of her Mother re-ascribes it a status of superiority, a tool with which she can construct her ethnic self and with which she can transmit love towards herself and other women of the Caribbean.

language and cultural heritage, which taught the author self-esteem, and to love her own body along with the bodies of all the women in her life, is a potent carrier of body-related emotions. The words chosen in connection to the body constitute a sort of cultural code permeated with respect and illicit love, since in a racist society loving one's brown body is an act of resistance and survival at the same time:

> The euphemisms of body were equally puzzling, if no less colorful. A mild reprimand was accompanied not by a slap on the behind, but a "smack on the backass", or on the "bamsy". You sat on your "bam-bam", but anything between your hip-bones and upper thighs was consigned to the "lower region" a word I always imagined to have French origins, as in "Don't forget to wash your *l'oregión* before you go to bed". For more clinical and precise descriptions, there was always "between your legs" – whispered. (Lorde, *ibid.*, p. 32).

The whole family knew the codes for words that would otherwise not be uttered out loud. Even when adults associated those words with shame, the effect that the coded language had on Lorde was to love her body even more. She recognised correctly that sensuality of life and body required a special code, undecipherable to the outside world. This linguistic shield protected Lorde as a child and adolescent from external racism. Poetic language filled with love became a tool with which the author reclaimed her body scarred by racism, sexism, and homophobia.

The connection between language, body and sensuality is so strong for Audre Lorde that it seems unthinkable to her to relate to her mother's body in ordinary and unpoetic terms. Quite the opposite, nearly every time Lorde describes her mother's body, she illustrates it in an outright sensuous, if not erotic way. Certainly, Lorde's mother is a central figure in her narrative: a woman she longs for, loves, and cherishes as a mother and a strong woman. The rituals they shared, such as brushing Lorde's hair are rendered with a dream-like quality of language and, at the same time, bestow a disquieting sense of incestuous relation. Both bodies, the daughter's and the mother's, are united with each other in a simple but culturally rich ethnic ritual of braiding and oiling the girl's hair. Lorde suggests that those two bodies deeply impacted each other emotionally and physically:

> I remember the warm mother smell caught between her legs, and the intimacy of our physical touching nestled inside of the anxiety/pain like a nutmeg nestled inside its covering of mace. The radio, the scratching comb, the smell of petroleum jelly, the grip of her knees and my stinging scalp all fall into – the rhythms of a litany, the rituals of Black women combing their daughters' hair. (Lorde, *ibid.*, 33).

Intimate language in reference to the body appears when Audre Lorde speaks of her mother, or other women or, alternately, of herself and her budding womanhood. At each mention of her mother, she makes an authorial effort to portray the image in a way that forces the reader to see eroticism and a mature and round female body, which can be associated not only with femininity and the erotic but also with safety, motherhood, and a sense of belonging. In a scene where she depicts how both she and her mother rest together on a bed, it is possible to encounter an image that transports the readers back to a peaceful and loving childhood:

> Saturday morning. The one morning of the week my mother does not leap from bed to prepare me and my sisters for school or church. (…) I get up and go over and crawl into my mother's bed. Her smile. Her glycerine-flannel smell. The warmth. She reclines upon her back and side, one arm extended, the other flung across her forehead. A hot-water bottle wrapped in body-temperature flannel, which she used to quiet her gall-bladder pains during the night. Her large soft breasts beneath the buttoned flannel of her nightgown. Below, the rounded swell of her stomach, silent and inviting touch. (…) Under the covers, the morning smells so soft and sunny and full of promise. (Lorde, *ibid.*, p. 33).

Although it is a memory strictly related to childhood and mother-daughter intimacy, it cannot be denied that the description of her mother's body is full of erotic tension and girlish, but also homosexually inflected curiosity and desire. The body here is fully feminine, soft, and maternal. It is definitely not the Black pathological, sick body of the white imaginary. Here, the maternal body becomes a source of love, longing, and strength. The cultural rituals mentioned above and the Saturday rituals between a mother and her baby-daughter are filled with deep affection and the body is linked to love and womanly self-esteem.

Erotic undertones in relation to the body, so present throughout the whole autobiography, also exist in moments which could be characterised as dream-like or myth-like. When Audre Lorde proceeds to describe Toni, a girl she imagined as her ideal girlfriend, a little sister she cannot have, she does not shun poetic and erotic language either. Toni appears to be a perfect baby-doll, beautiful, wonderfully dressed, a brown angel Lorde had dreamt of always. The girl can be interpreted as a symbol of Lorde's longing for a soulmate but also as an expression of same-sex desire predominant in Lorde's narrative. And although readers are faced with the image of a little girl, the description leaves no doubt as to the sexualised nature of the author's desire and view of the female body. The girl had honey-brown skin and brown-reddish hair. Colours are of the utmost importance here not only because they are highly aesthetical but also, or primarily, because they affirm racial beauty denied by white hegemony to African Americans. By describing the brown, beautiful body of Toni, Audre Lorde denies and rejects white denigration of Black and brown bodies, asserting they can be symbols of beauty and sources of aesthetic pleasure:

> But this delectable creature in front of me was most certainly a girl, and I wanted her for my very own – my very own what, I didn't know – but for my very own self. I started to imagine in my head where I could keep her. Maybe I could tuck her up in the folds under my pillow, pet her during the night when everybody else was asleep, and I was fighting off nightmares of the devil riding me. (…) I started to sweat inside my snowsuit as I usually did, despite the cold. I wanted to take off all of her clothes, and touch her little brown body and make sure she was real. My heart was bursting with a love and happiness for which I had no words. (*ibid.*, pp. 39-40)

Toni is a beautiful brown-skinned, reddish-haired dream of Lorde's, which she longs to love, caress, whose naked body she wants to know, with whom she might never feel lonely again. The little brown body can shield and scare away the outer demons that torment young Lorde. Skin separates humans (or protects them) from the world, so the body of another person, preferably of a brown girl in this case, can stand between her and everything else. A different body, beautiful, dream-like and of the same race can save Lorde from all the negative things the outside world has in store for Black girls. Audre Lorde seeks solace in the bodies of other women, Black or white, or in the arms of her mother (if only in her narrative), and in this excerpt she suggests that the human body has the potential to save people from solitude and despair. It should be also pointed out that Toni's body is described

in sensuous terms. Lorde desires to see Toni naked and touch her brown body. She generates erotic tension through language, letting the readers know that a female body can also be a source of pleasure, longing, and desire. The (brown) female body is evidence of material and aesthetic existence; it is life-sustaining and life-affirming.

However, Lorde's narrative in what concerns the body is not always so aesthetic-bound, sensuous, and untroubled. Her own anatomy, especially that of an adolescent girl often becomes a source of anxiety, insecurity, and longing for beauty she considers unattainable, for example, her long-awaited first menstruation and budding femininity. At the age of fifteen, she still did not menstruate, and her unruly, disobedient body becomes the subject of maternal preoccupation and endless, embarrassing conversations with doctors. As Lorde notes in her autobiography, her young body refused to easily walk the path to full femininity. Her mother took her to various doctors to discover why her menstrual cycle had not begun. The body, thus, becomes a source of concern and anxiety. As she says, her breasts were fully developed but her period failed to appear. At the same time, Lorde clarifies in her narrative that her mother refused to discuss the issue directly with her: she would only speak about the problem with a doctor in her presence, but never addressed her daughter directly. Although the matter concerned Lorde's own body, she seems to have been left out of any discussion. The matter of menstruation was apparently a non-topic between mother and daughter – a shameful subject better evaded and addressed only with medical staff:

> (..) But my mother was concerned because I was fourteen and a half years old and had not yet menstruated. I had breasts but no period, and she was afraid there was something wrong with me. Yet, since she had never discussed this mysterious business of menstruation with me, I was certainly not supposed to know what all this whispering was about, even though it concerned my own body. (*ibid.*, p. 75)

This contributed to Lorde feeling awkwardness and inadequacy about herself. What she really missed and needed was full affirmation of her femininity on her mother's part and confirmation that nothing was wrong with her or her femaleness. The same happened regarding human reproduction and male/female anatomy. Lorde states that she could not count on her mother's collaboration in this regard and information obtained on the topic was from library books she read in secret:

> When I wasn't getting whippings [for coming late home after school], I hid out at the library on 135th Street, and forged notes from my mother to get books from the "closed shelf", and read about sex and having babies, and waited to become pregnant. None of the books were very clear to me about the relationship between having your period and having a baby, but they were all very clear about the relationship between penises and getting pregnant. Or maybe the confusion was all in my own mind, because I had always been a very fast but not a very careful reader. (*ibid.*, p. 75).

Sexual education was, obviously, non-existent, which only added to the fear and confusion for a young girl entering adulthood. Upon her own initiative, she finds out about female biology, anatomy, and sex. Dry medical words used in biology manuals, for example "menses", "ovulation", or "vagina" start to enter Lorde's imagination and dominate her view of sexuality which she perceives as unexciting, if not utterly dangerous, when it takes place with a boy.

In fact, when Lorde refers to her first sexual incident with a boy at the age of ten, the language she uses differs dramatically from the language she employs to describe lesbian love and desire. She speaks in her narrative about a boy who wanted to stick his "thing" between her legs and the language she employs is dry, matter-of-fact and unimaginative:

> But for years before, I had had to find out if I was going to become pregnant, because a boy from school much bigger than me had invited me up to the roof on my way home from the library and then threatened to break my glasses if I didn't let him stick his "thing" between my legs. And at that time I knew only that being pregnant had something to do with sex, and sex had something to do with that thin pencil-like "thing" and was in general nasty and not to be talked about by nice people, and I was afraid my mother might find out and what would she do to me then? (*ibid.*, p. 75).

This dramatic change in language can be ascribed to the fact that the author was barely ten years old when she had her first sexual experience with a boy, however if readers reevaluate the description of Toni and her beautiful body or the description of her mother's body, it becomes clear that it is the female body and female-oriented desire that deserve

usage of the most poetic and aesthetic language. All that is beautiful and worthy of linguistic effort is related to women, their attractiveness and femininity.

When Audre Lorde menstruates for the first time, it merits a rich, poetic, and extensive description in her autobiography. It is a symbol of her full entry into the world of women and biological femininity. This is an extremely relevant event in Lorde's life, which deserves a lot of attention in her life narrative. Her first menstruation can be likened to a rite of passage through which her body will transform itself completely. She is no longer just a girl but develops into a full-grown woman with all it entails, including the capacity to become pregnant. As she mentions in her autobiography, with her first menstruation she feels very special and unfamiliar to herself at the same time. The description of her body smelling of womanhood is full of sensuousness and intimacy. Its straightforwardness is honest and conveys, as shall be seen in a following quote, a sense of happiness at becoming a woman. As she goes to the kitchen to pick up a mortar to grind spices, she renders her feelings in the following way:

> My body felt new and special and unfamiliar and suspect all at the same time. I could feel bands of tension sweeping across my body back and forth, like lunar winds across the moon's face. I felt the slight rubbing bulge of the cotton pad between my legs, and I smelled the delicate breadfruit smell rising up from the front of my print blouse that was my own womansmell, warm, shameful, but utterly delicious. (*ibid.*, p. 77).

This is a moving description characterised by poetic, emotional language that situates Lorde's body (and by extension, other women's bodies) at the altar of femininity. There are other fragments in *Zami* that testify to Audre Lorde's deep love of the female body and even its biology. Nowadays, with the advent of gender studies when division into sexes and cultural genders have been questioned and the role of the body and the body itself has been subverted and theorised as a social construct (*cf.* Butler, 1993), Audre Lorde's cult of the female body might seem outdated and essentialist at best. It could be suspected of reducing the female body to its biological dimension when a woman is much more than her physique. However, if that is a form of essentialism, it can be argued that it is a political and fully conscious move and a carefully chosen strategy on the part of the author. In a society that devalues the Black female body, portraying it as pathological, sick, lascivious, and degenerate, Lorde's description of a girl's body as beautiful, worthy of respect and

admiration is a political act of subversion. It indirectly addresses the issue of Black bodies reclaiming their power and demanding a dignity that had been taken away from them by the racist system of oppression practised and implemented for centuries in the American society. That Black body, rejected by the mainstream society, regains its dignity and beauty in Lorde's autobiography. It is through her voice that the subaltern Black female body can speak. There is no longer shame in being a woman, in menstruating. It is a reason to feel proud. Cultural patterns in many parts of the world, including the West, have relegated the female menstruating body to the margin of (in)visibility. Menstruating women had often been considered as ritualistically impure, forbidden to enter religious shrines, and marginalised/silenced during their period.[10] Audre Lorde denounces a culture that sees a woman's body as impure and unworthy – she places it at the centre of attention and respect. But to do that, she first needs to render it visible - only then can it occupy its due place in the contemporary society.

The memory of her first menstruation causes Lorde to focus again on her bodily, intimate relationship with her mother. Bearing in mind that *Zami* is a biomythography, Audre Lorde allows herself another dream-like narrative where she and her mother are central figures and both female bodies play an important role. The description of Lorde and her mother resting on the couch can be somewhat disturbing because it bears semblance of incest between mother and daughter. Of course, it must be remembered that the following excerpt, which illustrates Lorde's language and fantasies in what concerns her and her mother's bodies is born of authorial imagination and the freedom to create myths that fill the entire autobiographical work. In fact, this is the purpose of biomythography as a literary concept.

[10] Menstruating women were considered impure and in the state of sin in various cultures and religions, including Judaism. Tirzah Meacham (1991) examines the practise of "Niddah" (Female Purity) which women need to undergo after their menstruation so that they can be considered pure again. According to the Jewish tradition, a menstruating woman cannot touch any ritual object lest it become impure and contaminated. Rabbinic innovations speak of ritual purification through immersion, the evolution of Niddah into Zivah, retroactive and internal purity, etc. This tradition has its roots in Chapter 15 of Leviticus which speaks about menstruation (niddatah) which is linked to impurity and orders women who menstruate to avoid public places.

> Years after when I was grown, whenever I thought about the way I smelled that day, I would have a fantasy of my mother, her hands wiped dry from the washing, and her apron untied and laid neatly away, looking down upon me lying on the couch, and then slowly, thoroughly, our touching and caressing each other's most secret places. (*ibid*., p. 78)

The passage is, again, as per usual in Lorde's autobiography, deeply erotic and poetic. As she clarifies, it is pure fantasy involving her mother as a woman whose body she adores and reveres. The maternal female body is one of a woman she loves (as with other women Lorde chooses to include in her narrative) and desires not only in sexual terms but also for being a woman, a creature in whose arms she seeks confirmation of her own existence and self-worth. To Lorde, the maternal body is a source of self-love, life-sustaining values, aestheticism, and security that the external world cannot offer her and other Black girls. Once again, the female body is rendered in positive terms as a source of affirmation, belonging and life-sustaining values. It is assuredly not a source of shame or anxiety, although there are moments in Lorde's autobiography when she feels fat, unattractive, unwomanly, and generally unlike the cultural standards of female beauty. At times she did feel inadequate because she had to wear glasses "(…) but I still walked with my head down, all the time, counting the lines on the square. (…) But I was always messed up". (*ibid*., p. 35)

Sexual harassment is another type of experience she shares with other young girls and women who face misogyny and sexism so common in the contemporary societies. At one point in her narrative, she refers to an older man who touched her upper thighs when he hoisted her so that she could reach a specific bookshelf:

> "Lemme help you up, sweetheart, you can see better". And I felt his shabby fingers like sausages grab my ribs and hoist me through a sickening arc of cigarette fumes to the edge of the bins full of Bugs Bunny and Porky Pigs comics. I seized whichever was nearest and squirmed to be out down, frantic for the feeling of the floor under my feet once more, and sickened by the squishy touch of his soft belly against the small of my back. His nasty fingers moved furtively up and down my body, now trapped between his pressing bulges and the rim of the bin. By the time he loosened his grip and allowed me to slide down to the floor, I felt dirtied and afraid, as if I had just taken part in some filthy rite. (ibid., p. 49).

Although her biomythography does not focus too much on male-female relations, she does not shun difficult issues such as harassment. As a matter of fact, the above-described scene may provoke difficult emotions in the readers because it refers to sexual harassment of a child, and that means the readers are faced with paedophilia. This and other incidents with a man who touched her without consent, testify to the fact she was not unencumbered by the daily ordeals of any Black (or white) girl in contemporary society. She is fully aware of how female bodies are viewed and treated in the patriarchal order and her memory of the event is a direct critique of the excessive permissiveness cultures grant men to touch and abuse female bodies.

Finally, it is important to note that Lorde's autobiography does not remain silent on another important issue affecting women. At the symbolic age of eighteen, Audre Lorde has an abortion[11] and the section in the autobiography which deals with this issue is written in a very emotional and dramatic way. It is another form of coming out, this time as a body in pain, a martyred body which, because it belongs to a low social class, goes through an illegal abortion which, at any time, could end one's life. Such an intimate issue is treated in considerable detail and is written in such a way that readers can accompany Lorde in her search for a "specialist" and the ensuing events. Mrs Muñoz receives $40 for the whole operation and leaves Lorde in pain during the following days to recover from the physical and emotional shock. During those days of recovery, the author reflects on the meaning of her life and on her decision to end another life budding in her body. Nearly nine pages of detailed description of the procedure and her feelings afterwards attest to its importance, memorability, and trauma in her life. She eventually concludes that the decision she had taken to end the pregnancy was a lifesaving one. Even though she describes herself as a bleeding body torn by pangs of pain, she writes:

> (…) But another piece of me was being amazed at my own daring. I had done it. Even more than my leaving home, this action which was tearing my guts apart and from which I could die except I wasn't going to - this action was a kind of shift from safety towards self-preservation. It was a choice of pains. That's what living was all

[11] As Lorde recounts in her autobiography, when she moved out of her mother's house, she met a boy called Peter at the Labor Youth Leage party and started to date him. She briefly mentions sexual encounters with him which left her wondering what was so exciting about sex with boys that her female friends used to publicise a lot ("sex seemed pretty dismal and frightening and a little demeaning", p. 104).

> about. I clung to that and tried to feel only proud. I had not given in. I had not been merely the eye on the ceiling until it was too late. They hadn't gotten me. (*ibid.*, p. 111).

Traumatic and painful as the experience was, this fragment rings a hopeful note: that a Black female body, although it must sometimes choose between different kinds of pain, must be free to do so. The body is free insofar as it opts to live the way it deems fit and takes responsibility for the consequences of all decisions. The body Audre Lorde presents is not a perfect one, but it is strong, resilient, and responsible. It is a body that decries all negative and stereotypical images imposed on Black people by a racist society and subverts them all in search of new redefinitions of the Black body and its dignity.

4.2. The Restless Body in Transit: Nina Simone's (in)visible body.

Nina Simone's autobiography is an account through which the author weaves her narrative self focusing predominantly on the professional aspects of her life. As has been stated before, autobiography is a tool with which writers create a fabric of their memories and selves and they have authorial freedom to choose what image of themselves they wish to convey. There is no obligation whatsoever for autobiographers to focus exclusively on the most private or intimate dimension of their lives and memories. For some authors it is more important or safer to shift the focus of the narrative onto their professional and public selves. As has also been argued, because humans are embodied beings, they experience the world through their bodies and, as so, bodies do emerge in life narratives, even if they do not occupy the central place there. Comparatively, Nina Simone's autobiography seems to pay less attention to bodily questions than autobiographies of other authors selected for this Thesis, however they do appear at specific points of the text and play an important role, carefully crafted by the writer.

As mentioned before, the author's body plays different roles for narrative purposes and appears in the text in various situations to represent Simone as a self-assured, independent woman, or at least this is the image Nina Simone carefully constructs. Hers is a body in transit, as she claims right at the beginning of her autobiography. She, like Rebecca Walker discussed in the previous chapter, is a nomad, shifting between geographies and multiple travels between American cities and continents, mainly Europe and Africa and also the Middle East, all of which enrich her womanly and professional self. In contrast to

Rebecca Walker, though, Nina Simone is not deprived of her sense of security. The nomadic body traverses geographies without detriment to her sense of stability and emotional balance. As she argues, she feels happy at the prospect of being on the move right at the start of her career as a pianist and soloist. Additionally, in the Prologue she admits that different geographies are also linked in her memory to sexual experiences and romantic relationships. Thus, right at the beginning, Nina Simone portrays herself as a body traversing frontier of lands, countries and continents and enjoying her sexual freedom. Her body is free to travel anywhere and to love whomever:

> I've criss-crossed the world many times and every big city holds its own treasure-box of memories. I've had lovers from many different countries and I've fallen in love with whole countries, and, in the case of Africa, with a whole continent. People say you should measure yourself by the friends you have, and when I look at mine I'm more than content to be me. (Simone, *ibid.*, p. x).

Clearly, when she takes a bird's eye view of her life, right in the beginning of her memory-writing process, she is glad to have been a body in transit as the experience enriched her life, brought her sexual satisfaction, cultural proficiency, and guaranteed affection from friends.

Her world started to expand when she began spending more time away from home due to her musical training. Her travelling body noticed differences between her upbringing and the outside world: outside is where she realised her body was different due to being Black. Colour-blindness was a predominant philosophy of Simone's parents but as she began to collide with the outside world, she sensed the difference in treatment she felt had something to do with her body:

> More and more of my life was spent away from the close confines of my home – at school, church, or Miz Mazzy – and as I became more independent and removed from the protection of my family I became aware that there were things going on all around me that I had never noticed before. Sometimes they were so obvious I couldn't understand why I'd gone for so long without remarking on them, like not being able to sit down at Owen's Pharmacy or not being able to use the bathroom at gas stations on the way back from backwoods revival meetings. Other times they were more puzzling: one day Mrs Miller simply stopped bringing David around to play, and when I was at her house he was discouraged from playing with me; we had crossed an invisible boundary which neither of us understood. Somehow it had been

> decided that we were both now too old to play as if the colour of our skins made no difference. (*ibid.*, p. 26)

The above excerpt has different levels of signification because it denotes that the author underwent a painful and profound process of racial self-construction which takes place through the body. She notices that her skin colour is different from others in her hometown and realises that this divergence guarantees unequal treatment in society. She begins to comprehend that her Black body is a mark of difference she will have to carry all her life.

Simone the *flaneuse* – the body in motion - moves between cities for her professional preparation to become a famous classical concert pianist. When she recalls enrolling at Allen High School, 50 miles from Tryon, she notes that this new place made her realise she was quite innocent and naïve in what concerns relations between the sexes. She makes new friends at high school but, at the same time, remarks matter-of-factly that she was quite innocent regarding boys. She makes an evident effort to create an image of a respectful girl inexperienced in worldly matters. It might be, of course, an authorial strategy to adhere to cultural norms that imposed on young, unmarried women correct and self-respecting behaviour[12]. If readers bear in mind, too, the sexual stereotypes ascribed to Black female bodies seen primarily as salacious, Simone's approach to her bourgeoning sexuality is understandable. It might have been important to her to maintain the reputation of a girl who was mindful of social norms. The following excerpt describes this observation well:

> It was all very innocent: we were respectable young ladies who never dreamed of breaking out of our delicate shells. Every now and then we got a little taste of the outside world, like when Irma Wesley started talking about boys one day, but not in the way we normally did. She said the boys she knew were just about full-grown men and went on to describe stuff that made our eyes bug out. Elise Blanc said that Irma's talk was shameful and she wasn't going to listen to it any more so she flounced. I

[12] The term "politics of respectability" was coined by Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham in her 1994 book on the 20th Century Black women and the construction of the church *Righteous Discontent. The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920*. The politics of respectability refer to the whole set of acceptable norms and behaviour displayed by Black women, if they wished to be considered respectable by white society. These norms referred to dress code, sexuality, and other socially relevant factors according to which Black women were deemed lady-like or just the opposite – Jezebels (Jezebel was a Biblical figure, a Phoenician wife of Ahab which in contemporary culture symbolises an immoral woman who leads people astray. The symbol of Jezebel is particularly attached to Black women who were stereotyped as seductive, tempting, worldly and lewd.).

> stayed, and realized that no matter how grown-up Edney [Nina's boyfriend back in Tryon] made me feel I was very young compared to Irma. (*ibid.*, p. 33)

Although sexual initiation did take place in Simone's life (as shall be seen later on), still she maintains in her text that as a young girl, although increasingly experienced with travelling and shifting geographies, she kept an innocent heart and mind. The key word in the above quote is "respectable". Patriarchal culture required respectability of women and even more so of Black women. To some extent, it could be argued that Nina Simone is following the cultural norms imposed on (Black) women by the dominant society. At this stage of her autobiography, she refuses to discuss her blossoming sexuality and when she does, she is extra careful with language which is pragmatic and relatively neutral. A similar approach is taken when she discusses another geographical shift, this time to New York upon her graduation from high school. There she is confronted with Harlem and all its dark secrets. The author/city dweller, the body transiting from the province to a big city is confronted with a modern and progressive world and is shocked to witness things to which she was unaccustomed. The image of herself as an innocent girl that she wishes to uphold for as long as possible is deeply disturbed by cursing and drinking men while mesmerised by beautifully dressed women, food, and malls. At the age of seventeen Simone, raised in a deeply religious family, with her mother being the main disciplinarian and guardian of morality, is introduced to a completely different world which her strict mother would define as hell. All the rules instilled at home seemed irrelevant in New York, which offered extremely contrasting experiences. On the one hand, there were drunkards and the underworld, on the other, attractive stores with window displays featuring products she had never seen before. It is there, in Harlem where Simone realises that there are women who earn a living selling their bodies:

> Although I was only seventeen and a little innocent I knew how some of these sharp looking ladies earned their living, but looking at them in their finery I passed no judgement at all. It seemed like a fine life as far as I could tell. But Harlem wasn't all smoky dives full of gamblers, whores and jazzmen. Mrs Steinmayer had ladies boarding at her house who were perfectly respectable, and they were just as beautiful and sophisticated as any of the women out in the street. (*ibid.*, p. 39).

The author again insists on emphasising her innocence, young age and inexperience with sexuality. The truth of it is of no significance as opposed to her repeated affirmation of her womanly respectability – one of the most relevant attributes she had as a young Black girl in a racist world. Her innocent and inexperienced body was a sign of truthfulness and her ticket to mainstream society. Nina Simone reiterates that, despite moving away from her native town, she had not changed in what could be considered a negative, undesirable way by conservative society. While she does gain experience, in what concerns her sexuality and male/female relations, she maintains the rules instilled in her by her mother.

Even when Simone makes the acquaintance of a non-binary prostitute, known in the community of sex workers as Kevin Matthias whom she describes thusly: "My only real friend in Philadelphia was a woman named Faith Jackson. Her customers knew her as Kevin Matthias, and she was a whore" (p. 47), she does not feel shocked or offended. Actually, this encounter and ensuing friendship demonstrate Nina Simone's open mind as she never judges her friend in the text. She admits that despite being quite different, they both came from different *milieux* and had very different life stories, loneliness drew them together. Never actually using the word itself, Simone describes her friend as a dominatrix who once invited her to her apartment so that she could meet one of her clients who paid to clean and cook dinner:

> On Christmas Day her apartment was spotless. Kevin was stretched out on the sofa, looking elegant. The smell of roast turkey came from the kitchen and a man appeared, took my coat and offered me a drink. Kevin didn't say anything, just smiled. When he [Kevin's male client] went back into the kitchen she explained. He was a john, a costumer who paid her to let him cook and serve Christmas dinner. All she had to do was go in every half hour or so and beat him with a whip. I swear this is true. I almost died. (*ibid.*, p. 48)

The excerpt is humorous also because it shows Nina Simone innocent and naïve living in a big city. She meets people with unique life stories and does not feel offended by these new experiences, only shocked into disbelief. The last sentence reveals her sense of humour and surprise at her own naivety and the strikingly different lifestyles people in big cities led. She swears to the truthfulness of it to the reader even while agreeing it sounds unbelievable. Shifting between cities in the United States, going from New York to Philadelphia and to Atlantic City where she gave her first club concerts impacted the way

she felt and behaved. In Atlantic City she put on the attire of Nina Simone, a sexy and sophisticated artist. There she became a body on display; all eyes on her. Back in Philadelphia where her family lived, she was Eunice Waymon again with her usual bodily habits, language, and a way of dressing.

A female body in a big city, or traversing countries and continents is, in fact, impacted by new people or cultural practices. Nina Simone states in her narrative that her body was changed mostly by her trips to Africa. As she admits at some point in her narrative, she felt affinity with the African continent ("All around us were black faces, and I felt for the first time the spiritual relaxation any Afro-American feels reaching Africa", *ibid.*, p. 80) (even if hyperbolically, given she visited only a couple of countries, mainly Nigeria and Liberia) but it is important to note that African fashion and handicraft left an indelible mark on her body. She deems it important to note in the narrative that it was her body, along with her mind, that was profoundly influenced by the contact with the African continent. Also, her process of racial consciousness is translated into how she describes herself on stage. She becomes gradually more interested in dressing to reflect her love of Africa and its people. Surprisingly, she explains little of her concert attires but the photographs included in the book testify to her growing fascination with Africa and her Black roots. What was left unexplained in textual terms becomes apparent through the images selected for the autobiography. On many of them, especially those taken during her career as a pianist, she is dressed in an African manner, with typical African headwear, large round earrings, long dresses with flowery patterns and colourful fabrics. One exception is her description of the attire for a show she had on the September 12 at New York City Hall:

> The day of the show I dressed in a long white gown draped over one shoulder and white satin shoes. Don was with me that evening because I was a little nervous - not of performing, but of being around so many people backstage. I needed a familiar face. I stood in the wings and looked out at the audience, sitting in neat rows with no drinks in their hands, no cigarette girls walking up and down to distract them, and no out-of-tune piano to ruin my performance. The MC called my name and I walked on like an Egyptian queen – slow, calm and serious. (*ibid.*, p. 66).

Her ladylike body and its resemblance to an African queen is described in all its majesty, elegance, and grandeur. It is important to note at this stage that Nina Simone's body is that of an artist and performer, perfectly prepared and rehearsed for public events and shows.

Clearly, the ability to be poised on stage was unnatural to her and she points out that her body had to be forced into this required sort of behaviour. Disciplining the body to make it obedient and docile (paraphrasing Michel Foucault who, in fact, failed to recognise the powerful mechanisms behind disciplining the female body)[13] started at the onset of Simone's musical preparation. Miz Mazzy helps Simone bend her initially ungraceful body into graceful shape. Simone receives proper training to will her body into obedience: how to move with elegance, how to bow, how to look courtly and composed. Any sign of spontaneity or girly wildness was extremely unwelcome on stage. Simone's little body had to adapt both to the rules of the musical world and to please white audiences. What was traditionally expected of, mostly white, concert pianists had to become the air she breathed. As she states, all the years of bodily practise bore fruit in the form of self-composure and desirable elegance on stage (until she began experiencing mental health issues and her behaviour on stage turned erratic, chaotic, and outright rude towards her audience, *cf*. Cohodas, *op. cit*.). The two following excerpts illustrate well the above point of Simone's Black body being trained to obey the rules of the external world:

> Miz Mazzy had always included technical training in my lessons, like how to hold my hands at the keyboard, how to play from the shoulder rather than the wrist and how to improve the spread of my fingers, but now that I was to perform in public a whole new set of disciplines started. My lessons included practising how to bow after a recital, how to walk gracefully on and off stage, and how to sit up straight at the piano and look elegant and composed while I was being introduced. (Simone, *ibid*., p. 25).

> All those club dates had been trashy rehearsals for this, the real thing, a concert platform. Miz Mazzy had taught me the way to behave on stage years before, years of practice had developed my musical technique to a point where I had total confidence, and the Midtown Bar had shown me exactly how to deal with an audience. (Simone, *ibid*., p. 66).

[13] In Michel Foucault's 1975 *Discipline and Punish*, the author analyses mechanisms of oppression implemented by the State and State institutions such as prison, school, and the army to will human body into physical and moral discipline. However, the author does not analyse forceful patriarchal and institutional mechanisms that oblige female bodies to follow societal norms to keep them obedient, docile and under control. (King, Angela, 2004).

Hence, aside from the body of a *flaneuse* and a traveller, Nina Simone portrays her body as that of a disciplined subject, all for fame and success awaiting her in the white world. However, she does not criticise all the bodily sacrifices she had to make in order to achieve her goal and succeed as a concert pianist. As a matter of fact, she is even grateful to her music teachers, including Miz Mazzy who taught her all the secrets of the trade. Simone the Little Girl subjects herself gladly to all the training and does not interpret the disciplinary measures as a violation of her bodily integrity or freedom.

As mentioned in this section, Simone neither dwells too much on her bodily experiences nor makes her body the centre of her narrative. Yet there are topics directly related to her material body which she does not avoid: sexuality, male/female relations and maternity being the three most salient issues in her narrative. She heeds particular attention to the matter of her sexuality and of herself as a sexual Black body. It has already been observed that Simone grants special attention in her narrative to questions of respectability. In several fragments of her text she weaves a portrayal of herself as an innocent and inexperienced young girl, adhering, in this way, to cultural dictates of the then American society.[14] This can be, perhaps, explained by the rigorous moral upbringing that Simone received in her childhood home but it can also be interpreted as an authorial strategy to render her image as impeccable and pure as possible. As the cult of (white) womanhood imposed chastity and respectability on women, any illicit sexual activity could contribute to a woman's cultural and societal marginalisation.

A certain aspect mentioned in Nadine Cohodas' biography (Cohodas, 2010, *ibid*.) of Nina Simone is compelling enough to relate here. According to the author, the pianist had a number of same-sex adventures and romantic relationships before she married a Black policeman, Andrew Stroud. Curiously, that fact is never revealed in Simone's autobiography, even when she refers to her sexual encounters with boys, during her teenage years, or fiery romances with African statesmen at the mature stage of her career. Fact or

[14] In this aspect, Nina Simone's narrative bears a striking resemblance to the autobiography written by Anne Moody, *Coming of Age in Mississippi* (*op. cit.*). In it, Moody undertakes an authorial strategy to paint an image of a respectable young girl who remains indifferent to male charm and avoids both sexual encounters and dealing with her sexuality in the narrative. She wishes to be seen by her readers as a girl living a decent life, lest she be accused of immorality and being overly sexual. As previously mentioned, respectability had been considered an important and highly valued trait in all young girls in 20th Century America, but that applied mainly to white women and the cult of womanhood. Black women, in contrast, were labelled sexual, lewd, and promiscuous, which, in many instances, justified the sexual abuse of Black bodies during slavery and even today.

fiction, this reference serves here only one purpose: to demonstrate that an autobiographer is not obliged, even if they are expected by the audience, to include all private memories and facts in their life-narrative. Each author makes a conscious choice as to what to disclose in a self-narrative and what to silence. Still, an awareness of Simone's bisexuality makes her reader approach the excerpts about her sexuality in a different, perhaps more reserved or cautious, manner. Evidently, the chosen subjects in an autobiography serve a purpose: construct the desired image the author wants to transmit through textual storytelling.

And thus, it is interesting to note Simone's choice to keep quiet about her affairs with women while accentuating her sexual encounters with men. She emphasises her first love, Edney Whiteside, a 14-year-old Cherokee boy whose "(…) skin was a rich ochre and it glowed like there was a light behind it (…)" (Simone, *ibid.*, p. 31). Her sexual body awakens and opens to sensuous impulses as she describes why she felt attracted to him: "He smelt wonderful, better than any other man I have ever known, and getting next to him, leaning my head on his shoulder as we sat in his car, gave me real physical pleasure long before we kissed or touched each other" (*ibid.*, p. 31). The couple stayed together for a number of years, until Simone turned seventeen and the time came to decide whether she wanted to marry the boy or pursue her artistic career. Although she did want to be intimate with Edney and felt immense attraction to him, manners and upbringing won and before they decided to make love, they consulted their families. More specifically, Simone consulted her father seeking his approval of her desire to make love to a boy. Her father asked her to consult her mother who, in turn, spoke to Edney's mother. In this way the youths' plans to initiate their sexual life were thwarted by adults who thought it highly improper for the young, unmarried couple to become sexually intimate. As Simone remarks in her autobiography, the lovemaking never happened, much to her "eternal regret". It is with humour that the author recollects the incident:

> (…) because I wanted to make love as much as he did – I'd wanted to since I was twelve years old. The question disturbed me: if Edney and I were going to marry anyway, why couldn't we make love now? Daddy – no fool – told me to ask Momma. So I did. She said what you would expect a mother to say, and after she told Mrs Whiteside of our conversation Edney got told the same in stronger language. That was the end of it. We were obedient children, to my eternal regret. (*ibid.*, p. 34)

The trope of the respectable woman who follows the moral code instilled in her by her family already sounds familiar as has been mentioned in this chapter. The body immersed in sexual desire is, once again, an obedient body, this time not on stage but disciplined by moral/religious and cultural norms governing society. Still, it is relevant to see that Nina Simone does admit to sexual desire ("because I wanted to make love as much as he did"). Later, the reader is struck with the awkwardness of Edney realising Simone chose her musical career and school in New York over him. When he discovers Simone will not marry him because, in a proto-feminist vein, she opts for her career, he tries to rape her, in a sudden burst of hurt masculine pride. The author remarks on Edney's choice of violence towards her and claims he wanted to possess her against her will. Her response seems off, though: she laughs at his inadequate reaction and continues laughing until he leaves, offended by her laughter and rejection. It is a curious excerpt especially because when a woman is sexually assaulted, she finds nothing at which to laugh. It is definitely an unnatural reaction to an imminent threat of rape. A body in distress has a "fight or flight" response instead of an outburst of laughter unless Simone believed that her boyfriend could not seriously hurt her.

Throughout her memoir, Nina Simone treats her sexuality with nonchalance in nearly all instances she speaks of it. When she is in New York, after breaking up with Edney and suffering from bouts of loneliness, she meets a man called Ed. Sex was what united them against the loneliness of the outside world. Simone reports her sexual encounter with Ed casually:

> It wasn't what I expected, not at all. It hurt like hell and put me off the whole idea of men for a good while, but when Ed came up after church one week and asked to walk me home just like Edney had when I was twelve, I said yes. We went back to my storefront and I pulled the curtains across and sent Sheba[15] out to play. When she got back I was purring. I went with Ed for some time and he even talked about getting married, which was when I finished with him. (*ibid.*, p. 47).

Simone's sexual initiation is passionless and there are significant linguistic differences in comparison to Audre Lorde's descriptions of eroticism. The language Simone uses lacks the poetry of Lorde's. There is, however, one characteristic that does not appear

[15] Sheba was Nina Simone's dog.

in Lorde's narrative: a sense of humour/irony and a sense of distance to herself. In Simone's account, the sexual body is not overly dramatized like in Lorde's text where the female body and the erotic are placed at the altar of Eros. Simone's description is devoid of the drama and emotional tension so apparent in Audre Lorde's text. Although Nina Simone seems to feel at home in her own body and slowly understands and embraces her sexuality, she avoids intense emotions related to her sensuous body. The same happens when she mentions in her autobiography her first husband, Don Ross, a white man she met at a bar. She unveils a secret of their sexual life highlighting, again, an absence of passion and an acute sense of isolation from her peers and life-sustaining friendships:

> After a while we slid into bed together and if I didn't feel a great deal of passion for him it was nice to wake up in his arms rather than my own in a cold room. Don eased into my life in the same way, never setting me on fire but taking the edge off my isolation and surrounding me with an affection I needed. (…) He loved me, and I needed to be loved. (*ibid.*, p. 57).

Clearly, the author does not flee the topic of sexuality; her erotic body is present in the text but the choice of language and presentation of this aspect of her life denotes careful curation of the image she wants to show of herself as a lonely and unsatisfied woman. It cannot be said that her autobiography is influenced by puritan philosophy, but Simone makes sure that the language she employs to write her body into it is not excessive in any way. It is relatively indifferent and direct but never vulgar or controversial; rather it is somehow detached and betrays a reserved quality.

In fact, it is only closer to the end of the narrative that Simone starts to depict herself as a *femme fatale* and (somewhat desperate) predator channelling all her energy into finding a suitable man after she divorces her second husband, Andrew Stroud. Before the divorce, her narrative focuses on the image of a female-artist building a great career, carefully planned, and led by her second husband. Interestingly, at this phase of the narrative, she recounts her role in the marriage as one of a lonely, vulnerable girl who let herself be led and subjected to her husband's whims. Especially at the initial stage of their relationship, Simone carefully conveys the message that she played the role of a terrified and lost girl who waited for a knight to appear and save her from trouble and the hostile world. Andrew, as she claims, became the source of security she had failed to find in her former partners and he knew how to treat a woman (with the exception of an incident where he beat her

unconscious and raped her in a jealous fit sometime before their wedding). Simone, again, becomes a docile and disciplined body under the influence of her clearly abusive husband. She is not adamant about denouncing the abuse she experienced at the hands of her partner. Her female body was subjected to an extreme form of violence and transformed into a body in pain. The feminist traits she had previously shown at the rejection of Edney for her career or leaving her first husband, Don to become financially independent and pursue her musical profession, started wearing off during her marriage to Andrew. Her body becomes so subjugated that she even admits to having stopped breastfeeding her baby girl upon Andrew's insistence, as such intimacy between mother and child made him jealous: "I had intended to breastfeed Lisa but Andy didn't want me to, he was jealous – I quite liked that" (*ibid.*, p. 85). This is a rather surprising sentence which, if honest, reveals Nina Simone as a passive body completely controlled by her insecure husband. To some extent, the message she transmits at this stage of her narrative is contradictory with the image she tries to render toward the end of the autobiography. If she appears as a passive and subjugated female body while involved with Andrew, she struggles to show her readers she was an independent and desired heterosexual predator after she separated from her second husband. Then, sexuality becomes a driving force in her life and she constructs her sexual persona providing her readers with scenes of interesting sceneries where she enjoys life in the arms of men of colour. She flies to Barbados where she meets a local man with whom she lives moments of sexual passion (the passion she lacked in her previous love affairs). The young West Indian man turned out to be a mere distraction to her and a panacea to the loneliness and rejection she felt with her husband:

> One of the distractions was a porter at the hotel, Paul, who became my lover. (…) I was just a rich American lady as far as he was concerned, and when I told him I was famous he didn't believe me. Paul gave me all the attention and affection I'd been missing and I loved it – loved it! (…) We had a short, uncomplicated affair which made me feel good about myself again. I liked Paul very much; in bed he was a tender lover and out of it he was kind and gentle, nice to be around. (*ibid.*, p. 121)

She pictures herself as a *femme fatale*, an irresistible Black goddess able to make all male heads turn. Conversely, later on, the narrative becomes more densely filled with descriptions of Simone looking hectically for a prospective husband. After Paul comes Mr. Earl Barrow, the Prime Minister of Barbados with whom she hopes to establish a long-

lasting relationship and whom she sees as a "blueprint for an ideal man" (*ibid.*, p. 130). She also reports in her autobiography that he was "careful and courteous in bed" (*ibid.*, p. 131); she was "his courtesan and he was my pasha" (*ibid.*, p. 131). Here the language becomes more intense and illustrates the passion for which Nina Simone longed. At this stage of her narrative, as well as later, when she hunts for another man, this time in Liberia, she becomes a body on fire, ready for anything to achieve her goal, i.e., settle down with a rich man who could secure her future life, financial needs, and expenditures. Naked, she dances wildly on a table in The Maze club in Monrovia and dreams of securing her life at an emotional level too. Africa becomes a promised land where she could play the role of a famous American star, *femme fatale* and heterosexual queen. Miriam Makeba[16], the African friend who invited her to Liberia for the celebration of President Richard Tolbert's new government, is reported in Simone's autobiography to have found six potential husband candidates for Simone, all extremely wealthy.

Nina Simone dedicates a substantial part of her autobiography's final section to unveiling what she considers her true nature – unbridled sexuality and a free spirit locked in a Black body. If the majority of the narrative treats the sexual body in a controlled and curbed manner, describing it with a rather dry and reserved direct language, the final part of the autobiography leaves any "respectable" preoccupations behind and weaves a fabric of Simone's textual body sprinkling the narrative with stories of sexual adventures and frantic hunts for a prospective man. The docile and disciplined body transformed itself into the wild sex-driven body of a woman on fire. Nevertheless, the narrative exhibits signs of incoherence: one moment Simone claims that she was past trying to find a husband, and some lines later she admits to constantly looking out for an adequate man. Simultaneously, she does not forget the role she has to play for narrative purposes: she must maintain her reputation of an appealing woman immensely popular with African men: "By this time I had seen all of the six men Miriam lined up for me, and while they were all charming, rich and attentive none of them quite hit the spot" (*ibid.*, p. 143). This is quite the opposite role her body played in the initial part of the narrative where she invested in the maintenance of her image of innocence and respectability, uninfluenced by the city life or even her first

[16] Miriam Makeba (Zensi Miriam Makeba, 1932-2008), also known as Mama Afrika, was one of the most renown Black African performers in the 20th Century. The daughter of a Swazi mother and a Xhosa father, she become a professional vocalist in 1954 excelling in Xhosa and Zulu songs. https://www.britannica.com/biography/Miriam-Makeba

sexual partners. As previously mentioned, the language she uses to describe her sexual encounters and affairs is never unrefined or crude. It tends to remain reserved, detached or even cold, shunning emotional undertones.

Nina Simone's textual references to her body are sparse throughout the narrative. She does not dwell on the importance of her transformation from adolescence to womanhood. Unlike Audre Lorde analysed in the previous section of this chapter, Simone is never really concerned with her budding femininity; such intimate aspects as her developing body or first menstruation are never mentioned. She reveals a rather practical approach towards her body, without excessive or obsessive focus on the meaning of being a girl/woman. She does not offer her readers any philosophical analysis of living in a gendered body and accepts her Black skin and femininity as they are, without further complicating her approach to life. Obviously, she does not avoid writing about her body also because she is an embodied subject and as such, she experiences the world, other people, and herself through it. Her body is not a source of excessive preoccupation when it comes to beauty but, at the same time, she takes precautions to ensure her audience/readers that she is a respectable girl following the moral norms of the society she grew up in. Ultimately, she is a body in transit, shifting between different geographies in America and other continents and she freely admits that she is also a sexual body involved in romantic relationships with the opposite sex.

Additionally, it must be noted that she likewise describes herself as a maternal body when she finds she is pregnant. Although that aspect of her feminine experience occupies only a fraction of her autobiography, in comparison with other, seemingly more relevant aspects of her narrative, it should be stated that Nina Simone's body is also a mother's body and she does write about that experience. Her narrative reveals happiness at the news of becoming pregnant, even if, as she claims, she was happy mainly because she knew her husband would be. Her text also dwells on typical aspects of pregnancy such as nausea at the slightest hint of tobacco, or cravings for strawberries and pickles simultaneously (*cf.* p. 84). Her maternal body becomes again a body in pain during labour and Simone does not silence that aspect of womanhood. She even admits to what many women fear confessing publicly: "It [the labour date] was the 12 September 1962, three years to the day since I had played my debut concert at Town Hall, and if anyone had given me a choice during the birth I would have jumped onstage and played for a week rather than have to endure another minute of labour" (*ibid*, p. 84). She speaks about labour pains with disarming sincerity and

admits she would rather be on stage than endure the process of giving birth. She says further: "It hurt like hell; I swear I thought I was going to die" (*ibid.*, p. 84). Here, maternity, and more specifically, the body in labour and, consequently, the body immersed in intense pain, is no slight matter or romanticised by Nina Simone. Her painful honesty about the maternal body makes her bodily narrative ring true and relevant to other women. Her text does not treat her experience in a heroic way, although she readily admits she loved her daughter Lisa instantly and was more than happy to become a mother.

4.3. The Storyteller's Account of the Sexual and Maternal Body: Faith Ringgold's *We Flew Over the Bridge*.

Faith Ringgold's orderly constructed autobiography allows her readers to follow different themes touched upon in her narrative in a specifically arranged way. It has been observed in chapter III that *We Flew Over the Bridge* differs from the other autobiographies examined in this Thesis in what concerns the internal structure of the narrative. The book is divided into three parts, each composed of chapters. The idea was to dedicate several chapters mainly to Ringgold's professional life as an artist and teacher while others dealt with more private issues such as coming-of-age as a young Black girl in Harlem, her deeply affectionate relationship with her mother, first infatuations, relationships and, finally, marriage and motherhood. Unlike in the autobiographies discussed so far, Audre Lorde's *Zami* and Nina Simone's *I Put a Spell on You*, the narrative concerning the body is not dispersed throughout the entire book (with some small exceptions) but tends to be placed at the centre of Part II entitled *Men, Marriage and Motherhood*. It is in this section that the author weaves her textual body with particular care paying attention to so-called "womanly issues" such as intimacy, privacy, sexuality, and motherhood. The term "womanly issues" is employed here to emphasise that a female body has a specific story to tell and a woman's subjectivity frequently constructed through the narrative is often intimately linked to her corporeality. It does not mean, of course, that male self-narratives cannot revolve around the issues of the flesh or that woman is exclusively chained to her body. As has been noted before, some men, especially gay men, do construct their selves through their material bodies, however women's autobiographies seem to rely more on those intimate (and also public) aspects of their selves. The private and intimate become public especially in situations where societal and cultural norms imposed on women strip them of their

individuality and basic human right to choose the way they wish to live and experience their bodies.

It is interesting to examine the way Faith Ringgold weaves the fabric of her textual body. As stated above, she does not sprinkle the autobiography with reminiscences of her bodily experiences, instead they are concentrated in the second Part of her life story, however it must be added that there are excerpts beyond Part II where she addresses bodily issues, even if only momentarily. Those moments in her narrative when she recreates childhood or teenage recollections reveal much about her upbringing and morals that show not only her family's values but also testify to the nature of the times in which she grew up. In this respect, her autobiography resembles, to some extent, Nina Simone's narrative in which she made sure to portray herself as a respectable young woman. Similarly, Faith Ringgold opts to employ an elegant language, perhaps devoid of passion (like in Simone's case) but which translates into the text the sense of aesthetics and taste Ringgold had as a female artist. Thus, there are no moments where Ringgold uses vulgar terms or slang to speak of her body or the intimate areas of her partners.

To better understand the choice of language and certain restraint with which Ringgold treats the most intimate aspects of her bodily existence it must be remembered that, like Nina Simone, Faith Ringgold received a fairly strict upbringing. She was raised in a family that deeply believed in work ethics and avoided racial victimisation, living by the rules of colour-blindness and meritocracy. Judging whether such a philosophy was correct or not lies beyond the purpose of this Thesis, but one thing is clear: this parental attitude passed onto the children could have contributed to Faith Ringgold's overall approach to her life as an embodied Black girl. Hence, although she does notice the persistent and overwhelming racism embedded in the American society and throughout her autobiography she remarks on her growing racial consciousness, she is not obsessively preoccupied with her Black female body, at least not to a dominating degree in her life-narrative.

As has been observed, Ringgold was raised in a respectable family which abode by certain values. She also grew up between both World Wars, a period in which society did not allow for sexual issues to be discussed openly. This, however, did not mean that such issues did not occupy youngsters' minds. Only the way of thinking and speaking about them was much less direct than in the following decades, particularly from the 1960s onwards (which will be reflected in Walker's narrative). Ringgold's mother, the primary

disciplinarian in the family, is remembered as someone who made sure that discipline and order governed the children's lives and any sign of disobedience was unthinkable. The children's bodies were willed into expected discipline – living in an orderly atmosphere, doing homework, going to bed precisely at 7.00pm. It was not uncommon for the children in Ringgold's family to be sent to bed without dinner if discipline was breached. Strict rules also applied to young male bodies – Ringgold's father took steps to bend his son's body into his conception of masculinity. Young Andrew was being prepared for manhood (understood quite differently from womanhood) through boxing. The sessions, as Faith Ringgold describes, were meant to make young Andrew a man – even if the boy felt pain, he was expected by his father (and the cultural dictates of the time) to grin and bear it. The masculine body was expected to ignore physical pain and violence: this was the rite of passage for many Black boys in the Harlem of the 1930s and 1940s. Both siblings, however, were at times spanked by their mother (Ringgold reveals that her father never hit either of them): disciplinarian measures involved some rare examples of physical violence which at the time was seen as a perfectly normal and required method of bringing up unruly kids. While boys were brought up to practice "masculine" activities to develop muscular dexterity and strength, Ringgold remembers the girls practicing typically "feminine" activities; she and her sister Barbara used to play "house" – such games were meant to hone their "feminine" skills and abilities to put into practice years later with families of their own. She observes that gender-specific games served the purpose of preparing boys and girls for their roles in life: girls as future wives and mothers, but boys not necessarily as future husbands and fathers. As she notes, Andrew was being prepared to become a man but that did not obligatorily translate into a good husband and father (he was not, in fact, since years later he involved himself with a gang in Harlem and became addicted to drugs, dying of an overdose).

In such a traditional and conservative setting, Ringgold says that sex was never discussed openly in the families she knew and certainly not in hers. If ever discussed, it was done so in whispers so the children could not overhear. She included in her narrative memories of how her mother's voice lowered when she told sexual stories. For the children's ears there were only stories of pure, platonic love. Its physical aspect was to be avoided and left unmentioned. The following excerpt illustrates particularly well how sexual/sensuous bodies were expected to be treated and how sexuality in general was seen:

> Even the movies we saw revealed no more than my mother was willing to discuss. Stories of unrequited love were the only kind we saw, and the kind I secretly dreamed about. I dreamed that my husband would love me so much that he would not touch me. Maybe one night by accident he would forget his promise, and I remember thinking that I would forgive him because I would have been asleep at the time. We all wanted to be pure, and it was clear from all that I had ever seen or heard that s-e-x was dirty, dirty, dirty. Even when we got married and had children it would be a sacrifice. We would never enjoy "it". (Ringgold, *ibid.*, p. 20).

All things sexual, then, were considered ignoble and dirty – such an attitude was instilled in young people to deter them from any thought of precocious sexual initiation. Sex had to be associated with moral failing, a repugnant physical activity never to be enjoyed. What Faith Ringgold does not explicitly say in the excerpt quoted above is that it was culturally expected only from women to shun sexual activities before marriage and sex was not supposed to be a source of joy for them. To cherish and enjoy their reputation of chaste and respectable women, they were expected to refrain from any sexual activity. Sexual and sensuous bodies were linked to a deep sense of guilt and shame. Such a strict philosophy must have, obviously, impacted the way young women saw themselves as sexual beings who, at best, diverted their attention to school, education and/or professional career. Strict morality aimed to prevent young women from the shame of losing their reputation and becoming single mothers. Life scripts for both sexes were already defined long before they could have a say in what would affect their lives directly. In poor families, teenagers were expected to find a job (script for boys) or get married and start a family (script for girls). Bodies, thus, were disciplined by class and social expectations and those who dared follow their own path paid the high price of social exclusion and irreparable reputational damage.

Curiously, when Ringgold describes her first meeting with Earl Wallace, her future husband, her description focuses on his characteristics and personality, instead of his physical attributes or sensuality (*cf.* with Nina Simone's description of her first encounter with Edney, the Native American boy). She mentions his family, where he lived and his interests, but readers learn nothing, at this point, of his looks or attractiveness:

> Although Earl was a brilliant student, he wanted to hang out and play in the street just like the other boys on the block. Despite Earl's rebellious spirit, he was a nice boy who loved music, took piano lessons, and gave award-winning recitals of

> classical music. My mother liked him and Barbara and Andrew did, too. He quickly became one of my best friends. (*ibid*., p. 30).

It seems that Earl's physicality, his skin colour, and body are unimportant to Faith Ringgold at this stage of the autobiography. Alternatively, the author wishes to keep those details to herself. She opts for a different rendering of him where the body is invisible. It also shows that the author herself prefers to concentrate on other aspects of her future husband and saves the more intimate dimension of her life for a later chapter exclusively dedicated to that aspect of her existence.

Before she moves on to address her intimate life in more detail in Part II of her autobiography, Faith Ringgold touches on a topic which is common among female writers – that of sexual abuse and sexual harassment. This issue is discussed, to a greater or lesser extent, in both autobiographies examined in the previous sections of this chapter: Audre Lorde recollected a situation where she was touched inappropriately by a man while he hoisted her up to reach a bookshelf; Nina Simone was nearly raped by her first boyfriend, Edney when she rejected his plea to marry him and give up her musical career and, years later, she was beaten and raped by her fiancée, Andrew Stroud in a sudden attack of unexpected jealousy. In all three autobiographies examined, the Black female body is exposed to sexual and gender violence and objectified by misogynist men educated by a patriarchal culture which tells them that a woman's body does not fully belong to her. Faith Ringgold does not silence herself regarding the painful topic of abuse when she includes in her narrative an incident experienced at school. In George Washington High School located in Washington Heights she became the object of the illicit sexual interest of one of her teachers. She describes the situation in a typically "ringgoldesque" manner - a gifted storyteller reporting the incident in a slightly detached but arresting way. The following fragment illustrates Ringgold's language and mild manner in telling the incident which provoked her outrage and left a lasting mark on her memory:

> There was one white teacher I definitely remember, but not by name. He had called me into his classroom for excessive absence and looked more than usually red-faced and sweaty that day, but I didn't notice it until he stopped talking and told me to turn around. The fashion then was to wear very tight skirts and sexy sweaters – "the sweater-girl" look – and I was in style. I thought there must be something on my skirt, maybe a thread, until I felt something lightly touching my derriere. I looked

> over my shoulder and into his quivering flushed face. "What are you doing?" I asked indignantly. His hand froze. Pleadingly, he attempted a come-hither smile, the kind I associated with deviant old men who exposed themselves to young girls in doorways. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself", I blurted out without thinking. But I was immediately terrified because I knew I could get in trouble for this. I said nothing more, but gathered my books in my arms and proceeded straight to the door. (*ibid.*, p. 32).

The above excerpt is particularly compelling because it proposes several issues for analysis. First, what is striking is Faith Ringgold's attempt at, perhaps, explaining or justifying her teacher's untoward behaviour. She describes her outfit, admitting that it was fashionable, sexy, and physically appealing. Popular fashion among high school girls at the time tended to emphasise their body shapes and clothes were meant to highlight young women's sexual attractiveness. Ringgold's body is presented here as a fashionable one, following the dictates of current *haute couture,* a body meant to attract attention and display its physical charms, clad in a tight skirt and a sexy sweater.

It is not the only fragment of her narrative in which she focuses on her attempts at adorning her body and trying to make it even more appealing. She admits, on other occasions, to her particular interest in clothes, make up and haircuts – typically gendered interests and activities:

> My daily ritual consisted of making up my face, and combing, straightening, and curling my hair. When I was going out, I often changed my clothes four or five times before I was satisfied with my outfit. I learned how to sew my clothes, so I could wear my skirts and dresses as tight fitting as I chose. I enjoyed looking sexy and showing off my figure and legs. (*ibid.*, p. 36)

Because her mother paid attention to the way the children dressed for special occasions, Ringgold insisted on looking elegant and girly. Appearance was of great importance to her. As she remarks, her bodily rituals made part of the female culture and constituted a way to highlight her own, individual style and happiness at being a woman. Thus, it also explains why she imagines that the way she dressed caused her white teacher's sexual arousal and consequent attempt to touch her body. Even though she never expresses this openly, one might be under the impression that, according to her, men might not always

be able to curb their sexual instincts if confronted with a sexy female body. The truth is, she does not justify her teacher, but she also casts doubt on the role of the female body (the way it is dressed and behaves) in some cases of sexual harassment. Another question that should be raised at this stage is her choice of language. Here and throughout the entire autobiography, as has been already mentioned, Faith Ringgold maintains her style and sophistication regardless of the topic. The choice to use "derriere" is an example of this. Having other stronger words at her disposal to describe intimate parts on her body, she opts for one of the most elegant and neutral words denoting "behind". Likewise, it cannot escape the readerly attention that the word "derriere" has a humorous connotation – it is not vulgar and is devoid of sexual meaning. This is quite curious, given the unpleasant and sexually abusive nature of the incident. Not only is the language relatively restrained given the context of the situation but also the term used to denote Ringgold's intimate body is often employed in humorous linguistic contexts. Last but not least, it is important to pay attention to the emotions transmitted in the above fragment. Although the general atmosphere of the description is relatively calm and remains controlled, Faith Ringgold does not hide the fact she felt terrified and deeply offended by her teacher's attempt to harass her. "Indignantly", "ashamed", "blurted out" and "terrified" are words that carry intense emotions used by the author who felt that her female dignity and bodily integrity were assaulted. She does not portray herself as a helpless victim who passively, terrified into silent despair, agrees unceremoniously to a man's intentions. She portrays herself as an outraged body, ready to risk her safety as a high school student to fight for her dignity and security. As a matter of fact, her indignant reaction is spontaneous and unplanned. She reacts verbally and resorts to sass to defend herself[17], knowing too well she might be severely punished for her impudence. Hers, then, is a resistant, dignified body fighting for its human value. This, of course, does not mean in any way that the previous autobiographers examined so far, Audre Lorde and Nina Simone, agreed to sexual violence and the objectification of their bodies. It must be remembered that Audre Lorde was a child when she was sexually harassed and so her strategy of self-defence and survival cannot be compared to that of a high school student. In Nina Simone's case, harassed and violated when she was already an adult woman, her

[17] Talking back and sass are well-known and researched methods used by many enslaved women, in their slave narratives. Recent feminist studies conducted on slave narratives have demonstrated that, unlike enslaved men, enslaved women tended to resort to verbal methods of survival and self-defence rather than direct physical struggle. Apart from verbal reactions, they used body language to subvert their white masters' system of oppression and regain their human dignity. (Braxton, 1989)

description testifies to the fact she felt like a helpless victim whose approach towards rape, carried out by her extremely abusive partner, was a survival strategy too. Each story of sexual violence meted out to a female body differs in context, perpetrator, age of the woman assaulted but all three convey concern with the serious and widespread problem of the Black female body marginalised, silenced, and objectified by male violence. All three autobiographers speak out against such violence and social permissiveness which, in many instances, justifies male harassment and belittles women's suffering.

Faith Ringgold denounces sexual violence that diminishes the female body and the cultural values which impose chastity on women and almost automatically blame them for any conduct deemed unrespectable. She reflects on the ridicule and social ostracization of women who had pregnancies out of wedlock. When she and Earl became a couple and initiated their sexual relationship, she comments on the issue of birth control and women's reproductive rights. She is a voice of reason speaking of her fears and concerns and on behalf of all women who fell prey to sexual predators or who had not been "careful" enough in avoiding pregnancy. Abortion was considered, sometimes, the only solution to avoid problems outside or within the marriage. At any rate, it was usually a woman who bore the brunt of unwanted pregnancy:

> My mother had no concern about Earl's Jamaican heritage, she just disapproved of my going steady. Although she was afraid of pregnancy, now that I was sixteen she consented to let me go out with boys. At that time a lot of nice girls got pregnant and "had" to get married – there was no such thing as birth control. I often heard my mother talking about some girl who took care of unwanted pregnancies. Many of these women were married but could not afford to have any more children. Getting pregnant outside of marriage was shameful. Whether or not you had an abortion, it was still a disgrace. We were all supposed to be virgins, and only the men could admit to liking sex. *(ibid.*, p. 33).

This fragment is clearly feminist in nature and Faith Ringgold admits to feeling attracted to feminist values throughout her autobiography. The relevance here is that the excerpt illustrates the author's view of female bodies controlled by their families, men, and society in general. By referring to "all" women, or to women she heard of, she, in fact, refers also to herself because, in a relationship at sixteen, she was on the brink of initiating her sexual life and was well aware of the price she would pay if something went wrong. The

female body, like her own, is subjected to male sexual whims and is not free in any aspect of its sexuality. It should not become sexual(ized) too early and if it is, sex should not be a source of pleasure. Blame and guilt are so deeply ingrained in women that they carry this sexual stigma throughout their lives. To some extent, it also emerges in Faith Ringgold's text when she refers to her own sex life. The way she writes about her first sexual encounters with Earl, her first boyfriend, is rather reserved and matter-of-fact. She remarks on her dissatisfaction; ultimately, sex is overestimated and seems to only be a source of pleasure for men. It is understandable that, having been raised in an environment which demonised female sexuality, the author cannot separate her upbringing from sexual pleasure which, in any case, would only prove her lasciviousness. The following excerpt shall be examined further:

> Sex wasn't dirty to me, but it wasn't anything special. I faked liking it, and Earl enjoyed it just like they said he would. He was affectionate and loving – always kissing, holding, and touching whenever he could steal a few moments alone. He was a silent but passionate lover. (…) He never changed his words or his lovemaking style even after we got married. I was twenty-six, had two children, and was divorced from Earl before I met a man who could make love; I married him when I was thirty-one. (*ibid.*, p. 33).

This is an honest rendering of her sex life where she portrays herself as a woman who did not expect much of sex. However, the author tries to subvert the cultural patterns and claims that she did not enjoy her sex life not only because society and culture obliged her to behave in a certain way, to avoid expecting sexual pleasure, but also, because as she claimed, her husband was not a sophisticated lover, even though he was affectionate and caring. Ringgold uses her narrative to speak about very intimate aspects of her life and is disarmingly frank about feeling disappointed with her sex life. One cannot but wonder how Earl would feel if he read Ringgold's account, but as Couser (2004) claimed in his insightful work on ethics and autobiography, it is an autobiographer's choice and responsibility to address sensitive information and facts that involve third persons directly. Stephen Mansfield presents the question of ethics in autobiography in the following way:

> Broadly speaking, an ethics of autobiography involves thinking through the rights and responsibilities of writers and readers of such texts by attending to what a life writer should do. Or to express it as a tongue twister: what is right or fair or justifiable

> for one who writes about one's own life to write about? To discuss ethical questions in life writing is to attend to the relationships between writers and readers, writers and their human and historical subjects, and to the judgements writers (in the first instance) and readers (subsequently) make in writing and reading autobiography. (Mansfield, 2019: 268).

Because it involves others, autobiographical narrative can have a lasting impact on others' reputation and how readers perceive them. There is no doubt that it can bring harm if confidential or intimate information is disclosed. It can even be stated that certain autobiographical facts involving third parties can also impact the family members, for example children, causing shame and moral harm, etc. The following paragraph discussing Ringgold's treatment of her sexual life, humorous as it is, illustrates well the risk involving any disclosure of intimate or other details referring to other people.

It is in Part II of the autobiography that Faith Ringgold gives more detailed descriptions of her private and intimate life. The entirety of Part II is dedicated to questions of marriage, romantic affairs, and motherhood, although in Part III it is possible to find some reminiscences of her intimate life and bodily questions too. Because in Ringgold's rendering of her body, sexuality is not considered a taboo, she addresses her sexual body in a direct and often comic manner. A good example of the straightforward and funny way she presents her body through narrative is the following description of her and Earl's wedding night:

> I had expected to be swept off my feet on my wedding night. Accordingly, I took my bath, creamed and powered myself, dabbed behind my ears and knees with Worth's Je Reviens, put on my new and very revealing nightgown and waited. Earl spent that night grooming himself for his job hunt the next day. After his bath and oil rubdown, he polished his shoes, pressed a razor-sharp crease in his pants, and ironed a white pocket handkerchief. He combed his hair, put on a stocking cap to keep it in place while he slept, and got into bed. I was half asleep. If there was an erotic wedding night episode, I missed it. (*ibid.*, p. 42).

The lines that follow the excerpt quoted above continue her reflection on her married sex life. She portrays Earl as a man always ready to make love, regardless of mood, place, occasion, their financial situation, or problems the couple might be experiencing. She also

admits honestly that her husband did not know or care about how to satisfy her, so she was obliged to fake sexual satisfaction:

> My way of dealing with this was just to keep moving and swear I came before him. (…) For a long time sex was more of a problem than enjoyment. (…) Thank God I was only faking orgasms – otherwise neither one of us would have seen the light of day. (*ibid.*, p. 42).

Sexuality is, thus, revealed as an important aspect of her life and she does not hesitate to air her frustration at the hasty and boring way her husband made love to her. In spite of all societal and cultural limitations imposed on the female body, Faith Ringgold is independent enough to follow her own path and dares expect something more from her sexual life than what society would allow. She does not hesitate to admit she did have high expectations and sexual needs – she treats her body with normality and naturalness, knowing she has the right to enjoy her sensuous body and its natural needs. Even though she received a strict moral upbringing, as did Nina Simone, and tried to follow the moral rules instilled in her by her mother, Faith Ringgold depicts herself as a woman of independent mind and a healthy, balanced sexuality deprived of a sense of guilt or traces of neuroses. As she notes in her narrative, it was only with her second husband that she finally understood what a satisfactory sexual life means to a woman. Only then does her body open to new experiences and the author feels realised in the most intimate aspect of her life. She does not, hypocritically, pretend that sexuality was unimportant or that she did not really care.

She expresses her feminist argument: whether society accepts it or not, the female body is sexual, created to receive and give pleasure without guilt. She meets her second husband, Birdy, while still married to Earl and admits that the latter had everything she needed and failed to receive from her husband: affection, a sense of security and a satisfactory sexual life. She admits to searching for a certain type of man once single again. She needed a responsible, supportive man who would, additionally, accept and like her mother – that was one of the most important conditions she set. She builds herself in her narrative as a balanced and mature woman who expects to share her life with a man, but shall not forgo her career, daughters, and relationship with her mother for someone burdensome who is not a real partner. She uses the opportunity to offer a severe critique of the Black men she observed around her. Her feminist reflections on Black-on-Black, male-

female relationships are quite similar to her daughter's, Michelle Wallace in her controversial book on Black men (Wallace, 1978). Even if, as shall be analysed in the next chapter, both women differed significantly on various matters such as Black women, feminism and men, and the role of women in the Black Power Movement, Faith Ringgold also penned criticism of Black men. She claimed that men of a younger generation, those who became adults in 1950s and 1960s, climbed the social ladder selling out their Black values, despising their own mothers' religion and were usually separated from the mothers of their own children. Ringgold portrays the men of her generation as irresponsible, immature boys, eager to show white men that Blackness meant nothing to them and would support green power rather than Black Power. Money spoke louder than loyalty to their own people, especially their own women. She, in turn, felt she was seen by such men as either too old, too Black, or too educated. Her mature Black body was unattractive to such men and she denounced the way decent Black women were treated by their Black peers:

> By the early sixties, however, I found it more and more difficult to fantasize that such men [interested in money and abiding by the modern values of the society] were superior to me. They had superior status, yes, but I always knew that that was because they were men, and as such had more opportunities. Thank God, they found me too dark, too old, too ambitious, too political, or too well educated for them. (*ibid.*, p. 57)

At this stage of her narrative, Faith Ringgold weaves a deeply feminist narrative which reclaims dignity and worth to Black women's bodies, hers included. Further in the text, she also places the female body in the context of heterosexual love and bonding. What today could be considered outdated or even homophobic, to her meant strengthening and solidifying relationships between men and women, placing heterosexual love at the centre of a traditional and stable society. Critical as she is of many Black men's approach to Black women, she is of the opinion that only in a stable relationship with a man can a woman become fully herself. She insists on the complementarity of both sexes and argues that men and women need each other to confirm their identity. According to Ringgold, opposites, such as male and female, attract each other but also enrich their respective worlds. A man without a woman is a rootless creature, lost and anchorless. However, it is necessary to add that her male-female philosophy was considered as true in the 1960s and not necessarily so

at the time of writing her autobiography, also because times have changed and gender relations have undergone dramatic alterations.

Throughout the chapter, Ringgold maintains her hilarious writing style and a disarmingly honest narrative which reveals an able storyteller with a great dose of self-respect. There is also some distancing from situations that could be seen as frustrating or disappointing. In the above excerpts the readers discover a woman aware of her physical attraction who cherishes her female body and adorns it with cosmetics and lingerie. Ringgold's is a body meant to attract attention and desire. She feels well in her own skin (although she later reveals an overweight body and multiple attempts at losing weight). Her body is not a source of shame and anxiety. Quite on the contrary, being the daughter of a fashion designer, Faith Ringgold knows how to dress herself and use clothes to make her body more beautiful and express her style and personality.

Nevertheless, when treating the topic of the body, it is not only humorous sex life, clothes, lingerie, and attractiveness she focuses on. When she weaves the fabric of her textual life and addresses questions of body and sexuality, she refers to the violence she experienced at the hands of both of her partners. She admits to having been physically assaulted by Earl and, sometime later, by her second husband, Burdette. Back in 1952, Earl slapped her across the face in the presence of his friends believing that disciplining a woman in front of other people had a pedagogical effect and would help him save face. The second episode of male violence she suffered took place when Birdy hit her for being unruly trying to establish his dominance. In both instances, Faith Ringgold did what she believed she had to do: she called the Police and resorted to institutional ways of defending herself from abusive men. At one point she admits to having seen her father slap her mother once and it is from her she learned that even one incident of violence is too many. Her mother gave her an example that a woman must respect herself and care for her dignity because nobody else will. Even the most loving partner can become abusive.

It is relevant to note that Faith Ringgold's explanation of male violence does not take a feminist slant. Rather, the author argues that it is in human nature to turn against the person who is closest emotionally to us. Ringgold neither proceeds to a feminist explanation of domestic and gender violence, nor does she consider women as victims of a patriarchal system that subjugates them. However, she intentionally cautions women: it is of extreme importance to set rules and parameters right at the beginning of each and every relationship.

If what is unacceptable in a relationship is never stated from the start, the author claims that increasing violent incidents can take place, if a woman is always permissive and forgiving. So, the female body she presents and advocates is also a resistant body fighting back male violence and oppression. It can become victimised and marginalised by sexual and domestic violence, yet still it rises and reclaims its dignity. Through examples of less happy events in her life, Faith Ringgold does not aim to portray her body as that of a victim but rather of a strong, sensible woman who knows her worth and is able to implement the values she adheres to in her own life, setting, at the same time, an example for a younger generation of women (both her daughters and her female readers).

Like in Nina Simone's case, Faith Ringgold's trip away from America introduced her to sensuality with a foreigner. This is the only time Faith Ringgold refers to an extra-marital affair. Curiously, this "illicit" romance served a similar purpose to Simone's: it confirmed her femininity and physical attractiveness and helped her find her womanhood again, while stripped of constraining sexual patterns imposed on women in American society. Maurice was a young medical student of West Indian origin (the Island of Guadelupe)[18] with whom Faith Ringgold communicates in a broken Spanish. Soon enough the relationship becomes physical and Ringgold is infatuated with the young man who, apart from being a cultural translator for her, becomes her sexual companion. Again, in a matter-of-fact language the author renders the sexual encounter transmitting her ardour and mature respect towards her lover:

> On my last night in Paris, Maurice and I had our first and last rendezvous at his friend's flat in the student section of Paris. The décor was "student" modern, plenty of pillows and coverlets on a big bed. We found some wine (and lemonade for Maurice) in the cupboard, and cheese and bread in the tiny icebox. I was curious about what "it" would be like – after all, we were in Paris, and he was French and

[18] It is an interesting coincidence that Nina Simone, Faith Ringgold, and Rebecca Walker involve themselves romantically with young West Indian men with whom they seek short love affairs. The question emerges: do all three women analysed in this Thesis romanticise and feel attracted by the "exotic" physicality of Caribbean men, doing what Edward Said, in his famous *Orientalism* described as the West's fascination with the Orient, enclosing Oriental culture within the narrow limits of the Western imagination? In their case, the West Indian men become targets of sexualisation and objectification of Western (American) middle-class women who can afford to travel abroad and seek out "exotic" men to confirm their sexual attractiveness. Albeit not a criticism, one cannot help but wonder why the autobiographers under scrutiny do exactly what they often criticise in their narratives: use "exotic" bodies for their pleasure. This could be a topic worth of further research to understand if "exoticisation" of the Other, non-Western, subject can also happen in case of women considered by white society as second-class citizens.

> black. But ours was not an illicit affair – I could almost have told my mother about it. I was more concerned about the open window than I was about Maurice. He was no-frills, matter-of-fact, rapid-fire lover. Maybe I had made him wait too long? Maybe I should have waited even longer. (*ibid.*, p 136).

The last two sentences testify to some insecurity Ringgold felt in relation to her younger lover. Perhaps they mean that, while being a mature, married woman with two daughters and a successful artistic career, her inside "child" was unsure of herself due to the strict moral rules she received. Was she expected to make a man wait longer? In not doing so, did she seem too available? Or was she afraid Maurice would think it all happened too fast? Was she a respectable enough woman if she waited longer before making love to an adult man? The problem is not her civil status, as she admits, it is whether the timing to be with her lover was correct. Although sexuality plays an important role in Ringgold's narrative and she constructs her image of an independent, self-assured woman well aware of her bodily (and emotional) needs, she does not render herself as a *femme fatale*, as Nina Simone does. She does not seem to be in need of confirming her (hetero)sexual charm with all men she meets, perhaps because she feels more mature and secure in her body than Nina Simone does in hers.

There is also a marked contrast between the way Nina Simone and Faith Ringgold write their pregnant/maternal body into their narratives. Although both women address motherhood, it occupies much more space in Ringgold's narrative. The pregnant/maternal body is as important to Faith Ringgold as is her sensuous body. The narrative addressing her pregnant body is straightforward and offers many details. Ringgold includes in her autobiography some atypical symptoms of pregnancy (her menstruation did not cease), a doctor's visit that confirmed she was approximately four months along, how she joined natural birth classes, and so on. Her own experiences serve also as a pretext to comment on other women's and what conditions for labour they could find at hospitals. Faith and her husband studied new concepts in obstetrics and decided their child would be born without forceps or drugs:

> We wanted our child to be born naturally without forceps, drugs, or anesthesia. Natural childbirth was a new concept and not many people knew anything about it, so the classes were very small and experimental. (*ibid.*, p. 45).

The detailed description of her daughter's birth is a proof that the experience was exceptional to her and deserved five pages of vivid recollections with dialogues and skilful storytelling. The description takes form of a linear narrative rich in details of the events that took place from the moment her water broke until the birth of her first daughter, Michelle. The pangs of pain are recorded in detail as well, including her attempts to breathe slowly in order to control them. Like in Nina Simone's autobiography, the maternal body is filled with pain, tension, and effort. Giving birth is portrayed in both narratives with all the seriousness it deserves, but in Ringgold's it is more graphic and emotional. Ringgold met other women in labour at the hospital she described as screaming curses at their husbands for being the reason for their pain. This is, indeed, a very intimate and feminine piece of writing about the body which transforms itself in order to give life. A uniquely feminine experience is rendered in a dramatic way which reminds the reader, and the author herself, the price and process of becoming a mother. There is no doubt whatsoever that only a female author could pen such an intimate and "naked" description stripping herself of all privacy and secrecy. As a matter of fact, the body of a woman in labour never really belongs only to herself. It is available for all staff's eyes to see and witness the process of releasing another life. According to Faith Ringgold's experience, she was just a body in pain surrounded by strangers who came and went as she was trying to give birth to Michelle. All privacy was gone, unthinkable even, because:

> (…) my tiny room was crowded with nurses and doctors who gathered up my sheets and pulled me, bed and all, into the adjacent room. In a second I was off the bed and onto the delivery table. A parade of doctors followed the procession and stood several rows deep around my now-permanently-opened legs. (*ibid*., p. 48).

Clearly, although these lines do bear some sense of humour or irony in the midst of such a painful situation, the excerpt also confirms that during childbirth the woman's body is not only in extreme pain, but also disciplined by the doctors and nurses, willed into obedience, and completely stripped of its privacy. The act of entering labour and giving birth to a child is of great relevance to Ringgold but she also does not gloss over the fact that motherhood comes at a great price to the pregnant body. She is as honest about it as Nina Simone is in her excerpt where she addresses her pregnancy and the act of giving birth to Lisa. Ringgold's treatment of her own body, thus, focuses on her sexuality, femininity expressed through clothes, make up and haircuts and, finally, the pregnancies which are reported to be of

extreme, but not central, importance in her life. The body image she transmits has multiple dimensions, it is deeply human in its sexual needs and vulnerability, however, it is not overly dramatized as with the case of Audre Lorde's focus on her Black lesbian corporeality.

4.4. Insecure Body in No-Man's Land: Rebecca Walker's *Black, White and Jewish*.

Rebecca Walker's autobiography/memoir is a fertile textual narrative through which the author, nearly obsessively, focuses on her self in-the-making. Her racial identity paired with a profound sense of non-belonging and the tensions she experiences confronting both cultures and communities she is immersed in, Black and Jewish, is placed at the centre of her text. Dealing with the pain of coming-of-age as a biracial child, a "tragic mulatto", as she perceives herself, occupies most of her narrative. Her own brown body, at the junction of cultures and races, a body in constant transit (which, as has been stated, she views as a problem, rather than an opportunity to observe the world like Nina Simone does while crossing geographical boundaries) is marked by the love of her parents of different races, but also by society's disbelief in the very existence of a biracial child. Her body is the centre of the attention in the narrative because she ascribes to it all the anxiety she feels. She constantly emphasizes the fact that her racial hybridity is written on her body. Her racial identity seems to be a reason she calls into question her very existence.

It has already been analysed that her personal fears and insecurity are all related to her material body: she is a body constantly contorting in self-doubt, feeling continually judged and gazed at by others, her own Jewish family or her peers who assess the authenticity of her Blackness and Jewishness, if she acts in accordance with cultural expectations, if she belongs. These issues must be answered by her body and its racial and cultural performance. To this end she describes the performative nature of her racialised body: racial identity is constructed through the correct performance: gestures, the way she walks and moves, the way she speaks (language and slang). She so desperately wishes to belong that she ceaselessly undermines her own individuality in the attempt to be like others and, consequently, be loved and accepted. Some of these questions were raised in the previous chapter and special attention has been paid to the role of Rebecca Walker's body in her process of racial identification. This chapter will examine the way she constructs her body textually and although some aspects can overlap with the issues analysed previously, others unaddressed before will be scrutinised here.

Undoubtedly, Rebecca Walker's textual body is strongly linked to her racial identity and her body cannot be separated from her sense of who she is as a biracial person. Because her sense of identity and the tension between her individuality and community are intimately linked to her material body, it is impossible not to touch upon this aspect of her narrative. At the same time, the textual body Walker weaves throughout the text is like a colourful fabric; it is a body experienced individually, one of a girl and sexual being. Her body is not related only to her racial self throughout the narrative; there are several moments when she treats it on a more independent, individual level. It is also an important tool of safeguarding her existence and self in terms of memory. Perhaps it is the most important reflection Rebecca Walker offers on the role of her body in her life and in her autobiography. Although she does not dwell excessively on this aspect of her corporeality, it should be analysed to understand the connection between her body and her most intimate self.

The link between the body and the memory is a specific aspect unique to Rebecca Walker's autobiography, little referred to in the other three texts under analysis. In her text, Walker reflects on her memory and the process of re-constructing memories for the purpose of writing the self-narrative and how that process is linked to her physical body. For example, Nina Simone does speak about the process of writing her autobiography in the prologue, and what that process entails. She says, for instance, that writing down a book of memoirs/autobiography is a difficult process because it forces one to reflect on periods and events that would best be kept buried and undisclosed. As she remarks, her mind had already "forgotten" some memories and now she has to confront them again. In Simone's words, she has to "persuade" the lost memories to come out of the shadows as if they were creatures lurking in the dark. The following is Nina Simone's account of her process of writing her memories which helps establish parallels with Rebecca Walker's experience:

> So I've spent a lot of time persuading those lost memories out of the shadows into the light. At times it wasn't easy, at others the dam broke out in a rush and I was flooded by so many memories I lost count of them all. It's funny too how you don't have much control over what it is you do remember; how the most inconsequential, unimportant events sit at the front of your mind as clear as yesterday and the moments you just ache to relive stay out of reach for days or weeks at a time. (Simone, *op. cit.*, p. ix).

Thus, as can be seen, to Nina Simone recreating memories could even be compared to giving birth ("the dam broke down" just like a pregnant woman's water can break): it seems to happen naturally, very often without the autobiographer's particular effort while at other times the process is painful, time-consuming, like a woman's body in labour waiting for the baby to make its way out. As discussed before, according to recent studies on memory and neurobiology, re-creating memories is a creative process that involves working on them anew each time the brain "produces" them. Memories do not sit hidden in a special reservoir waiting to see the light of the day. In Simone's subjective understanding, though, they are just there ready (or not quite if they need time to ripen like fruit) to be retrieved. Her experience of memories, although difficult and painful at times, is not directly linked to the body as is the case of Rebecca Walker.

Walker's reflection on the process of writing an autobiography differs significantly from Simone's because it involves her own body. The author offers her readers an interesting, nearly philosophical theory of memory recreation. She too admits to often forgetting and wonders about the significance of those moments. How does the act of forgetting impact the act of remembering and writing? She concludes that those two seemingly opposing processes, of forgetting and of remembering, constitute the process of memory recreation and writing the autobiography. Perhaps something must be forgotten for something else to be remembered? She admits that writing/memorising are implicated in the process of conscious or unconscious forgetting and omitting bits of information. To her, memory is essential as it indicates who she is and shows the way to find herself. Without memory she could not claim her real self. Without memories she would become fluid, shapeless and lose ground: "I feel amorphous, missing the unbroken black outline around my body that everybody seems to have" (Walker, 2001, *op. cit.*, p. 2).

Memories are then linked to her Black body; she writes as if they were contained within the limits of her Black skin and without them, in the act of forgetting, she becomes unembodied, i.e., she loses her self, her core. Already at the beginning of her autobiography she defines her position regarding her body: it is important because it contains her memories. Her memories and her body denote the limit of her self. Writing further on the issue of memory linked to her body, she reflects on her existence in physical and spiritual terms. A conversation with a friend reveals that Walker believes deeply in the role of the heart: 'It's the heart' I say, laying my flat palm over my beating organ, feeling the heat grown between skin and skin, through the cotton of my tee shirt" (*ibid.*, p. 2). To her, it symbolises emotions

and feelings while her friend insists that it is the mind, or spirit that defines one's existence. In the eternal philosophical debate regarding the division between Mind/Body/Spirit, Rebecca Walker opts for the Heart/Body. It is by means of her heart that she remembers her friend when they are separated, not through her mind or spirit. To Walker, the mind is a dry, barren land devoid of emotions which are essential to her existence and if emotions inhabit her Heart/Body, that means her life philosophy, body and emotions gives primacy to the Body. Only the Heart has the capacity to "store" emotions that trigger memories:

> It will be my heart that will force my mind to remember her face, the way she felt lying next to me in the dark, the way she looked sitting on the sofa, telling me that Mind, to her, is everything. My heart will have registered the deeper meaning snaking and elusive beneath her disparate pieces; my heart alone will allow me to remember her whole. (*ibid.*, p. 3)

The beginning of her autobiography and her understanding of the role played by the Body/Heart in guarding emotions and recreating memories, sets the tone for the entire narrative and explains why she places her body at its centre. She focuses obsessively on her biracial body and what it means to her and to the world that she is both Black and white. Her body plays a crucial role other than denoting who she is racially: it is a carrier of her deepest emotions such as love towards her mother, friends, the troubled love she feels for her Jewish family, anxieties related to her origins and their implications. Being a carrier of emotions, her body is also the vessel of her memories and, as she states right at the beginning of her narrative, her memories and her body are one organism – they create an inseparable whole.

Later, half-way through her text, she reiterates this sentiment in a separate section called *How Memory Works*. The text offers again her position on the link between memory and the body. This time, however, the mood of the excerpt is darker, more pessimistic. Further into her autobiography and the process of remembering/forgetting, Rebecca Walker admits to wearing a mask of indifference. The mask is supposed to shield the hidden child inside her from all the dangers of the external world. The mask does not let other people see the fear she carries within her body at all times; the fear of being rejected, of not being loved, of not belonging. Fear is anchored in her insecure young body throughout the entire autobiography. Her masked face exudes security and calm but it is like a false skin, thick make-up, under which Walker hides her emotions, buried deep inside her body:

> There is a mask I wear, a mask of unfazable calm. With it firmly in place, my features express serene indifference. My cheeks, eyes, lips, all are placid, welcoming, nonthreatening. I convince myself that I am at ease, that I do not live as though expecting the gate [the discotheque gate] to be slammed shut at any moment. (*ibid.*, p. 186).

Therefore, her body is not only a reservoir of memories but a container for all her doubts, fears and longing for love and acceptance. On the surface, her body is like an avatar – a robot whose role is to pretend she is strong, unaffected by the acts of racism she encounters every day. Walker creates a textual twin, a girl who shields her from pain, racism, sexism, and the hostility of the outside world. Her memories, rooted in her body, propel her to write the following:

> This is how memory works. It reminds me that no matter how strong I feel in myself, I am still the little girl with the legs that aren't right. I am still the little girl who is too dark or too light, too rich or too poor to be trusted. (*ibid.*, p. 188)

This is an arresting perspective on the body and memories unaddressed in the previously examined autobiographies. Some autobiographers feel more or less comfortable in their bodies, their Black skins cause them more or less pain and anxiety. All of them are sexual bodies immersed in desire with which they deal in a more or less straightforward way. Yet, in none of the three autobiographies analysed before is there such a superb emotional and intellectual link between body and memory. The memories Rebecca Walker writes of are like pieces of glass that cut into her skin leaving undeletable marks. Her whole body carries emotional scars caused by memories of racism, pain, and the attempts to carry on. Much like physical scars, they are so painful, she cannot speak because they cut into her throat like a shard of glass. To Rebecca Walker, overly immersed in her textual body which is either too inadequate, never loved enough, never fully accepted mainly by herself, and by others, her biological, material body is linked to her memories and emotions with an invisible thread of steel. These two fragments illustrate the author's position aptly:

> But the memory doesn't disappear. It fades from the mind I know and creeps like a parasite into my soft tissue, muscles, glands. At meetings, in stores, during interviews, at dinners and lunches with friends and family I sweat giant dark spots in powder blue shirts, and I fight a relentless urge to flee. (*ibid.*, p. 188)

> Beneath the mask, behind the cool, unperturbed exterior there is rage. There is pure liquid fire threatening to annihilate. And I am afraid. (*ibid.*, p. 188).

Fear, anger, and rage are all nearly physical emotions deeply anchored in Walker's body. The memories incorporated into her narrative serve as a reminder years after experiencing those moments of rage and anger, that racism is all-pervasive; it sinks into the skin and inhabits her cells and tissues, feeding her mind and fuelling her fear and anxiety. The racism she feels on her skin because of the colour of her body is like a toxin that circulates through her veins poisoning it. It becomes like a foreign body within, on the surface of her skin. It is invisible and yet acutely uncomfortable, biting and assaulting the body it carries. It takes time for the scars to heal and the process of writing the autobiography can only take place when the pain is overcome. All her memories are lodged near her heart and, because of it, they are full of emotions. Her story is buried deep inside her body – she says she has an embodied story to tell: her own body is the story and it is written on her skin, melted in her veins, cells and tissues. It runs through her body like her own blood.

Paul John Eakin (2008, *op. cit.*) insightfully argued in his work on autobiographies that they are embodied stories and his observations fit Rebecca Walker's understanding of an autobiographical account as one where the body is never silent. She makes an original contribution to the depiction of the Black female body as a carrier of memories and emotions. It absorbs the toxic wastage of all-pervasive racism and humiliation addressed at her by her white and even Black peers. Her body, hence, is a container of all the racial hatred she experiences daily and to protect the child inside her teenage body, Walker admits to wearing a mask which makes it impossible for others to see what really happens inside her. The mask does not protect her from exterior harm but it at least lets her conceal her true emotions and feelings, shielding her intimate self from unwanted sight.

Her body is, additionally, a sensuous and sexual one. As with the previous autobiographers analysed, Rebecca Walker dissects the intimate aspects of her bodily experience honestly. She unveils her attitude toward her sensuous body using a somewhat different textual technique from the ones employed so far. The more direct and graphic language she utilizes in fragments concerning her sexual life and relations with boys (and girls) might have to do with her age – she was born in the 1960s, decade of the Civil Rights Movement and free love, when sexuality ceased to be a taboo. Faith Ringgold herself

admitted those were times when women could enjoy sex freely without the constraints of shame. Walker's upbringing differs from Nina Simone's and Faith Ringgold's in regard to the morality surrounding sexuality, body, and respectability. Therefore, when Rebecca Walker, a representative of a new generation of Black women addresses intimate issues, she shows less linguistic restraint than all three autobiographers examined so far. She is also overly concerned about her own beauty and displays a profound need to feel affirmed in the eyes of others. Mrs Cornelius, a lady who hosted Walker at her house, is a brown-skinned woman immortalised in Walker's autobiography as someone who boosted her self-esteem. Mrs Cornelius tells young Walker she is pretty, therefore, enhancing her self-appreciation, customarily undermined, if not directly denied to her by white racist society:

> She is like Grandma, only warmer, softer, and brown. She always pays special attention to me. On picture day she combs my hair, smoothing it away from my face. She says I am pretty, and that even though I am the youngest at her school, I am the smartest. In the class picture, mine is the lightest face. (*ibid.*, p. 19)

Such a confirmation, coming from a woman who has brown skin just like she does, is a life-sustaining and life-saving affirmation to a little Black girl who sees herself through the eyes of others and understands from their look if she is pretty and worthy of love or not. Young Walker's body seeks such an affirmation to confirm her body is adequate and loved.

As has been previously noted, Rebecca Walker's narrative is profusely sprinkled with references to people's skin colour. Any person she meets is described in terms of racial identity and skin hue. It seems to be such an important aspect in her life and, consequently, her narrative that no person's skin colour goes unnoticed. Among the authors under examination in this Thesis, Walker's text is the one most concerned with descriptions of skin colours and tonalities. Brown and Black bodies symbolise everything she craves – only those bodies can safeguard her feeling of security and desirability. Skin colour is the first aspect of people she remarks throughout her autobiography. And so she refers to her own body as "a little copper form" against her mother's "cherry brown body" (*cf.* p. 16). She also notes later in the text that her "copper body" broke many social rules and cultural expectations, it caused so much outrage only because it was considered illicit, fruit of the forbidden love between a white Jewish man and a Black woman. She sees herself constantly as a source of scandal and discomfort in both white and Black worlds. This body suspended between two cultures, a human bridge between two opposing worlds, this hybrid body

containing her parents' hopes and dreams is a source of doubt that undermines her very right to exist. She wonders: if she is not a Movement Child, fruit of a social experiment, consequence of the courage two people had to denounce and subvert racist rules, what is she? What is the purpose of her existence? At the same time, she desperately tries to understand who she is: "I am not a bastard, a product of rape, the child of some white evil. (…) I am not tragic" (*ibid.*, p. 24).

This is an appealing approach towards her body, a vessel for all her doubts, fears, anxieties, and demons. It is never a source of pride or comfort to her, as in the case of Audre Lorde who found in her own sexual body a home nobody could take away. How can Rebecca Walker, in fact, construct a positive body image if the people she cares about reject her because of her skin colour? Bryan, the boy she likes, tells her he does not like Black girls and shatters in this way all the remnants of her self-esteem. She sees her own body through Bryan's eyes and learns she is something she ought not to be: Black, which makes her unwanted. Her skin colour impacts her relationships with many men throughout the narrative. César, another boy of whom she is fond, prefers, however her blond-haired and blue-eyed friend Theresa: "I flirt with César, but he wants my best friend Theresa, who is blond and blue-eyed and thick. I am young, copper-colored, and look like his sister" (*ibid.*, p. 195). Her body is questioned again when she tries her luck in ballet classes. She is there reminded by a white teacher that Black bodies were never meant to practise classical ballet. She is told that Black bodies are inadequate, not built for it and imperfect:

> I take ballet classes from a woman who tells me I will never be a great ballerina because black women's bodies aren't suited for ballet. (…) When the teacher comes to me she pushes on my belly and tilts my pelvic bone up, so that my tush is pulled towards the floor. You will never get this one hundred percent right, she says out loud. Too much rear end, legs are not straight. There have never been any famous black ballerinas. (*ibid.*, p. 93).

Such racist attitudes crush all self-assurance young Black girls could have and would desperately need. They make her compare herself to other girls, particularly white ones, and find herself lacking. Whenever she sees a Black peer or a photo of a Black model with ebony skin, she always feels inadequate, less beautiful, fatter, shorter or with a bigger bottom. Her physicality will never become a source of pride and her femininity will always be deficient due to her biracialism. Until nearly the end of her narrative, Rebecca Walker is not at peace

with her hybrid body, regardless of the situation or environment she is in. She feels more at home in the company of other Black people, but to prove that she belongs is a very challenging task. To do that she needs to learn the code of cultural Blackness: how to walk, speak, act, and behave. Her community accepts her only after its members decide she is authentically Black, Black enough to belong.

Walker's first meaningful erotic experiences which make her feel comfortable in her body happened with Malaika, her female friend. Unlike Nina Simone, Rebecca Walker did not decide to hide her bisexuality from her narrative. It is also thanks to Malaika that Walker takes a keen interest in her own body and sensuality. The author reports having felt comforted by her friend's Black body. The brownness of Malaika's skin fills Rebecca with warmth because it is a reminder of her mother's body and skin colour. So, the experience is erotic and lesbian, but at the same time deeply emotional as it fills a void she carried within herself. Similarly to Audre Lorde's portrayal of the erotic body, Rebecca Walker's narrative signals that it is in the erotic where lies a strong power capable of shattering the loneliness and bodily isolation imposed on Black people by white racist society. The erotic game between both girls is a way of protecting themselves from the outside world and the prevailing racial hostility surrounding Black women. The body can become, in certain contexts, a source of love and security. This brings to mind the narrative of Audre Lorde when she expresses a similar philosophy. The following excerpt illustrates well the affection and poetry of the language Walker uses when she refers to same-sex love:

> We are like sisters but I want to sleep naked next to Malaika, I like the warmth of our bodies flush against each other under the cool cotton of the blue sheets my stepmother puts on the bed for us in the guest room. In the dark we twist this way and that, sometimes sweating from all of our rubbing. I like the color of Malaika's body. I like how brown she is, like Mama. When I look at her, I feel the deep brown of her skin pour into me through my eyes and fill me up in a place that feels cold and empty, a place that I forget I have until I look at her naked body. (*ibid.*, p. 96).

The description is full of tenderness, but also addresses the acute loneliness Walker experiences during her adolescence. The eroticism implied in the excerpt is affectionate and serves to forget all about the cold, dry world where Black girls feel rejected and inadequate. The body is warm and comfortable, at the same time it is innocent and in desperate need of affection. Walker's body so often rendered as lonely, unfitting, and shameful is placed here

at the centre of positive emotions. The desired brown body is like her mother's, soft and warm. Thus, it offers security and a sense of home and of belonging. Under the blue sheets provided by Walker's white, emotionally cold stepmother, she discovers her own sexual brown body and that comforts her.

Interestingly, when Walker gives an account of her quasi-sexual experiences with boys, her narrative bears some similarity to Audre Lorde's. The language becomes matter-of-fact, dry and arid. No magic takes place when she encounters the male body. Describing games between boys and girls she notes:

> I bring my mother's boyfriend's Panasonic cassette player to school every day and at lunch we build this thing called the clubhouse out of big blocks on the roof and only we four are allowed inside. We kiss there, our backs and legs pressed against the cool, slick concrete, Dakeba and Jomo all heavy on top of me and Bethany, pushing their tongues into our mouths. (*ibid.*, p. 107).

There are no fireworks, the scenery is off-putting (cool, slick concrete which is an uninviting surface for erotic games), Walker makes no effort to adorn the scene with more imaginative language. This is quite telling and might mean that it is only the female body that arouses Walker and stirs in her more emotional reactions. Another sexual scene she includes to render the sexual body is also written in a trivial, unpoetic way. Again, there is no passion, although she is fond of the boy, Michael. The description of the sexual experience resembles the scene Audre Lorde included in her autobiography when she referred to her sexual initiation with a school mate on the roof (when he put his "thing" between her legs). The whole description is lifeless and dull leaving her readers with the impression that boys were not Walker's preference:

> We lay down on the mattress on the floor and then he climbed on top of me and pushed his penis inside of me. Afterward, after it hurt and after I didn't know whether I had felt what I was supposed to feel, he got up, told me he had a curfew and headed for the door. (*ibid.*, p. 132).

Although the language Walker uses is not yet crude[19], it is plain and direct, unlike the one employed in the scene with Malaika. The female Black body seems invisible here, uncared for and silenced. Assuredly, the sexual encounter with Michael does not seem, at least at the textual level, to compare to what her body felt in the encounter with her female Black friend. Possibly, her bisexual body feels more at ease with female friends, as with Lena, a white friend in whom Walker develops a keen interest and affection. It is with Lena that Walker talks unhesitatingly about her sexual experience with Michael and discusses male/female relationships, including boys' anatomy. There is a striking difference, though, between how Audre Lorde, Nina Simone or Faith Ringgold refer to men and how Rebecca Walker describes her conversations with Lena about them:

> It also has to do with sex. I tell Lena about Michael and she tells me about her boyfriend. We talk about how they kiss and whether or not they have big dicks and how much we like them or how much we like someone else and want to go out with him instead. (*ibid*., p. 140)

While experimenting with drugs and alcohol and throwing wild parties with her friends, Walker seems to be a body floating on the surface of reality. She is uprooted, unhappy and deprived of any direction in her teenage life. Left to her own devices by her parents, she becomes immersed in a world that will oust her body worn down, exhausted and emotionally empty. She is aware that what her parents understood as a permissive and modern upbringing, is, in fact, a lack of necessary discipline and routine to direct her onto the right path and offer her adolescent body a sense of security. Her nomadic body, obliged to shift between cities after her parents get divorced is compared to a leaf tossed by the wind – there is nothing to keep her anchored and embedded in reality and regular daily routine.

Apart from rendering her restless body sexual, trying to find its way through a maze of different and conflicting emotions, Rebecca Walker dedicates some space in her narrative to portray her anxious menstruating female body (when she gets her first menses, she is away from her mother and shares it with her stepmother who seems to react in a proper, comforting way) and a body that deals with abortion. Like in Audre Lorde's narrative, it is possible to find an excerpt in Walker's autobiography where she needs to decide about an

[19] Further in the autobiography Rebecca Walker starts to employ a more vulgar language, especially when referring to male body and male intimate parts.

abortion and hers is a much different description than Lorde's. First of all, there is a social class difference between both girls at the moment they undergo the termination of their pregnancy. Audre Lorde is nearly 18, completely alone and without the financial means to secure decent conditions for the procedure. She, therefore, pays 40 dollars to a Spanish-speaking woman who carries out the intervention causing her immense pain and bleeding. Audre Lorde does not gloss over the abortion and provides disturbing details about her body in pain. Moreover, Audre Lorde decided to withhold the information about her pregnancy and its termination from her family and thus confronted the situation on her own. Rebecca Walker, in turn, the daughter of middle-class, famous parents, had the necessary means to have a safe, clean abortion. She tells of how she informed her mother about the unwanted pregnancy – Alice Walker received the news with calmness. As Walker notes, there was no bitter argument about what happened, her mother was not resentful, nor did she blame her daughter for becoming pregnant. She just arranged a safe solution to the problem. Two Black female bodies are confronted with a serious situation which needs to be addressed in a safe, responsible way. However, because one of them is poor, she deals with additional problems related to lack of resources which translates into lack of proper medical care. It is clear under such circumstances that being female or Black is not the only explanation for their predicament. Economic exclusion is as equally harmful to one's well-being as racism or gender discrimination. Perhaps it is for this reason that Walker's account of her abortion and recovery is relatively detached and deprived of the dramatic undertones that emerge in Audre Lorde's account. Because Rebecca Walker undergoes abortion in a safe environment, she also feels she did not risk her life and thus feels unpreoccupied to the point of going to the movies soon after the medical intervention. As she recounts, from time to time she thinks about the baby she could have had but, on the whole, the abortion had a less shocking impact on her body and mind than on Audre Lorde's:

> It seems eerie to me only later on, the way the whole thing goes by me without having any strong feelings about it, no ritual of mourning, not one serious thought about ending something that could have been, I'm twenty-eight and co-parenting my partner's biological child. He's eight years old and looking up at me and I swear I see his mother's face and that's when I wonder what my baby would look like. Does she remember in her cellular memory being ripped from my womb? (*ibid.*, p. 251)

Both women, thus, reveal in their narratives the more challenging aspects of being and having female bodies. To some extent, it can be claimed that all four of the examined authors display bodies capable of giving life but, at the same time, all of them have the freedom to choose whether they wish to become mothers or not. For two of them the timing is not adequate so they exercise their decision to become mothers in more fitting conditions.

Rebecca Walker's body is, perhaps the most troubled and haunted by racism and the fluidity of racial constructs. Her autobiography is the most concerned with her skin colour and all it entails to her sense of who she is and how she is regarded by others. It is only at the end of her narrative that she gains relative peace regarding the mixed origins impressed on her skin. She feels more at home in her light-brown body and embraces her bisexuality, even though she does not turn it into a politically conscious choice as is the case of Audre Lorde, for whom a homosexual orientation is about much more than physical pleasure: it is a political statement and a way of living without giving in to patriarchal dictates.

Because, as has been asserted, autobiographies are, necessarily, embodied since their authors are and have bodies, the chapter proposed to examine the textual bodies of the Black women. All four autobiographers analysed in this chapter focus their narratives on their corporeality and weave their textual bodies in interesting ways. It is possible to draw parallels between the narratives as well as differences in the way the authors refer to their bodies. Audre Lorde and Rebecca Walker place most emphasis on their material bodies, however the body is not silenced in Faith Ringgold's and Nina Simone's narratives. Audre Lorde weaves her bodily self around the topic of lesbian love but she also constructs a solid sense of self in relation to her mother's body. Its fragrance, warmth and dark colour assure Audre Lorde of her own value as a Black woman. Through the body of her mother and other women's, Lorde places her own at the altar of Eros. Sexuality and sensuality safeguard Lorde's sense of self-worth within the society which devalues her as a Black girl and as a woman. Lorde pays particular attention to sensuous aspects of her body, its feminine dimension such as menstruation which she links to her mother's West Indies roots, the ritual of grinding spices, smells, and tastes. To her being a woman means, first and foremost, to have the body. And her body is later understood as a bridge between women of two races. It could be assumed that Audre Lorde displays an essentialist attitude towards her and other women's bodies by focussing so much on biological aspects of feminine bodies. However, it is one of the conclusions of this chapter and also a proposed interpretation of the biomythography that when Audre Lorde emphasises the biological dimension of women's

bodies, she, in fact, renders them visible and reclaims their beauty and dignity, especially in the context of the American imaginary which defined Black bodies as pathological, abnormal and excessively sexual. Audre Lorde places the feminine body at the centre of attention, links it to aestheticism and reminds all women that such bodily functions as menstruation do not deprive them of their dignity and value.

Rebecca Walker's rendering of her body is more dramatic than Audre Lorde's. In fact, the main difference between the authors is that while Audre Lorde finds solace, protection and home from racism and discrimination in her own body and in those of her female lovers, Rebecca Walker expresses constant tension and a sense of exile in her own body. To her it is a source of anxiety, incomprehension of who she really is in racial terms. Her body is a prison-house where she feels trapped. It seems to carry a void in it, a hole she is unable to fill in and to cope with. It is like a burden she must always carry with her, a badge of shame. Because she is Black, she feels inadequate and incomplete. Wherever she is, with whomever she establishes links, she contorts in her body, unsure of herself and always self-conscious of her Blackness or of her Jewishness. When she becomes sexually involved with boys, her language is never as opulent and emotionally charged as when she is involved with girls. It becomes dry, arid and matter-of-fact. In this aspect, her narrative bears similarities to Audre Lorde's where she also turns a poet when she describes her romantic and sexual involvement with girls and women.

As has been mentioned, it is possible to conclude at the end of this chapter that both Nina Simone and Faith Ringgold do not shun the topic of their bodies in their narratives but also have a quiet, self-assured attitude towards them. None of these authors express particular tension or conflicting emotions in their autobiographies when they describe their bodies. Nina Simone does not offer her readers any feminist or philosophical explanations or theories related to her Black coming-of-age body. She does not reminisce about her first menstruation or anxieties she might have felt when she was turning into a teenager and a young woman. These aspects are silenced in her autobiography. In the same vein, she does not focus her textual attention on gender-related activities such as make-up or adorning her body as a young girl but these aspects gain certain visibility as her narrative progresses and she becomes a well-established composer and places her body on stage. In fact, her body exposed to the gaze of Others (both Black and white) becomes a docile body, forced into disciplined postures required by the standards imposed by the white musical world and audiences attending her concerts. It is also relevant to remind that while at the beginning of

her autobiography Nina Simone constructs her body as that of a respectable girl, sexually innocent, confronted with but unimpacted by the worldly matters in the cities she traverses, closer to the end of her narrative she changes her strategy and portrays her body as that of a heterosexually active woman, hunting for a prospective partner in Africa. Her body becomes sensuous, openly displaying its sexual needs and Simone takes an effort to render herself as a woman on fire. She seems to leave behind any concerns related to respectability and describes her body with more openness situating herself as a *femme fatale*. Also, Nina Simone describes her body in pain when she gives birth to her daughter but she does not dwell too much on this aspect of her life. Motherhood, although important to her, does not occupy a central place in her narrative.

Among the four autobiographers, Faith Ringgold describes her body in a most natural and balanced way. Hers is a body of a woman who will not give in to societal norms and expectations. She longs for satisfactory sexual life with her partners and when she fails to obtain that, she is frank and honest about it in her narrative. In this way she also suggests that women cannot be limited by moral and cultural proscriptions which force them to act in a hypocritical way pretending they are not interested in sexual matters. In a truly feminist manner, she renders her body as sexual and sensual, with natural sexual needs, without tensions. Her narrative regarding her body is natural, written in a humorous and balanced way and reveals a woman well aware of her worth as a Black woman. On many occasions she portrays her body as adorned, taken care of and sexy. Clothes, make-up, and haircut are all gender-related activities that raise her interest and find their expression in the autobiography. She does focus on her image as a sexy woman with a good body and takes pleasure in rendering herself as an elegant woman with a sense of class. Although she does not dramatize her female coming-of-age, she pays attention to several aspects of her life such as pregnancy and motherhood. These two dimensions of her life receive attention in her autobiography as she dedicates a considerable number of pages to her pregnancy, labour pains, giving birth and the whole experience of becoming a mother. In this way her narrative written from the positionality of a woman-mother gives visibility to motherhood and testifies to the importance of this aspect of women's experience.

Chapter V

Relational aspects of the Black female autobiography: between reverence and cry for acceptance

Introduction: the autobiographer as a lonely island?

The third chapter of this study sought to demonstrate that a Black person can feel affinity with her community and still retain a great degree of autonomy as an individual person trying to fulfil her professional objectives (this observation is particularly accurate in the case of Nina Simone and Faith Ringgold). Moreover, racial belonging and identification with the in-group do not preclude a critical stance to one's own racial group. Racial identity and "authenticity", so fervently advocated by some more radical Black groups such as the Black Panthers, does not mean that weaknesses or even abuses perpetuated by the community go unnoticed or are carefully silenced in autobiographies. Quite to the contrary, several female autobiographers linked to radical Black organisations criticised their communities for a number of serious issues such as sexism or colourism.[1] Also the question of Black female body exposed to Other's gaze is the pillar upon which the chapter IV is constructed. In it the study sought to analyse the way in which four autobiographers wove their textual bodies, rejecting the denigrating ideas upheld by the mainstream culture and creating their individual selves where the body has either been placed at the central stage or has been mentioned in passing as is the case of Nina Simone's autobiography. Some authors, as has been examined, dramatized their racialised bodies emphasising the colour of their skin, their sexuality and womanly experiences of menstruation, motherhood, sexual abuse, and gender violence while others kept certain topics related to their bodies in silence, trying not to give it excessive visibility. There are significant differences but also parallels between the way all autobiographers treated their bodies textually. It must be noted now that the two previous chapters did not focus on relational dimension of each autobiography as this is the purpose of the chapter V, but when the authors wove their textual selves in

[1] Elaine Brown's *A Taste for Power* (1992) or Angela Davis's *An Autobiography* (1974) are the two most prominent examples of personal narratives written by women who were members of radical Black organisations. Both authors speak to situations in which Black leaders displayed sexist attitudes towards Black women in the movement. Although Brown and Davis aimed to address racism, discrimination, and the oppressive nature of the American white state, they did not hesitate to enumerate weaknesses and mistakes within their organisations and communities.

relation to their community and their body, the significant Others were always present and of great relevance. In some instances, like that of Audre Lorde or Rebecca Walker, their construction of the self is strictly linked to their bodies and communities which are obligatorily composed of Others, women, and men.

The purpose of chapter V then is to examine the four narratives from the angle of affective dimension of the authors' lives. This dimension intersects to some extent two previous axes of analysis but requires further and more detailed examination. The aim of this chapter is also to demonstrate that, no matter what early critique of autobiography practised by that time mainly by male scholars has claimed[2], autobiography is never written in an affective (and social) vacuum and the relationships with one's closest people, such as the family members, lovers or friends impacted deeply each of the autobiographers and constituted a source of strong identification, in regard to the racial and female self as well. An autobiography can also become a biography in the sense that it never concentrates only on the autobiographer but tells the story of the Other too[3]. Any autobiography becomes, thus, polyvocal. Even the most traditional autobiographies written by men, accused by some feminist critics, such as Estelle Jelinek or Elaine Showalter, of focusing excessively on their autonomous masculine self to the detriment of the Other, do not deviate from affective relations. Because people are not lonely planets, autobiographies mirror the fact that their authors become who they are also, or mainly, through interaction with others. It is important at this stage as well to refer to academic work developed by social scientists discussed in the chapter I of the Thesis, with its examination of the concept of the self developed through social relations and how the gaze of the Other impacts an individual's

[2] The first two chapters of this Thesis analysed in details various tendencies and schools of thought regarding autobiography and the conclusion was reached that the first generation of autobiography critics (Weintraub, Misch, among others) tended to analyse so-called exemplary lives as lives detached from others, especially in case of autobiographies written by men. Not only were the autobiographies "disembodied", as has been examined, but also the authors supposedly avoided speaking about emotive aspects of their lives, shunning also excessive focus on affective relations. Feminist critique of literature in general and of autobiography in particular paid attention to the fact that male autobiographies, contrary to females', were deprived of that emotional links. It seems useful, hence, to dedicate more academic studies to the analysis of autobiographies written by men with an aim to analyse them from a relational point of view and also to examine how they reject the traditional norms of masculinity. As has been noted in previous parts of this Thesis, there are autobiographies and memoirs penned by men who treat Other(s) as central figures of their self-narratives.

[3] Autobiography obligatorily blends into the text the story and figures of significant (or not) Others. Whether an author focuses mainly on his/her life and memories, these are never void of other people inhabiting the pages of autobiography. The previously mentioned in this Thesis *The Color of Water* by James McBride is in significant part a biography of his rebellious and strong mother. As has been mentioned, she is not less present in the story as is McBride himself.

self. Margaret Mead (1928), Jean Piaget (1932) or Erick Erikson (1959, 1963, 1968), to name just a few, contributed to the current understanding of the self entangled with Other(s), significant or not. It is through the interaction with society at large and family members and the closest circles that people come to understand who they are and such understanding and complex links with others do appear in autobiographies.

Relationality has become a key term while thinking about the genre of autobiography at least since 1980s[4] as it focuses precisely on autobiography as a text which engages Others in the narrative. According to Kim Schoof (2023), at the end of the millennium it is difficult, if not impossible, to see and understand autobiography as a non-relational genre. The author also claims that new autobiographies, particularly those written by men (and women or persons self-identifying as non-binary) who reject societal norms of traditional masculinity and femininity deeming them too narrow, exclusionary, and unsuitable any more to express their subjectivities, e.g., LGBTIQA+[5] do display new patterns in autobiography, paying particular attention to relationality, complex relationship with Others and society. It does not mean, as has been mentioned before, that earlier autobiographies written by men did not reveal these specific aspects, or that all autobiographies written by women do focus on relationality. This only means that changing cultural norms and perhaps more freedom in the way people can construct and display their selves, open new spaces to display new ways of self-writing, also in relation to others.

When it comes to the link between narrative and relationality, Adriana Cavarero argues the following:

> We could define it as the confrontation between two discursive registers, which manifest opposite characteristics. One, that of philosophy, has the form of a definite knowledge which regards the universality of Man. The other, that of narration, has the form of a biographical knowledge which regards the unrepeatable identity of someone. The questions which sustain the two discursive styles are equally diverse.

[4] The term "relationality" has been appropriated, so to say, and used by feminist and post-colonial scholars with an aim to implode the already mentioned traditional approach towards autobiography as a genre written in emotional and social vacuum (Schoof, 2023, *ibid.*). As has been referred to, feminist analysis of autobiography pointed to its relational dimension and understanding of the self.

[5] LGBTQIA+ is an acronym used to denote Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex and Asexual people.

> The first asks 'what is Man?' The second asks instead of someone 'who he or she is.' (Cavarero, 2005:13)

What should be reflected on in the quotation above are the key expressions "biographical knowledge" and "unrepeatable identity of someone". Narrative, thus, even about oneself is always embedded in the knowledge of the Other and requires some degree of intimacy and kinship. In the end it seems that non-relational autobiography is nearly impossible or it will be deemed incomplete, superficial, or dishonest.

Drawing on the studies conducted in the area of social sciences, Paul John Eakin argues in his work that the self and each individual are constructed through and act in relation to others (Eakin, 1999, *op. cit.*)[6]. Curiously, he strongly objects to feminist theories which posit that only the female autobiography is strictly relational. He does admit that the feminist critique of the genre has been one of the most fertile areas in literary studies in the last decades of the 20th Century, however he also argues, not without reason, that the binary between the male and female autobiography was created by the feminist obsession with the feminine way of writing as exclusively relational:

> One of the consequences [of this approach], however, and perhaps an inevitable one given the project to distinguish female from male autobiography, has been an unfortunate polarization by gender of the categories we use to define self and self-experience. The three most prominent of these male-female binaries are the individual as opposed to the collective, the autonomous as opposed to the relational, and, in a different register, narrative as opposed to non-linear, discontinuous, nonteleological forms. (Eakin, *ibid*, p. 48)

The relational aspect of autobiography has been, thus, traditionally seen as a typically female characteristic, although more research indicates that there are male autobiographies that focus heavily on relations with Other(s) and female ones that avoid delving into the topic of affective relations and display traits which would earlier be considered typically

[6] Paul John Eakin wrote in 1992 another book on autobiography: *Touching the World: Reference in Autobiography* where he analyses various autobiographical works by Henry James, Nathalie Sarraute, Roland Barthes, or Lillian Hellmann and concludes that the genre has a strong referential dimension. Authors do not pen autobiographies as autonomous selves hidden in their private realms but establish strong lings with the world outside and engage in emotional interaction with Others.

masculine (individuality, focus on professional life and avoidance of the topic of domesticity).

Eakin also claims that if autobiography is the story of the self, one must remember that any self is constructed in relation to the Other. It grows in a dialogue with other human beings and so it can be confirmed that identity formation is a social process (*ibid.*, p. 63). The author, to illustrate his understanding of the relational nature of autobiography as a genre quotes from Rom Harré[7]: "The fundamental human reality is a conversation, effectively without beginning or end, to which, from time to time individuals make contributions" (Harré *in* Eakin, *ibid.*, p. 64). Hence, autobiography is often a dialogue where other voices enter: voices of mothers, fathers, siblings, friends, lovers, husbands and wives. An autobiography becomes a story not only of the self but also of the Other. The Other is afforded some degree of visibility but it should be highlighted that their voice can be muffled by the autobiographer, consciously or not.

Although each of the four autobiographies analysed in the corpus of the Thesis are peopled by many different Others, it has been determined that to demonstrate the influence of affective relations on the self and identity of the authors it is best to examine those relations that seem to be the most emotionally intense and the most complex: the autobiographers' relations to their parents. It shall be examined how much space is attributed in each autobiography to the maternal and paternal figures, what the narrative reveals about them and how the autobiographers approach their expectations, needs, and emotions through writing. It will be important to look at how each of the autobiographer's subjecthood is constructed in relation to the maternal and/or paternal figure and how their racial identity depends, or not, on those relations. Logically, other relationships will be examined as well, such as with male and female lovers, friends, or members of the white society.

In all four autobiographies, the voices belong to daughters. Audre Lorde, Nina Simone, Faith Ringgold, and Rebecca Walker weave daughterly stories and render their mothers and fathers visible throughout the narrative. However, although the figures of fathers are visible, to a certain extent, in all texts under analysis, motherly figures dominate

[7] Rom Harré (1927-2019) was a philosopher working in the field of social sciences, interested broadly in the philosophy of science as well as social psychology. https://www.socialsciencespace.com/2019/10/philosopher-of-psychology-rom-harre-1927-2019/

the stories. Kristi Siegel (2001) advances the theory, developed by the study of texts written by (feminist) daughters that the maternal figure is often addressed in a complex and uneasy way. Taking into account the American stay-at-home mum, as an ideal proposed by traditional American values, she writes:

> Despite the relative brevity of the "at-home mom" in American society, that image remains our enduring model of motherhood. While viewing at-home mother as the "ideal," the mother's dominance on the homefront was simultaneously the focus of criticism. (…) Oddly, even many feminists participated in the collective mother-bashing and provided accounts of how they were "victimized" by their mothers. (Siegel, *ibid.*, p. 5)

The mother becomes the figure responsible for nearly everything in a daughter's life, all her successes and failures, who she becomes and who she could have become. According to Siegel, even today the site of motherhood remains a contested terrain, filled with incoherence, ambivalence, and emotional turmoil. Because the mother has been traditionally perceived as solely Nature and Body, those daughters-autobiographers who aspire to a more intellectual status need to take extra care when referring to their mothers in their autobiographies. The following quotation from Siegel serves to illustrate an important point but which might not necessarily be reflected in all of the autobiographies constituting the corpus of this Thesis:

> Not surprisingly daughters as autobiographers quickly realize they need to represent their mothers and their relationship to their mothers very carefully. A savvy daughter intuits that too close an identification with her mother puts her own cultural mother at risk. (…) To be recognized as worthy autobiographical subjects, then, daughters must adopt many of the conventions inherent in classical autobiography. The assumptions of traditional autobiography mime many of the beliefs embedded in Western culture: e.g., the centrality of white males, the privileging of mind over body, the importance of the public versus private sphere, and so forth. (Siegel, *ibid.*, p. 6)

This quotation, however, should be approached with caution because all of the autobiographers examined in the Thesis are Black and as such have also been confronted with a problem white daughter-autobiographers have been spared: racism. In many cases racism from the white hegemonic society somehow brings Black mothers and daughters

closer, in spite of generational and/or ideological differences. As will be discussed, daughters seek confirmation of their value as Black girls/women in their mothers' eyes and acts. Mothers, in turn, devise strategies of resistance to protect their daughters from external (white) harm. It is in their mothers and/or fathers that the young autobiographers seek a model of racial identification and self-worth. And so even if conflicts are unavoidable, it will be demonstrated that mother-daughter and father-daughter relations narrated in the autobiographies do become sources of self-affirmation, sometimes through pain and tears. Sometimes the reconciliation is a long, difficult process which ends in success and peace. In two autobiographies, however, the narrative is also maternal – both Faith Ringgold and Nina Simone write some parts of their autobiographies as mothers and give voice to their offspring rendering them visible while occupying this contested terrain of motherhood, gaining voice, and becoming double subjects in a way, as both daughters and mothers. Nevertheless, it must be already observed that the space devoted to their maternal location is much more restricted than the one devoted to their daughterly location, and this is true particularly in the case of Nina Simone who, being a mother, created mainly a daughterly narrative.

5.1. "I am a reflection of my mother's secret poetry": Audre Lorde's mythical portrait of the Mother.

Undoubtedly, all autobiographies included in this Thesis are deeply relational and their authors rely on the bonds with their closest ones to construct their narrative selves. Audre Lorde's *Zami. A New Spelling of My Name* is perhaps the most poetic about and focused on relations with significant others. From the *Acknowledgement* to the last page of her autobiography, she highlights numerous times that she is the woman she is thanks to the women she met and interacted with throughout her life. *Zami* is definitely a tribute to the many women whom Audre Lorde loved and appreciated, and who inspired as well as fascinated her. It is impossible to think about Audre Lorde's autobiography without visualising all the women, Black and white that entered her life and stayed in her memory forever. Even though she portrays herself as an independent and autonomous poet, writer, warrior, cancer survivor, woman, and lesbian, all of the identities she enumerates throughout her autobiography and in other sources such as essays, poems and the memoir, *The Cancer Journals* (1980), have been constructed through dialogue and emotional

constellations with women (men occupy very little space in her texts, including her autobiography. Sometimes they are only mentioned perfunctorily). As has been addressed in chapters III and IV, her love of women, the woman-oriented philosophy, openness to difference and tolerance of other races made her an outstanding intellectual and activist quite ahead of her time, especially when she called for the rejection of racism, intolerance, and the fear of difference she observed among many of her peers, including Black and white lesbians she met during her lifetime. She called for building bridges at a time when people sought to interact only with those who shared with them common points, values, or physical looks.

Audre Lorde acknowledges the relational aspect of her existence and art right in the first paragraph of the autobiography: she owes who she is to numerous women, to them she owes her voice and strength. This sentence sets the tone for the whole autobiography which concentrates on Lorde's interactions with others and, foremost, on her emotional links to women:

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

Many different women inhabit the pages of her autobiography: DeLois who lived on 142nd Street, Louise Briscone who was her mother's tenant, a white woman she meets at the airport and recognises she is a victim of male violence, Genevieve, her friend and first true love, Ginger, a girl she met at the factory, finally Eudora, her lover in Mexico, and at the end, Afrekete, the mythical figure she makes love to and with whom she symbolically shares her food and tastes. All of these women leave an imprint on Lorde's mind, body, memory, and narrative. They all contribute to how she sees herself (as a Black-woman-lesbian-poet-myth-maker) and how she creates her poetic self. Different people come and go throughout the autobiography, all significant to her at different stages of her life but there is one person whose presence is constant throughout the narrative, although closer to the end of the book it becomes less conspicuous. Audre Lorde's mother is the one who almost never leaves the narrative and if she does, it is to offer more space to other female relations that gain significance in her text. Her father is a presence in her narrative that is barely noticed, although she does mention him on a couple of occasions. An excerpt which addresses Audre

Lorde's attitude towards the paternal figure is quite telling; it is placed right in the beginning of the book and sets the tone for the rest of the autobiography in what concerns her approach towards her father and her choice of his portrayal throughout the text. Whenever she refers to him, it is in a dry, matter-of-fact way showing her emotional aloofness:

> My father leaves his psychic print upon me, silent, intense and unforgiving. But his is a distant lighting. (Lorde, *ibid.*, p. 3)

He is a distant figure, not always present at home. "Silent, intense and unforgiving" are three words that illustrate well the way Audre Lorde feels about her father. In noting them the reader might get the impression that Audre Lorde feels her father is a nearly menacing figure at home, a figure unassociated with love, care, and affection. Later in her autobiography whenever she describes her father, the choice of words and the atmosphere she evokes strikingly differ from the linguistic strategies she employs when discussing her mother. The language used to render her father (in)visible is more succinct and rather concrete. She does include memories of him, particularly from her childhood and admits to some moments of affection, however they were rare and failed to impact Audre Lorde's self in any particular way. For example, she mentions the time before World War II when her father played with the children:

> I remember one light-hearted evening before the war when my father returned home from the office. I was sitting on my mother's lap while she brushed my hair. My father picked us up together and swung us over his head, laughing and calling us his "excess baggage." I remember being delighted and thrilled at his attention, as well as terrified by the familiar surroundings suddenly turning *cro-bo-so*. (Lorde, *ibid.*, p. 57)

The memories of her father also include the fact he never hit her, but his reputation for being so strong that "if he ever laid a hand upon you he might kill you" (*ibid.*, p. 57) left an uncomfortable sensation of fear and insecurity in relation to him. His strong body does not emanate safety and love but rather threat and discomfort:

> He was a very large, strong man, and his six-foot-four-inch frame in the beach pictures of that period do not show much fat. His eyes were small but piercing, and when he set his mammoth jaw and dropped his voice to the hoarse, intense low that signified he meant business, he was very scary. (*ibid.*, p. 57)

As the father works outside the home, he spends little time with the family and so his presence is inconsequential to Audre Lorde and her budding sense of self. It is quite interesting to establish a comparison between how Lorde describes her father's body versus her mother's. In her narrative she revisits the memory of once seeing her father's intimate parts while he was asleep. This made her feel both embarrassed and curious to discover and understand what the secret was of what men carried between their legs and what the excitement was all about. Curiously, her description of her father's private parts does not betray any sign of affection and sensuality so present in the language she uses to describe her mother's body. The following excerpt illustrates well the point:

> (…) I watched his mouth open and close a little with each snore, stentorian rattles erupting below his nuzzled moustache. The covers thrown partially back to reveal his hands in sleep tucked onto the top of his drawstring pajamas. He was lying on his side toward me and the front of his pajama pants had fallen open. I could see only shadows of the vulnerable secrets shading the gap in his clothing, but I was suddenly shaken by this so-human image of him, and the idea that I could spy upon him and he not aware of it, even in his sleep. I stepped back and closed the door quickly embarrassed and ashamed by my own curiosity, but wishing his pajamas had gaped more so that I could finally know what exactly was the mysterious secret men carried between their legs. (Lorde, *ibid.*, 62)

There is a child's curiosity in this fragment but there is also some emotional distance expressed through words. The secret of the male body is there, the little girl is confronted with an adult man's body but it does not evoke any excitement or the sense of sensuality her mother's body usually stirs in her. It must be remembered, however, that Audre recounts that she saw her father's body when she was a little girl and so she was too young to associate his body to sensuality. Nevertheless, it should be emphasised that there is always this linguistic and emotional distance present when Lorde addresses the paternal figure throughout the text. Because her father does not impact her life in any special way and because he has no influence on the way she sees herself as a Black girl, the autobiography is predominantly silent on the paternal figure. This can be also linked to the fact that Audre Lorde creates a narrative where she portrays herself as a woman interested in other women, in their bodies, lives and emotions. Hers is a political objective to create an autobiography that would fulfil certain aims: to render Black lesbians visible and create her image as a

woman focused exclusively on women. Lorde's autobiography constantly demands that women remain at the centre of attention and gain a voice.

The relatively dry language she uses to speak of her father contrasts strongly with the language and atmosphere she creates when she speaks of her mother. In fact, as has been mentioned, her mother fills nearly the entire autobiography. Her figure is present throughout the narrative and becomes a pillar upon which Audre Lorde constructs her womanhood and Black self. According to Bethany Jacobs, in her 2015 article "Mothering Herself: Manifesto of the Erotic Mother in Audre Lorde's 'Zami: A New Spelling of My Name', in the times when the figure of mother was rendered as passive and unhappy in the American culture, a figure marginalised by patriarchal order, Audre Lorde renders an image of her mother as a powerful figure whose strength comes from the eroticism:

> Audre Lorde's 1982 biomythography Zami: A New Spelling of My Name resists this figure by positing motherhood as an erotically powerful subject position rather than a position of servility. Eschewing simplistic binaries of good or bad mothering, Lorde refuses to treat mothers primarily as resources for others, as women who constantly give of themselves. Rather, Lorde's Erotic Mother (a figure or essence rather than a strictly literal person) is a resource to herself, able to draw on her own, create "lifeforce" (…) (Jacobs, 2015, *ibid.*, p. 110)

This is an interesting analysis, undoubtedly, however it has some limitations as shall be seen in the further analysis of the portrayal of Lorde's mother in the autobiography. It seems overly optimistic in its assessment of the figure of Linda, Audre Lorde's mother. There is no doubt, whatsoever, that Audre Lorde renders her mother as a highly erotic woman/body, particularly when she establishes a link between them both: mother and daughter. It shall be scrutinised that in many instances Lorde makes a parallel between her own body and that of her mother's. It is true, as well, that Audre Lorde refuses to portray her mother as a female victim of racism and chooses to demonstrate her strength which stems not only from the erotic body but also, or perhaps, mainly from her ethnic origin and belonging to the West Indies Islands. However, it cannot be asserted that the mother in Audre Lorde's biomythography is a woman who escapes the role of "servility": she does have to sustain life hardships due to social and economic circumstances and also because she is a Black woman. In fact, these two factors are intimately linked: being a Black female in America was often translated into being poor and marginalised. And it also should be noted that the

eroticism ascribed to Audre Lorde's mother by the author of the article is a source of power to the author herself more than to Linda Lorde. The eroticisation of motherhood clearly visible throughout the biomythography serves multiple purposes but one of the main goals is to create Audre Lorde's own autonomous and strong self inspired by the erotic. On the other hand, in a culture where motherhood and mothers are desexualised, often seen as asexual figures, ascribing sexuality and sensuality to Audre Lorde's mother guarantees more visibility given to motherhood in general and portrays a figure of woman-mother capable of retaining her sexuality. It renders all Black mothers as normal women, against the cultural proscription which dictates that motherhood demands asexuality.

Apart from the erotic power inherent in Audre Lorde's mother, she also admits that her mother is a source of her racial/ethnic identification and self-affirmation. Her mother's Caribbean roots are subject to intense examination in Lorde's narrative. She weaves legends of her mother's native culture into her own text and autobiographical narrative. Her mother's West Indie's origin is a source of pride, joy, and nearly erotic pleasure. The beginning of the autobiography deals with Linda's hardships in the US to emphasise the common lot of many immigrants from former colonies and denounce economic and cultural domination over non-Americans. As bell hooks (2010) comments on Audre Lorde's and other Black feminists' art and activism:

> When we connect Wallace's writing on invisibility with the constant demand Lorde makes in her work that silences be broken, that we claim our power to understand what hems us in and a theory that conceptualizes our power to set ourselves and our words free (hooks, 2010: 247).

The words that break the silence then are also used in Lorde's autobiography to give her mother her voice back and to show her strength and resilience. Otherwise, she would remain another anonymous Black woman marginalised and muted. In this way, through language, Audre Lorde subverts the myth of weak Black women and rejects the trope of a mammy.

Audre Lorde's mother immigrated to the United States in 1924, between wars, right before the financial difficulties America was about to experience. Lorde mentions economic discrimination and the fact that had her mother not passed for white, due to her fair skin, she would never have been able to get a job. Still, when her employer found out she was

Black, he fired her immediately. Home, back in the Caribbean, was where all feminine and cultural wisdom was deposited. The Islands held a promise of freedom and dignity which Lorde's mother constantly tried to transmit to her children. All the knowledge of food and taste, fruit and spices came from home, back in the Caribbean. The cultural legacy Lorde's mother brought with her to America was passed onto her children and Audre Lorde transformed it into her own vision of home and ethnic background. This legacy was always alive, never fell into oblivion also because Linda was a born storyteller who made the ethnic tradition reverberate with life, colours, smells, and flavours. All the traditional knowledge Linda possessed made her into a near goddess in Lorde's eyes, a strong woman possessing lifesaving and life-affirming skills:

> She knew about mixing oils for bruises and rashes, and about disposing of all toenail clippings and hair from the comb. About burning candles before All Souls Day to keep the soucoyants away, lest they suck the blood of her babies. She knew about blessing the food and yourself before eating, and about saying prayers before going to sleep. (…) As a child I remember often hearing my mother mouth these words [St. Bernard's prayer][8] softly, just below her breath, as she faced some new crisis or disaster-the icebox door breaking, the electricity being shut off, my sister gashing open her mouth on borrowed skates. (Lorde, *ibid*., p. 10)

At the same time, the mother appears as "solid and austere" (*ibid*. p. 11) – the image she transmits of her mother is that of an unbreakable woman, deeply religious and somewhat inflexible in what regards discipline at home. She provokes awe and admiration and eternal longing from her daughter.

Lorde's association of her mother with strength and power seemed slightly incompatible with her times. Linda, being in her daughter's eyes a powerful woman, defied the norms and social expectations of her days. These two words "powerful" and "woman" seemed almost oxymoronic. Women, especially Black, were most often than not

[8] St Bernard's prayer exact words: Remember, Oh gracious Sweet Virgin Mary, never has it been heard that you left unaided anyone who ran to you for protection, implored your help or sought for your intercessions. With this inspired confidence I fly to you my mother, Oh Sweet virgin of virgins, I come to you and before you I stand most sinful and sorrowful. Oh Mother of The Word Incarnate, do not despise my words and prayers but listen, hear and answer them with your utmost love. Amen. Available at: https://catholicreadings.org/prayer-of-saint-bernard/

marginalised in the decades between both World Wars and beyond. It was unthinkable to imagine a Black woman as powerful because society did everything in its power to strip her of any might and dignity. Still, Audre Lorde challenged those assumptions and portrayed her mother precisely as a role model for herself and other Black girls. She realised her mother was different from other women she knew, and in her autobiography went as far as to suggest that her mother was a dyke[9], a woman oriented towards other women:

> My mother was a very powerful woman. This was so in a time when that word-combination of *woman* and *powerful* was almost inexpressible in the white American common tongue, except or unless it was accompanied by some aberrant explaining adjective like blind, or hunchback, or crazy, or Black. Therefore, when I was growing up, *powerful woman* equalled something else quite different from ordinary woman, from simply "woman." It certainly did not, on the other hand, equal "man." What then? What was the third designation? (…) Different how? I never knew. But that is why to this day I believe that there have always been Black dykes around-in the sense of powerful and women-oriented women-who would rather have died than use that name for themselves. And that included my momma. (Lorde, *ibid.*, p. 15)

Her mother is, thus, mythologised into a strong figure, able to solve every single problem, but also atypical for her times, defying the cultural norms of the pre-war America. She also mythologises her into a women-oriented woman, characteristic she herself developed early in her life and which became her most salient trait. This maternal and feminine strength to survive was passed to Audre Lorde who, addressing her multiple identities referred to herself as a woman-warrior doing her best to survive in a world that devalues Black women.

The power Audre Lorde sees in her mother is overshadowed sometimes by a sense of helplessness when racism strips her family of dignity. Moments of acute pain inflicted on Linda by racist members of the American society must be hidden at all costs lest the children realise racism lurks and threatens to humiliate Black people. When Audre is spat at by a man, her mother conceals her outrage and pain diverting her daughter's attention saying that people with low education have no manners. The racially charged act of spitting on a

[9] According to the Cambridge Dictionary of the English language, "dyke" (slang) denoted a lesbian woman, however the term is considered by many as offensive. https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/dyke

little Black girl gains different contours because her mother is there to protect her from humiliation. "If you can't change reality, change your perceptions of it" (*ibid.*, p. 17) Linda says, trying in this way to teach her daughter the strategies of self-defence and self-preservation. Even though years later Audre Lorde will disagree with such strategies of survival arguing in her poems and essays as well as in her autobiography that silence is never the answer, she realises that her mother's strategies were devised to protect her children and spare them unnecessary pain[10].

The family trip to Washington to celebrate Lorde's sister Phyllis' graduation from high school and her own graduation from the 8th grade, serves as another occasion to examine how both parents coped with omnipresent racism. When the family is asked to leave the restaurant due to Jim Crow laws still in force in 1947, neither offers a political or historical explanation to what just happened. Instead, Lorde and her sister are given hygiene-related explanations as to why they could not eat at that specific restaurant. Again, Linda's choice is to not confront reality; she opts for silence and dissimulation. The issue of colour was never really discussed openly in Audre Lorde's family. It was strictly forbidden to ask questions regarding why their mother looked white and why they had darker skin.[11] The question of racial identity was never an issue at Audre Lorde's home and years later, her mother's role in Lorde's process of racial identification remains ambiguous. Still, it must be stated that it was Linda who instilled in Audre Lorde the love of all things Black, Caribbean culture and heritage.

Audre Lorde not only does not disavow her mother throughout her autobiography as is the case with many female autobiographies according to Siegel, but she uses the autobiographical narrative to demonstrate the linguistic heritage she acquired thanks to her. This mother-daughter linguistic, bodily, and erotic (mythic) bond is a source of survival. Njeng Eric Sipyinyu (2004) claims that by invoking a figure of Mother-Goddess, Audre Lorde opens new space where Black women can be seen as life-affirming, life-saving and

[10] Similar strategies, already mentioned in this Thesis, were employed by Anne Moody's mother who would refuse to call a problem by its name and confront racism directly. Instead, she chose silence as a way to deal with racism prevalent in the Southern states creating, in this way, a chasm between herself and her daughter who failed to understand and accept her mother's posture regarding racism.

[11] Exactly the same situation emerges in Anne Moody's autobiography when her mother refuses to provide an explanation for the "one-drop" rule and for why people in her family are of different shades. Biracialism and miscegenation were considered taboos. Some things, apparently, would be better left unaddressed.

radical figures able to save other Black women by showing them the way out of the prison-house of American racism (*ibid.*, p. 95).

Apart from the Caribbean legacy linked to food and all rituals involved in preparation of meals and grinding spices, all filled with sensuality and eroticism, Audre Lorde pays homage to her mother as a storyteller and the source of her own poetry. This aspect is immensely important to understand how affective relations with her mother impacted the budding self of a Black-woman-artist. The activity of storytelling, so cherished by Linda who was a living deposit of Caribbean-related stories, opened the door to Audre Lorde's imagination and gave rise to her poetic activity. Audre Lorde becomes a poet because she absorbed all the words her mother used to employ when telling her stories. She showed a great need to imitate her mother and win her love and appreciation too (something she missed all her life as she speaks of her unfulfilled need of being loved and accepted unconditionally by her mother throughout the autobiography), she interiorised her mother's language and made it her own.[12] Her mother taught her verbal techniques of defence against racism and abuse – techniques copied from the white man's tongue, using the master's language. It is clearly her mother who gets credit for Audre Lorde's survival. This linguistic heritage is passed down from mother to child. The autobiographer pays tribute to her Linda Lorde and to the Caribbean matrilineal traditions that propelled her onto a path of poetry:

> My mother's words teaching me all manner of wily and diversionary defences learned from the white man's tongue, from out of the mouth of the father. She had had to use these defences, and had survived by them, and had also died by them a little, at the same time. (Lorde, *ibid.*, p. 59)

The excerpt above addresses also a significant dimension of her poetic becoming: the language she uses is the same language her mother used to protect herself from death, but it is also the language that was stolen from the figure of man-father where he symbolises the

[12] Zora Neal Hurston speaks of a similar origin of her writing. When her mother died, leaving Zora a child who longed for her mother's love and presence, she admitted in her autobiography *Dust Tracks* that she began writing to give her mother a voice; she turned to writing to continue the legacy of her mother, render her visible and make sure her voice is heard. According to Robert E. Hemenway (1977), dying Hurston made her nine-year-old daughter promise that after her death neither the mirror nor the clock would be covered with a cloak and no pillow would be removed from under her head in defiance of Eatonville superstitious rituals related to death and mourning. The child was unable to fulfil the promise, which caused the future writer a deep sense of guilt for many years to come. This might also be seen as a reason for Zora Neal Hurston to give her mother back a voice after her death, especially given her last wish was ignored by the family and the community.

patriarchal power and phallocentric domain over language, knowledge, and authority. By rejecting that patriarchal tradition, by espousing her mother's form of language, naming emotions, objects and body parts, Audre Lorde cuts ties with the heteronormative, sexist language used very often to belittle women in general and Black women in particular. She adapts it and appropriates it to pay homage to her mother the storyteller and to all women.

Through the chain of Black women courageous enough to create and tell their own stories, in a language stolen from the (white male) master, she learns new strategies to create her own poetry. The love of words was transmitted to her through her mother who also revealed deep love of words and who nurtured a very special relationship with words and language. Thus, this huge, lifelong passion Audre Lorde cherished is another link to her mother. She not only learned how to love herself as a Black woman but was also born a poet from her mother's fierce love of language. Words became one of the most treasured legacies Linda Lorde left Audre Lorde, in spite of intergenerational misunderstandings, tensions and open conflicts. "I am a reflection of my mother's secret poetry as well as of her hidden angers" (*ibid.*, p. 32) is a sentence that best reflects her mother's role in her life. The Caribbean heritage will not be wasted on Audre Lorde who channels her love of her mother's language into intensely emotional poetry, essays, and autobiography. The whole chapter on her becoming a poet (*How I Became a Poet*) deals with this process of discovering a passion for words and language. At the beginning of this section on how she turned into a poet, Audre Lorde affirms the following:

> When the strongest words for what I have to offer come out of me sounding like words I remember 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. (Lorde, *ibid.,* p. 31)

Curiously, Audre Lorde relates a memory she has of not being able to speak until the age of four. She was somehow barred from words, voice, and language when she was a child and this could have some explanations, although she does not provide them openly. Not only was Lorde unable to speak but she also did not see clearly: the world was a chaos of smudged colours and lights. Her inability to utter words can be interpreted at a symbolic and feminist level as a rejection of the world which humiliates and eschews little Black girls deeming them ugly and unworthy of attention. Silence then could have been, during some

time, Audre Lorde's answer to the unspeakable horrors of the outside world. If the world treats you like an undesirable element of society, then you have nothing to say to it. Of course, a little girl cannot consciously choose silence as a reaction to the world's rejection of her, nevertheless Audre Lorde proposes such an interpretation as an adult autobiographer. However, silence is a sort of response which, with time, ceases to remain sufficient. Even though Audre Lorde's mother opted for silence when faced with outrageous racism, she, nevertheless taught Lorde words and language which carried love, tenderness, passion, desire, and resistance. Because Lorde could not see well due to her sight impairment, her mother translated the world around her. Her mother's rich imagination commented on the everyday world and reality she was sharing with her daughters:

> We were never dressed too lightly, but rather "in next kin to nothing". Neck skin to nothing? Impassable and impossible distances were measured by the distance "from Hog to Kick 'em Jenny". Hog? Kick 'em Jenny? Who knew until I was sane and grown a poet with a mouthful of stars that these were two little reefs in the Grenadines, between Grenada and Carriacou. (Lorde, *ibid.*, p. 32)

Her mother's origins are always present in her language, always there to bring to mind the emotional cartography of the Islands. The roots, the Caribbean, the longing, and the language are intimately linked and prepare the ground for Audre Lorde to learn this linguistic landscape by heart and transform it into poetry. This poetry, in turn, will translate Lorde's love and longing for her mother and other women. The heritage Linda brought to America, the home she left behind, the passionate love of all things Caribbean were so intensely transmitted to Audre Lorde, that they fell on the fertile soil of Lorde's imagination fusing her mother, herself, the language, the poetry and the love into one entity. In some moments, Lorde and her mother seem to be one, united in bodily and linguistic terms, as mother and daughter expressing their bond through language and sensuality of rituals such as combing Lorde's hair, staying together in one bed on Sunday mornings, and other symbolic rituals related, for example, to food preparation or spice grinding whose meaning was to emphasise this eternal bond Audre Lorde longed to share with her mother.

The numerous images of the two bodies laced together, emitting fragrances that Lorde will always associate with her mother's comforting and womanly smell, appear again and again throughout the autobiography, wobbling on the edge of the incestuous result in a mythmaking presence throughout the autobiography. Those images evoke feelings of

protection, love, and closeness as well as the sensuousness of a woman's body (Malin, 2000: 50). The maternal and, at the same time, the sensuous body of Linda is not something Audre Lorde tries to avoid. She does not attempt to separate herself from her mother, at least not at a discursive level. Her mother's body is later projected onto other women's bodies. In fact, Lorde will look for her mother's body in other women's. Their bodies will become an extension of her mother's image and the intense love she sought to fulfil in her mother's arms. Several scholars have admitted that Lorde's lesbian identification comes directly from her deep love for and identification with her mother. Jo Malin claims that:

> The love for women, for Lorde, as for Moraga and Nestle, is grounded in her love for her mother. In addition, she explains the family's origin in Carriacou situates the narrative in a woman-identified space. In this village, men spend much of their time on fishing boats, leaving women and girls to create a female-centered culture. Stories of her mother's childhood experience, in this culture, are unambiguously meshed with Lorde's lesbian identity. (Malin, *ibid.*, p. 49)

The link between mother and daughter and being lesbian is a topic of particular interest to Adrienne Rich[13] who quotes from the poet Sue Silvermarie, who, in turn, expresses her viewpoint on being a mother and a lesbian at the same time and how she translated the love for her mother into her romantic relationships with other women:

> In loving another woman I discovered the deep urge to both be a mother to and find a mother in my lover. At first I feared the discovery. Everything around me told me it was evil. Popular Freudianism cursed it as a fixation, a sign of immaturity. But gradually I came to have faith in my own needs and desires…. Now I treasure and trust the drama between two loving women, in which each can become mother and each become child. (Silvermarie *in* Rich, 1995: 232)

[13] Adrienne Rich (1929-2012) was an American poet of renown, lesbian and a mother. She produced a number of essays, poems, and books on the topic of being lesbian in patriarchal America and how motherhood gained a special status in traditional America. Of particular interest is her work *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976) which until today proves to be relevant. In it Adrienne Rich scrutinises the problematics of motherhood such as maternal ambivalence, the impact of patriarchy on becoming and being a mother, dilemmas of writing mother, etc. *Of Woman Born* had a lasting and profound impact on motherhood studies at the intersection with feminist studies.

Although she did become a mother, Audre Lorde leaves that part of her life out of her autobiography and so her attitude towards lesbian mothering is never expressed in it.[14] However, drawing inspiration from Sue Silvermarie's excerpt, it is possible to understand that Audre Lorde found peace in her lesbian identity strongly impacted by her love for her mother. Because her entire autobiography is filled with images of other women she loved, through them she also indirectly pays homage to her mother. She never says it openly at any point in her text, but it seems clear that she owes her love for other women to her own mother whom she loved with a passion and who became the central figure of her narrative, even if she does not dwell on each page of the autobiography.

Linda Lorde is a maternal figure which dominates the majority of Audre Lorde's memories and leaves an imprint on the text even when she seems absent from the narrative which happens on several occasions, particularly from the moment when Lorde moves out of her mother's home on (not from her parents' home…). This is also evident when she starts to become more autonomous, and it dawns on her that she is lesbian. When she comes home for her father's burial and sees her mother heartbroken, she realises that she is now a fully autonomous person, no longer emotionally dependent on her mother. She finally feels free from her. As she says, it is only with the realisation of her mother's pain after becoming a widow, and her own new sexual life wholly oriented towards women that she comprehends she has become free of the constant need for her mother's affection. That possibly means that she no longer sought the affirmation in the eyes of her mother. It could be also asserted that the possible "split" between the daughter and the mother, the moment when Audre Lorde becomes more independent and less reliant on her mother for emotional fulfilment is also due to the fact that Audre Lorde realised there was a chasm between her and her mother caused by the fact that her mother was, in the end, a heterosexual woman. Linda, heart-broken because of her husband's death, displays her status as a men-loving woman, quite a contrary status to what Audre Lorde had described in her biomythography and perhaps expected from her mother.

Still, Audre Lorde creates a quasi-mythic figure of her mother as a powerful woman, perhaps even a dyke, insisting on her being women-oriented woman brought up on an Island

[14] Audre Lorde speaks of being a lesbian mother to her son and reflects on the role of women as mothers to their sons and how they can raise feminist and women-respecting men on different occasions, namely during her conferences and in her essays, for example in her essay included in *Sister Outsider* (1987) under the tile: "Man Child: A Black Lesbian Feminist's Response".

where lesbian relationships are devised as a strategy of emotional survival in the absence of men. Men, in fact, seem to be irrelevant to the women's existence. Such a culture is passed through storytelling to Audre Lorde who then sees loving women as a political act of self-affirmation in homophobic and racist America. The mother becomes, in her narrative, a source of wisdom her ethnic origins guaranteed her. She becomes the primary poet and the language teacher. She is also the first woman Lorde loves and whose reflection she will look for in other women's bodies and love. Audre Lorde's mother is also the first guardian of her racial self-affirmation. Avoiding the topic of racial tensions within American society, Linda Lorde also shuns any signs of victimisation due to the racial identity mother and daughter share. All the effort expressed through storytelling to transmit the values, cultural heritage and geographical beauty of the Caribbean Islands is translated into Audre Lorde's pride at who she is: a Black woman on the brink of adulthood. The affective relations with her mother, although lacking, imperfect and fraught with tension over daily issues and decisions, proved to be a rich investment into Audre Lorde's future as a woman, lesbian and poet/activist. The autobiography Lorde penned is, thus, a homage to her mother without whose influence the author admits she would not become who she is.

5.2. Nina Simone's troubled relationship with the mother and affective emphasis on the father.

Nina Simone offers her readers an autobiography where she focuses on her process of becoming a Black female artist. Hers is a relational autobiography too, although the affective relations she discusses in her text are treated with more emotional distance than in the case of Audre Lorde whose entire autobiography brims with passion and desire for her mother and other women. In turn, Nina Simone's narrative seems to analyse her memories from a certain distance and the language employed remains somewhat detached.

She too, however, opts for including descriptions of affective relations with others, particularly her parents and, in a later stage, her partners and lovers, all men. It should be stated at this point, nevertheless, that the parental figures are constantly woven into the narrative and the author leaves no doubt that both marked her as a young girl in many aspects. The self constructed by Simone throughout the narrative enters in constant dialogue with the voices of her mother and father, impacted by their sometimes difficult and complex love, their wishes, ideals, and acts. As in Audre Lorde's autobiography, Simone's *I Put A*

Spell on You establishes a conversation with the maternal and paternal figure, although the disproportion between the attention paid to Simone's father in contrast to Lorde's is rather striking. If Audre Lorde pushes her father onto the margin of her narrative and dooms him to invisibility, Nina Simone gives her father plenty of space in hers, establishing a noticeable contrast between her textual treatment of her father and mother.

It is not surprising that, as in many autobiographies, the first references to the parental figures appear right at the beginning of Nina Simone's autobiography, where she discusses her origins and the story of her family. And there, at the start, she mentions that by the time the children were born, her mother had left behind "sinful" things such as playing piano to accompany her father's professional entertainment. Because the mother's family had fifteen Methodist ministers, she followed the tradition and became a minister herself leading an austere life. It is important to examine this fragment because it is written in a light-hearted way, with a sense of humour but there is some hidden irony when she writes about her mother's professional life as a minister. Sometime later, when the children were born, her mother's career as a piano player for her future husband was never talked about with the children, it was a period in Mary Kate's life best left behind due to its sinful nature:

> When they met, Daddy was an entertainer working around Pendleton. He had a white suit, wore spats and danced; sang a little too, and played harmonica. Momma used to play piano for him while he danced and sang – something she never talked about to us children because by the time we were grown enough to be interested in hearing about her courting days Momma had become a church minister, and had put sinful things behind her. (Simone, *ibid*. p.2)

The fragment is telling because of the tone it sets for Nina Simone's textual treatment of her mother throughout the whole autobiography. There is always some shadow of emotional distance between the mother and the daughter, not necessarily chosen by Nina Simone in life but definitely opted for in the narrative. Even if she did not choose to feel rejected and unaccepted, she had the authorial freedom to transmit such a message in her autobiography. Irony appears again when Simone references her parents having many children as soon as they got married. "Dad kept mom busy" (*ibid.*, p. 2) is another sarcastic, but not devoid of humour, comment on the fact that Nina Simone's mother was busy giving birth to children, something the author seems to disapprove of even if indirectly. It must be

truly the case since in the 3rd Chapter of the autobiography, Nina Simone refers to more children being born during the second World War: "Momma hadn't finished either: my youngest sister, Frances, was born in April 1942, and my brother Sam in the middle of 1944" (*ibid.*, p. 28). The expression "momma hadn't finished either" leaves no doubt about what Nina Simone thought, as an adult autobiographer, of her mother's multiple pregnancies.[15] Even when she refers to her mother becoming pregnant with her in 1932, she does not hide the fact that times were very difficult financially for the family (Depression years) and another pregnancy was not a direction the parents wanted to take, however they accepted the new situation. The following excerpt reveals, again, the unfailing sense of humour with which the author treats the serious topic of Black families' looming poverty and class-related issues paired with questions of reproductive health:

> He [father] was still wheeling and dealing like always, even though the road ahead must have seemed dark as Christmas 1932 approached. It was a time for tightening belts, scratching a living and praying for change in the right direction. A change was on its way all right, although it probably wasn't exactly what Daddy had in Mind. Momma either. At the end of summer that year she got pregnant again. She was going to have another baby. Me. (Simone, *ibid.*, p. 7)

Curiously, although she does not express her view openly, she conveys the message that it was her mother who, in Simone's eyes, was responsible for all the pregnancies, as if the decision to have more children or not were hers alone. If at the beginning of the book the father "kept mother busy" and so was partly responsible for the family expansion, the sentence quoted above reveals perhaps a sense of thinly veiled resentment towards her mother for bearing children year after year. Also, at the beginning of the narrative, the mother is presented as a "stay-at-home" mum while the father worked outside the home. As will be scrutinised later, it is her father who incites all the pride in Nina Simone. Although her mother succeeds in having a career outside the home later on, both working to feed the family when the father is jobless and travelling as a minister preaching in churches round

[15] Anne Moody airs in her *Coming of Age in Mississippi* very similar views on her mother's constant pregnancies. Although she is a young girl, in her autobiography she appears as more mature and responsible than her mother and criticises her mother's decision to bear more and more children given her dire economic and legal situation (Anne Moody's mother was single for a long time taking odd jobs to feed her growing family). It is utterly irresponsible and incomprehensible to her that her mother would allow herself to bear more and more children if she could not afford them.

the country, nowhere in the text is this fact highlighted to show Simone was happy or proud of her mother's career. As a matter of fact, on many occasions when she refers textually to her mother, it is either with a sense of emotional detachment or of poorly concealed resentment. It can be observed, thus, that while Audre Lorde mythologizes her mother, showing her as a powerful woman (and also an active citizen during the Second World War), Nina Simone, at least in the first part of her autobiography, is focused rather on erasing her mother and belittling her contribution to her growing self as a Black girl.

Nina Simone chooses to depict her mother throughout the narrative as an austere, deeply religious person who imposed her worldview on the entire family. Because her mother was active in the church, Nina Simone had been exposed to spiritual and church songs from an early age. This, without any doubt, bore fruit later when it was discovered little Nina had an undeniable talent for singing. Still, it should be emphasised that it is her mother's effort and understanding of the situation that contributed greatly to the author's future career. She finally gives her mother credit (and her father too) when she examines her early childhood: had she been born in a different family, not so musically oriented, her life could have been utterly different. Still, even when she pens the memories of her mother, there is little emotional involvement and the choice of language translates well the author's memories and mental states. Her earliest memories are related to food[16] and music – both linked to her mother. Food is a theme that brings up more positive memories of her mother: Mrs Waymon was skilled at preparing delicious food out of nothing and with time became known for her cooking talents in the neighbourhood. It is through food preparation that many Black women showed affection for their families during times where hard work, discrimination and prejudice were unfavourable to verbal expressions of love. Nina Simone remembers her mother singing "in a highly thrilling voice" (*ibid.*, p.7). All of the songs were, obviously, of a religious nature and Bible-related, sung occasionally in church. The importance of music in Nina Simone's family cannot be underestimated. Everybody played and sang in church choir, gospel groups, glee clubs, and so forth. It was only natural for all family members. It was also expected that Simone would develop a taste and talent for music and singing. Because she had been surrounded by music since childhood, any sign of

[16] Interestingly, Audre Lorde's memories of her mother are also related to food preparation, flavours and fragrances of spices and West Indian dishes. It can be affirmed that food/sharing it with loved ones is not only an act of mere physical survival but also, or foremost, an act of love and family survival as an entity bound by mutual love. It can also be interpreted as a political act of subversion of racists patterns within the American society and act of self-affirmation in cultural aspects.

talent was to be ascribed to God and so no pride was to be taken in it. However, the children were allowed to play and sing only the kind of music of which their mother approved. Any other music was "of the world", in other words, sinful and to be shunned at all costs:

> Momma had a name for any sort of music that wasn't religious, that was 'of the world.' She called it 'real' music. If I played a tune I'd heard somewhere she'd say: 'Don't play any of those real songs.' For a long time I thought that 'real' was the name for a style of music, like 'blues' or 'gospel.' (Simone, *ibid.*, p. 16)

Nina Simone's mother's austere religiosity receives a rather harsh treatment in the autobiography.[17] She is often portrayed as inflexible in what concerns Christian values, worldly music, and inappropriate life stances. In fact, her mother's religion (because her father is portrayed as more tolerant, open, and relaxed in terms of religion) came to dominate house rules. As Nina Simone's mother opted for a career as a minister preaching in local churches, she imposed strict discipline upon her children. With time the author started to resent the fact that God and religion were her mother's priorities, instead of her family:

> As far as church was concerned Momma was fanatic. She wasn't unusual – plenty of southern Evangelical families were like ours, quite a few of them in Tryon. But Momma took her religion a stage further and became a minister, which meant she had to travel all around preaching and leading services. By the time I was four the church had come to dominate her life. (…) But as I grew older I came to realize something about my mother which was difficult to accept: her first loyalty was to God and her ministry. It came before anything else – before her husband, before her family and before me. (*ibid.*, p. 16)

On several occasions the author comments in her autobiography that she felt the need to be loved, cuddled, and appreciated by her mother but what she received in return was severe admonishment and a disciplinarian attitude. As she observed, nothing else mattered to her mother apart from religion and any matters regarding the family were, eventually, addressed after religious compromise was fulfilled. Still, she admits that she was taught to play the

[17] In contrast with Audre Lorde's mother whose faith and prayers to Our Lady filled Audre Lorde with a sense of safety and respect.

piano while accompanying her mother to churches and played before her mother preached. Indirectly perhaps, but she does credit her mother with being the catalyst of her musical career.

Like Audre Lorde, Nina Simone also mentions in her autobiography that she missed her mother's affection and words of encouragement. Her sense of abandonment was acute because her mother was also somewhat of an absent figure when she travelled on days she had to meet her religious responsibilities giving conferences and preaching. It was her older sister, Lucille who played a maternal role for Nina Simone when their mother was away. To some extent, as Simone admits, Lucille substituted her mother, just as other female figures, such as Miss Miller or Miss Mazzy would do later. These white women would fulfil the emotional vacuum left by her mother. Thus, Lucille would perform certain rituals which, normally, are often referred to by Black girls as occurring between mothers and daughters. Such rituals include, for instance, plaiting hair, bathing, talking about boys, etc[18]. These were the sort of rituals that Nina Simone's mother failed to carry out with her daughter and the author does not hesitate to depict her sense of disillusionment at that fact. The sisterly figure becomes, at a certain stage of the narrative, a motherly figure trying to fulfil Nina Simone's emotional needs:

> Lucille took on the burden of the house without complaint. Pretty soon she had all us running the way she wanted; she'd make the fire in the morning, cook our breakfast, walk us to school, make lunch and dinner and clean up the house. There was no nonsense with Lucille. She was a woman on fire, burning with energy. (…) But at the same time when I started to take an interest in feminine things it was she who guided me along the way. Lucille would bathe me, plait my hair and talk about boys and what she thought of them, which wasn't much. (…) Lucille was pretty, knew all about make-up and loved to wear high-heeled shoes. She explained about perfume and fine lingerie, and taught me that a single top quality dress was better than four or five cheap ones. (Simone, *ibid.*, p. 21)

[18] *Cf.* Lonnae O'Neal Parker's article "Balm: By styling her daughter's hair each morning, she was attending to something deeper than a beauty ritual" published in the *Washington Post* on January 31, 2010 on the bond developed between Black mothers and daughters during the beauty rituals and the relevance of such rituals: https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/01/22/AR2010012203259.html

Unquestionably, Nina Simone's budding womanhood is not enhanced by her mother, as she would expect but by her older sister who knows all about feminine secrets. Given her mother's religious austerity, she would have never discovered certain feminine-related pleasures such as high-heels or perfume had it not been for Lucille. More than that, had her mother known about the sisterly initiation into womanhood with all it entails, i.e., tips on how to be attractive and know more about boys, she would have definitely condemned such trivial rituals. Still, Nina Simone transmits the message in her narrative that she was deeply disappointed by not being introduced to womanhood by her mother. She missed her mother acutely, her taking interest in her life, the emotional support she needed when she was coming of age, yet she received none of what she had always expected.

On the other hand, the autobiography does not ignore the fact that it was due to her mother that Nina Simone started her career as a pianist. It was none other than her mother who not only initiated her into church music, as has been observed, but also took more energetic and specific steps to ensure that she received proper musical training. Mrs Miller, the white lady at whose home Nina Simone's mother worked as help, was informed that Simone had talent, yet the family had no financial means to sponsor musical lessons ("Momma told her the truth – that we couldn't afford piano lessons", *ibid*., p. 21). One can only imagine the significance of this revelation for such a proud woman as Simone's mother was. It must have been a blow to her sense of pride and dignity. However, this was the beginning of Simone's brilliant career. And, as observed, her mother was at the source of Nina Simone's professional life. Her mother also had high expectations for the author's future as a concert pianist. Although the family never really discussed racial issues, just as in Audre Lorde's family, Nina Simone's potential success would bring fame and recognition not only for her but for the entire Black community. Those expectations were unrelenting, and as has been examined in chapter III of this Thesis, regardless of her age, Nina Simone was to work as hard as possible to fulfil all of the hopes held by her family and the neighbourhood. Officially, the family seemed to implement colour-blindness as a rule, believing in merit and hard work, values particularly highlighted by Simone's father, however when it came to her professional life, she bore the burden of her community's hopes and those were clearly linked to race. According to Nina Simone's recollections, although her mother was a trigger in her career and musical training, at home she never revealed any particular interest in her development, needs and musical classes. She is referenced in the

autobiography as unsupportive if not outright indifferent not only towards Nina Simone's professional life but also towards her as a girl.

This acute feeling of alienation and detachment from her mother prevails throughout the entire autobiography. The most painful memories are linked to the fact that other women, such as her sister, her piano teacher, Miss Mazzy, were figures that came to replace the maternal figure. At certain stages of her narrative, Nina Simone speaks of feeling that other female figures were closer emotionally to her than her own mother. This unfulfilled need for maternal love reverberates in Simone's memories and narrative all the time. A sense of disillusionment and disappointment is clearly transmitted in the autobiography also because, later on, Simone's mother does not approve of her playing and singing in bars, even if those jobs were undertaken to pay for classical piano training. Although the mother had a secret wish for her daughter to become the first African American concert pianist, a career to which most Black people had no access, she was careful not to reveal any emotions she might feel regarding her daughter's career. Nina knew all along that although her parents never mentioned the topic, it was all about the race. The unspoken ambition for the daughter was, at the same time, the ambition of the Black community, also because that community contributed financially so that Simone could attain her goals. They were, thus, her mother's goals and her community's goals, although the mother imagined Nina Simone's career in a wholly different way. What Simone opted to do – to play in bars, to sing at night, to circulate between cities and become, in the process, a *flaneuse* – was, in her mother's eyes, to opt for hell and sell one's own soul. Simone is acutely aware of her mother's disapproval of her career:

> The only problem was Momma finding out I was going to be playing piano in a bar. To her that wouldn't be any different from working in the fires of hell. I could already hear her voice in my head: 'A bar? My God, in my family I have the devil himself"' I couldn't see how Momma would ever find out, but somehow with these sort of things she always did. (Simone, *ibid.*, p. 49)

It is also for this reason that Nina Simone chooses her stage name – to prevent her mother from knowing she was playing in bars or, at least, to delay the moment her mother would finally find out. She knew a sign announcing her playing in a bar ("Playing Tonight: Eunice Waymon", *ibid.*, p. 49) would be too much for her mother to bear so she resolved to play under the name of Nina Simone. The strict rules her mother subscribed to throughout

her life and which had been imposed on the whole family, turned out to be stifling to Simone. They clipped her wings but, at the same time, instilled in her a deep sense of guilt and inadequacy even when she was a world-renowned artist. Even though she was straining to achieve her dream, which was also seemingly her mother's dream – to become famous as the first Black concert pianist – her mother's open disapproval of her choice of career hurt her deeply. The money Nina Simone earned was "dirty" to her mother and she expected nothing good to come out of that career. Even her beloved, trustworthy father demonstrated some reservations concerning it, knowing perhaps too well that the world of entertainment required a price to pay for fame.

The chapters dedicated to Nina Simone's activism, through art, in the Civil Rights Movement hint as to why she was drawn to the ideals of human and civil rights for Black people. It has been observed in chapter III that at some stage of her career, Nina Simone refers to feeling guilty for living quite a self-centred life, focused nearly obsessively on her professional development. The Black community never really meant much to her as she had never taken heed before to Black history and lack of rights, although, with time, she started to be more and more aware of racial discrimination present in American society. Thanks to her peers and friends she met in New York, namely James Baldwin and Loraine Hansberry, Nina Simone experienced a sort of philosophical and spiritual epiphany which propelled her on the path of activism. However, it should be noted that Nina Simone's civil rights activism brought her a renewed hope that her mother would, finally, understand how much she cared for her approval. Perhaps, Nina Simone notes in her autobiography, her involvement in the Movement through songs and concerts would earn her mother's respect and appreciation. It could also be an answer to her mother who never understood why Nina Simone did not employ her talent to praise the Lord with her songs. If talent was given to her by God, then she should pay her debt back by dedicating her career to Him:

> That [the feeling of having an insignificant career] changed when I started singing for the movement because I justified what I was doing to myself and to the world outside, I could finally answer Momma's great unasked question, 'Why do you sing out in the world when you could be praising God?' (Simone, *ibid.*, p. 91)

So, Nina Simone does not hide the fact that even as an adult woman, she still hoped for her mother's blessing of her career and other life choices. It can be asserted, then, that to some extent, Simone's involvement in the Movement was dictated by her desire to please

her and to feel unconditionally loved. Only once did she hear her mother was indeed proud of her – it was during her concert at Carnegie Hall on January 15, 1965 – but she heard it from Miss Mazzy, not directly from her mother's mouth. Mrs Waymon did not waver and never betrayed any sign of pride she might have felt in her daughter's success. Simone's autobiography makes it clear on many occasions that she longed for her mother's forgiveness for the career she chose for herself and, apparently, the entirety of it was a long cry for attention and love that her mother never offered. A bit closer to the end of the autobiography, the tone Nina Simone uses to speak about her mother alters slightly. There is still unmet need for love but the sense of resentment is less conspicuous. Nina Simone seems to be more reconciled with the fact that her mother was strict and abiding inflexibly by her moral rules, however she admits she had her strong points, like for example a certain coherence in her behaviour and strength to keep the family going. She says:

> Momma never made it easy for me to repay her, because she still felt uncomfortable with the life I led. (…) That was Momma, and while she made me want to tear my hair out sometimes at least she was consistent. Daddy wasn't so worried about accepting help but that was because he needed it less. It was Momma who went out to work every day, tiring herself, doing what was needed to keep their home together. (Simone, *ibid.*, p. 123)

This kind of reconciliation with the maternal figure took a slightly different turn from the resolution of the tension between Audre Lorde and her mother. While Audre Lorde does feel after her father's death and burial that she is finally released of her dependent bonds with her mother and can start to live as her own person, Nina Simone achieves certain peace, even if a melancholic one, when accepting her mother as she is.

According to David Miller *et al.* (2022) the link between Black girls and their Black fathers has been traditionally ignored or rendered inadequate in scholarly literature. The authors argue that: "Historically, much of the literature about Black fathers being unmarried, uninvolved, deadbeat participants in the socialization of their children reinforced negative stereotypes" (*ibid.*, p. 2).[19] This invisibility of the paternal figure is true

[19] According to recent data in social sciences, the emotional bond between Black girls and their Black fathers is of extreme importance when it comes not only to self-image and a sense of security in young Black girls but also is a stabilising factor in such phenomena as cyberviolence, bullying in schools and in social media and general victimization of girls (Thrasher, Shawndaya *et al.*, 2022). The study demonstrated that direct involvement of fathers in their daughters' daily life brings positive impact on their self-esteem, resilience to

to some extent in autobiographies included in the corpus, especially if Audre Lorde's biomythography is taken into account. Curiously, however, the paternal figure receives much attention in Simone's autobiography[20]. There is no doubt that among the four autobiographers analysed in the Thesis, it is only Nina Simone who pays most attention to her father in her self-narrative. In emotional terms seemingly the author pays more attention to her father than to her mother, but the way the author portrays her father is strikingly different from the way she describes her mother.

First of all, it should be noted that Nina Simone's relationship with her father was much easier in emotional terms. Because she renders this relationship as filled with mutual love, understanding and support, the atmosphere she evokes when she addresses the paternal figure is much less dramatic and almost completely devoid of tension. There are no unmet expectations, no sense of abandonment and desperate attempts to win her father's acceptance and approval. The paternal figure is woven into the text from beginning to end and it is only closer to the end of the autobiography that the relationship takes a more dramatic and unexpected twist which is solved only after his death. While the author portrays her mother in a somewhat unflattering way throughout the narrative, the father is shown as a dignified Black self-made man always on the lookout for financial and job opportunities. The initial part of the autobiography is more focused on the father and that is where the reader becomes familiar with the most admirable traits of John Divine Waymon. Curiously, the author never speaks about her father in a sarcastic way, if anything she makes textual efforts to portray him as an intelligent and loving man. Throughout the autobiography, Nina Simone's mother is never referred to as an intelligent woman, but her husband is described as a genius:

> He was a clever man; although he wasn't educated he had a genius for getting on. Whatever job he was doing, he took the time to learn all about it; when he knew the

violence and change in behavioural pattern. Another study indicates that close bond between Black girls and their fathers heavily impacts the academic achievement of adolescent girls (Cooper, 2009).

[20] It seems to be more common for female autobiographers to address questions of the mother-daughter bond, however it is not a rule. June Jordan's *Soldier. A Poet's Childhood* (2000) is an interesting example of a narrative where the female author reminiscences on the relationship with the father and how this complex bond impacted the way Jordan turned into a poet and a warrior, instead of a soldier. The obsession and ambition to achieve success in the white man's world impacted the girl exposing her to her father's brutality, inflexibility and, at the same time, love expressed through his desire that she become strong and infallible.

> details of his job he'd set about watching the people working around him and pretty soon he'd know their jobs too. (Simone, *ibid.*, p. 3)

Another important point that the author resolves to include in the text is the fact that her father never paid attention to skin colour and others' race. This, what has been referred to above as colour-blindness, was a trait shared by both of Simone's parents, in fact. In no place in her autobiography does she mention her parents as aware of racial differences and tensions so prominent in the American society at the time. Her father was respected by white and Black people in town and he himself never categorised people – a quality instilled into all of Waymons' children and which Nina Simone reveals throughout her autobiography. His ambition to excel at work is something Simone will not only try to mimic (successfully) in her professional career but is also a quality she considers as his most characteristic. If the mother, then, wanted her to become the first Black concert pianist, her father taught her the value of honest and hard work and respect towards oneself. Neither of her parents presented a victimisation discourse concerning their racial identity and, as has been affirmed, they even shunned any attempts of discussing the question of race as if this problem did not exist or impact the family. Certainly, such an attitude cannot be interpreted as fear of white revenge or backlash but rather as an attempt at sparing their children premature awareness of the fact that being Black means being deemed inferior by the dominant culture. And so both parents, in Nina Simone's narrative mainly her father, insisted on industriousness, work ethic and meritocracy as necessary ingredients of success. Even when her father suffered from racism trying to solve his financial problems, he never blamed white people for his failures. He never even mentioned the fact that many of his job-related problems were caused directly by racism. Quite on the contrary, he would maintain that each and every individual was solely responsible for their life and (in)success. There was no point in racial self-flagellation. This firm belief in one's own responsibility for one's life and in the importance of meritocracy is what Nina Simone highlights in her autobiography when she addresses the matter of her father's impact on her worldview. Although she will go on to feel racism acutely as a Black female artist and decide to stand against racial discrimination through her artistic involvement in the Movement, racial awareness is not a dominant issue throughout her autobiography and she rarely if ever feels inadequate or inferior as a Black person. Very possibly, this was the direct impact of her father on her life and, later, her autobiographical narrative.

In contrast to his wife, John Divine Waymon knew how to enjoy life and was much less strict about religion and discipline at home. However, Nina Simone's happy childhood memories and, in fact, her very childhood came to a halt with the advent of her father's illness. Her carefree and happy days end when she is obliged to take care of her father. She dwells on those memories in some detail describing her father's serious condition (intestinal infection and postoperative wound left open to heal itself) and her sudden awakening to responsibilities she needed to undertake since her mother had to work outside to feed the entire family during her father's convalescence:

> I knew Momma would have to work and my brothers and sisters would be at school all day so I would be my father's nurse. We talked about it and Momma knew she could trust me. There would be no more sitting around the house listening to Momma's singing, no more dancing around the garden pretending to help Daddy milk the cow. I was almost four years old and my carefree childhood was over. (Simone, *ibid.*, p. 10)

However, nowhere in the text is it possible to detect any sign of resentment towards her father for the situation in which Simone found herself. Her childhood was over with newfound obligations, but she will reminisce years later in her autobiography that, to some degree, it was one of the most memorable periods of her life because the illness brought the two of them – the father and the daughter – closer. Taking care of her father, his dependency on her created a bond between them that was broken only years later when she overheard her father telling lies to her brother, diminishing her mother's role in keeping the family unscathed while going through hardships. During the period of her father's illness, Nina Simone admits to having transitioned from a maternal bond to a paternal one. Missing her mother's attention constantly, she shifted to her father and found solace and love. Daddy was incomparable to anyone else – "he was fun" (*ibid.*, p. 12). What she remembers most from that time is the value they both gave to the truth: she believed every single word he said and trusted him unconditionally. It is perhaps for this reason that she was so heartbroken when she caught her father lying to her brother concerning her mother. What he said at that moment, when she was already an adult, was an assault on her mother's heroic attempts at keeping hunger and poverty at bay and that was a lie which she could never forgive her father.

In him she used to find comfort when she wished to distance herself from her mother, the church and religious music:

> This is how Daddy was; always around to help, but allowing me space to grow. For the rest of my childhood I relied on him more than anyone else in the world, and he never let me down. Never. If other things started to get too much, I knew I could run to him. He became my refuge: from church, from Momma and from music. (*ibid.*, p. 13).

While her mother appears as the main disciplinarian at home, a woman with a passion for religion but detached from her family, her father is portrayed as full of life and a trustworthy ally in Nina Simone's love of "world" music. It was with her father that she could play other pieces of music otherwise forbidden if her mother were at home. A heart-warming and good-humoured excerpt follows to illustrate that Nina Simone's love of music was impacted in equal measure by her mother and father, although each of the parents had a different role to play in Simone's process of musical coming of age:

> In fact I liked to play as many different styles as possible, though I had to keep an eye out for Momma if I started wandering off the heavenly track. Luckily I had an extra pair of eyes to help me, because not everyone in my family was as hostile to 'real songs' as she was. Daddy wasn't. He knew a whole load of songs from his bachelor days and he would sing them to me and I'd try to play by ear, or he'd play it himself. (…) He'd sit by the window or outside on the porch, and if he saw Momma coming down the road he's whistle – the signal for me to switch to a more righteous tune. (Simone, *ibid.*, p. 17)

The "conspiracy" in which the father and the daughter partook helped Nina Simone greatly gain practise in playing non-religious music and also deepened their mutual love. There is no doubt that the father is a contrasting figure associated with fun, happiness, mutual trust, and unconditional acceptance – characteristics that Simone was never able to share with her mother. Still, the author leaves no margin for doubt that she owes much more to her mother who had been a more active figure in the process of building her career.

The paternal figure is present until the end of the autobiography and throughout Nina Simone portrays her father as the only person who ever truly understood her and with

whom she felt a unique sense of affinity. However, closer to the end of the narrative, the paternal figure starts to be less and less present in the text only to reappear in the context of the aforementioned conflict regarding the lie he told. The fact that the author mentions this particular conversation between her brother and her father when he takes full credit for keeping the family united and alive has deep significance. Not only did her perfect, trustworthy father dare lie about his wife but in this way he also betrayed her mother, belittling her effort to make ends meet. He violated the rule of truth and transparency. The fact that Nina Simone felt unable to forgive him that act and refused to participate in his burial is of immense importance as it reveals, indirectly, her profound love and loyalty to her mother. As has been mentioned in this chapter, at the end of the autobiography Nina Simone manages to solve, at least partially, the tension and unresolved conflict with her mother by accepting her as she was. She appreciated the fact that her mother, with all of her inflexibility, was a transparent and honest person, a person of integrity. This earned Mrs Waymon Nina Simone's respect. Thus, her insistence on not forgiving her father for a long time after his death (and solving this internal conflict recurring to traditional African spiritual rituals) testifies to the importance of her mother in her life. Through her insistence on her quasi-perfect relationship with her father she reveals how much she owes her mother as a Black female artist.

5.3. Crafted lives: artistic inspiration and matrilineal heritage in Faith Ringgold's portrayal of her mother.

As referred to in the previous chapters of this Thesis, the autobiography penned by Faith Ringgold is the most traditional one in terms of structure among all four autobiographies treated in this study. The three Parts divided into thematic chapters focus on various topics that were of particular interest to the author. However, memories are overlapping and have no clear boundaries, each influences the other. In the same way, the chapters in which Faith Ringgold discusses her life, career, body, affections, and memories impact one another and together they form a whole unit. Although she dwells on the question of her personal life, marriage, and sexuality mostly in Part II of her book, the same topics re-emerge in Part I as well as in Part III, although clearly to a lesser extent. The same pattern can be observed when the author examines her affective relations and when her autobiography concentrates on her parents and daughters. It is in Part II where she dedicates

a whole chapter to her mother: Chapter 4 (titled: *My Mother Was Perfect, or So She Said*). Still, chunks of text about her mother (and her father too) appear before and after that Chapter.

There is no doubt that Faith Ringgold's mother is one of the central figures of her autobiographical narrative and hovers over the entire book. However, unlike in Audre Lorde's or Nina Simone's autobiographies, Ringgold's is an unquestionable and unwavering tribute to her mother's qualities. Since the very beginning of the autobiography, it becomes crystal clear that Faith Ringgold has opted to portray her mother as a strong, no-nonsense woman, possessing the skills to be a (nearly) perfect mother and wife. In no part of the text is it possible to find a moment of hesitation or tension regarding the maternal figure, as is the case of both autobiographies discussed in the earlier part of this chapter. Ringgold's profound respect, admiration and love is unfaltering. Either in peaceful or turbulent times, the mother is always a point of reference, a rock upon which the author can lean for emotional support.

However, it must be noted that the autobiography is dedicated to Faith Ringgold's father, Andrew Louis Jones Sr. to whom she owes her first easel and who, as she claims, "has always made me feel special" (Ringgold, 2005, *ibid.*, page unnumbered). Right at the beginning she acknowledges her father's presence in her life and wishes he could be alive to see for himself what she managed to do with it. This deep gratitude to her father will remain visible throughout the autobiography, although he was not an ideal figure since he drank, spent time in bars and, later, separated from her mother. As is common throughout the autobiography, Faith Ringgold avoids bitter tones in her narrative and does not blame her father for any pain he might have inflicted on the family.

The *Acknowledgment* does include the first mention of her mother, Willi Posey[21], whom she thanks for all the photographs she had taken of the family and for being the family historian and storyteller. She says: "She left me a million stories and almost as many photographs documenting the details of my life" (Ringgold, *ibid.*, p. xi). This is the first important information the author marks about her mother: she acknowledges her essential role of storyteller, a role many Black mothers had been performing since the times of slavery in the American continent and beyond. Storytelling has been considered (hooks, 2000; Hill Collins, 1990, *ibid.*) a survival technique keeping the family intact and a tool thanks to which

[21] Willi Posey Jones was a well-known fashion designer and seamstress in Harlem, working with different fabrics and drawing on African culture in her making of clothes.

racial dignity could be maintained. Undoubtedly, it is because of their mothers' storytelling that many women authors were able to write their autobiographies since, at a certain point, the authors' memories are not theirs but their parents' and other family members'. In the sentence quoted above, Faith Ringgold makes an interesting observation too, which helps understand the role of photography in maintaining memory alive and assisting in the process of creating autobiographical texts. Both storytelling (oral) and photography (which can be considered as storytelling too but through a different media)[22] are mentioned in Ringgold's *Acknowledgement* to demonstrate the undeniable impact of her mother on the textual fruit of their relationship.

As has been noted above, autobiography often relies on memories which, for obvious reasons, do not belong exclusively to the author of the text. Surely, when Faith Ringgold tells the story of her birth and does it in her typical humoristic way, she relies on the story her mother told her. Ringgold's mother, being a born storyteller and familiar with storytelling techniques, must have transmitted a passionate image of herself giving birth to her daughter and then the daughter completes the task of matrilineal storytelling by not only remembering it but writing it down. The result is a realistic and humorous excerpt where the mother appears as a courageous person undaunted by the inhumane treatment she receives at the hospital:

> (…) the nurse, a stern black woman, tried to tie Mother's hands with a cord. Mother protested, saying she would rather die than be shackled, and promised to be good. But the new life inside her was compelling her to push forward before the doctor was ready. So, despite her promise, Mother pushed even harder. The doctor was still scrubbing up when the hair on my head began to show. (…) "Hold back!" she yelled. "The doctor's not ready yet". Once he was, Mother gave one grunt and the doctor's huge hands guided me effortlessly into the world. (*ibid.*, p. 3)

[22] The ambiguous role of photography in autobiography, sitting on the line between reality and fiction, blurring those borders, is discussed in a work by Timothy Adams: *Light Writing & Life Writing: Photography in Autobiography* (2000). The book analyses specific cases where autobiography relies heavily on photography but where the photographs employed to document the text do not facilitate its comprehension and prove that photography can be equally problematic in terms of referentiality as the genre of autobiography is. Autobiography is often believed to create an image of reality, as a photograph does but in both cases this can be misleading. According to Cole (2021): "The photograph does not document all the true angle of view of the subject, just like autobiography does not of the subject" (p. 2).

Faith Ringgold starts, in fact, her autobiography by describing her mother's qualities and insists on several occasions that her mother was a very pretty, good looking woman who liked to please guests with her appearance (*ibid.*, p. 5). Like in the previous autobiographies, here too the maternal figure is associated with discipline: thus, in Faith Ringgold's home her mother was the main disciplinarian. In fact, when she weaves Chapter 1, quite full of her mother, she makes clear that she owes her self-discipline to her mother since she demanded orderly behaviour and respect from her children. Interestingly, while Audre Lorde hopes for signs of verbal and non-verbal affection from her mother (and is deeply disillusioned when she receives none), Faith Ringgold is fully aware that the time when she was coming of age was utterly different from the time when she writes her autobiography and no one spoke of love between parents and children then. This kind of love was non-verbalised but it was expressed through parental care for the children, through acts rather than words. Faith Ringgold highlights the fact that although her mother never verbalised her love towards them, there was never any doubt that she did love them. More than that, Ringgold even mentions incidents when it was her mother who occasionally spanked her children, if need arose (contrasting thus her mother with her father who never resorted to physical punishment).

It was also her mother who sparked her interest in art from a tender age: after little Faith had her first asthma attack and had to stay home, she strolled with her mother round the city streets becoming familiar with public and urban spaces. They went to parks and museums, theatres, and galleries. Contact with art was ensured through concerts during which Black performers and others played and sang, e.g., Frank Sinatra, Billie Holliday, and Ella Fitzgerald. There is a striking contrast between her mother's attention to her development and her father's. Her father used to take her to bars where she would be exposed to alcohol and adult conversations, but it was her mother who was the first trigger onto the artistic path.

Any time Ringgold turns to her mother in the text, she does it to render her image as that of a self-sufficient, well-organised woman who never uttered a word of complaint about money shortages and tight family budgets. Financial difficulties so often affecting Black families at the time (Faith Ringgold grew up between both World Wars) made many Black women bear the brunt of dire economic conditions. Often taking odd jobs, they had to make ends meet and keep hunger and poverty at bay in situations when they were either single mothers or the sole wage earners in the family. However, in Faith Ringgold's family, the

children were never exposed to tensions related to financial hardships. An important aspect she shares with Audre Lorde's and Nina Simone's memories of childhood and teenage years is that none of their families, despite uncertainties and periodic joblessness, decided to blame white society for their fate in front of their children. The Lordes' and the Waymons' believed deeply in hard work and personal responsibility for their life and such was the case with the Ringgolds'. The children were raised to be self-sufficient and learned to economise and be financially accountable. Poverty did not excuse laziness or looking for an external enemy (white people). These values were instilled in the children and, undoubtedly, impacted the way Faith Ringgold saw the world at large and her own Black identity. She never allowed herself a single dose of self-pity as a Black girl/woman, although, like Audre Lorde and Nina Simone, she did realise with time that the Black community was discriminated against in housing, schooling, art, and daily life. She observed clear prejudice against her peers at school and later, as a renowned artist, she took very concrete steps to eradicate such prejudice. Still, in her autobiography she never expressed a single view that would reveal resentment at being Black or hatred or hostility towards white people. This, certainly, is a trait she owed to her parents who had gone to great lengths to educate their children in the atmosphere of tolerance and openness.

The pride Faith Ringgold feels for her mother prevails through the entire autobiography. Any effort her mother made to become a responsible citizen and self-sufficient woman evoke in the author a deep sense of gratitude and admiration. With the advent of WWII, Willi Posey went to work outside the home, as many other American women did, not only to contribute to the war effort but also to turn into a financially autonomous woman. The mother, too, initiated her path onto independence by working in a defense plant and, simultaneously, she started an activity which would later become her primary career in the fashion industry:

> During the war many black families got "on their feet" by working in defense plants. My mother, like so many women all over the country, went to work for the first time outside the home. She worked in a defense plant sewing Eisenhower jackets for the army; she also sewed at home, designing and making clothes for friends and relatives for extra cash. She no longer had to depend on Daddy for support. Her newfound financial independence gave her peace of mind, and, at the same time, this was to be the start of her career in fashion design. (Ringgold, *ibid.*, p. 26)

Ringgold feels visible pride and affection towards her mother, and she is perfectly capable of translating those emotions into text. She portrays her mother as an admirable person and a true role model in her life. A few lines later, she writes about her mother's divorce from her father and although she is delicate and tactful enough not to blame her father for the end of the marriage, it is obvious on whose side her loyalty lies: "In 1942 Mother got divorce from Daddy and shocked the family by changing her name to Willi Posey, her maiden name" (*ibid.*, p. 26). This is definitely a feminist-oriented commentary on her proto-feminist mother. Although Ringgold's mother is never directly associated with feminism in the autobiography, and the author herself takes considerable time in her narrative to reveal a clear feminist philosophy, she displays a woman-oriented attitude by describing how her mother defied the social and cultural rules of her times: she not only succeeded in becoming financially independent, but also managed to set herself free of her drunk husband and, to everybody's shock, went back to using her maiden name which, in itself, is a highly autonomous, feminist act of self-affirmation and self-naming. Certainly, the seeds of the future artist were planted by her mother's example and behaviour at the time the autobiographer was still a little girl. Her identity (as a Black girl and independent woman) is fruit of decades of interaction with and observation of her mother.

A significant portion of the autobiography where the maternal figure turns out to be central to the narrative, including Chapter 4 and beyond, deals with Faith Ringgold's mother as a successful fashion designer. This insistence on her mother's professional career and her passion for clothes might have several aims. First of all, Faith Ringgold continues with the homage paid to her mother to whom she owes so much as an artist. Secondly, it can be argued that the portrayal of her mother's self-sufficiency and industriousness serves a pedagogical objective. Certainly, because her autobiography is addressed to different audiences such as young Black women, African American artists, Ringgold's critics, her daughters and granddaughters, the rendition of her mother as a goal-oriented woman who achieved success in her profession against all odds, establishes her as a model and proof that anything is possible, even for Black people, as long as they possess strong will, determination and motivation to work hard. No external conditions or prejudice paired with racism and other forms of denigration can deter a person if they wish to achieve success. This is one of the most important legacies her mother left her: resilience in the face of external conditions, unfaltering faith in her own capacities and talents as well as motivation to succeed. She has been profoundly impacted as a Black woman and as an artist by her mother's choices,

behaviour, and life and, for this reason, the maternal figure is so revered throughout the autobiography.

If the narrative frequently touches on the maternal figure in Chapters 1, 2 and 3, Chapter 4 is exclusively dedicated to Faith Ringgold's mother. The affective relationship binding the two women is the central theme of the Chapter where the author develops some of the ideas referred to in earlier and later chapters. However, it must be noted that, apart from the purely affective link between Willi Posey and Faith Ringgold, the authorial strategy laid out in Chapter 4 is to demonstrate the deep impact Willi Posey had on her daughter as an artist. Aude Lorde resorts to the same authorial strategy: she claims in her biomythography that she became the poet due to her mother's poetry and love for words. In Faith Ringgold's text there is, of course discussion of love, respect and reverence the daughter had towards her mother, however what is of interest here first and foremost is the focus on the professional dimension that linked both women. It is not that the emotional links are irrelevant. Indeed, they are of undeniable importance also because they impacted the way Faith Ringgold saw herself as a Black girl. She felt loved, wanted, and appreciated and those emotions helped her develop as a girl fully aware of her own value as a human being and particularly as a Black girl. Her mother's unconditional love and acceptance of the author's life choices, her investment in her racial dignity, although never really spoken of directly but rather through acts and life postures, bore fruit in the form of great self-esteem as a Black, fully humane, and dignified woman. Still, the author pays particular heed to her mother's career and their artistic collaboration as she deemed them essential in her becoming an (woman) artist. It is possible then at this point to draw a parallel between Audre Lorde, Nina Simone, and Faith Ringgold's rendition of their mothers as triggers in the girls' choice of careers and interest in art. If Audre Lorde became a poet due to her mother's language and cultural influences of the West Indies transmitted by her mother on a daily basis, Faith Ringgold sees, in the same vein, her mother as a source of inspiration for her own artistic life.

Ringgold argues that she feels obliged to preserve the story, the life history of her mother's truth and pass it onto next generations. The mother's voice becomes, then, audible through her daughter's writing – a dialogue is established in which the daughter offers space

in her autobiography to her mother's story[23]. It is, indeed, a sensitive and intricate work to render one's mother visible without trying to impose on her one's own vision and voice and violate, in this way, another person's freedom and autonomy. To some extent women-mothers can become exposed to their daughters' mercy and whims because, although it is possible to use the term "conversation" in this context, it depends entirely on a daughter-writer who has all the authorial control. Feminist demands to give voice back to silenced women can be easily forgotten, if not overly distorted in such situations, if the mother's voice is silenced through the daughter's narrative (Malin, 2000, *op. cit.*). Taking a closer look, however, at Faith Ringgold's narrative, one written as a daughter, it can be concluded that there is a sincere effort to transmit the mother's voice protecting her autonomy and safeguarding her heritage. The following excerpt illustrates very well the author's intention to ensure her mother's image is honestly rendered:

> I wanted to know everything about my mother; she was, after all, a model for me. As I grew up, I began to criticize her flamboyancy, yet, even so, I always admired her personality, strength, and courage. Most people will believe whatever we say about our parents. It is my responsibility to keep my mother's truths and pass them on – one day I hope my daughters and granddaughters will do the same for me. (Ringgold, *ibid.*, p. 68)

This excerpt is also important because it sheds light on Faith Ringgold's philosophy which, even without formally naming it "feminist", reveals her tendencies to ascribe significance to matrilineal legacies where stories, wisdom and affections continue along the feminine line within the family. She expects younger women from her family, her daughters, and their daughters, to continue the work her grandmother and mother started of establishing links between women and passing stories to subsequent generations. In this philosophy, women are receptacles of certain traditions and memories and are responsible for passing them down to further generations of women.

[23] Jo Malin in her 2000 book on autobiographies where daughters speak to and for their mothers, examines different autobiographies whose narrative is that of daughters. In this way, the authors break the genre and open it to new possibilities where polyvocality reigns. Voices of mothers and daughters overlap, complement each other and in this way the text becomes an auto/biography. The dichotomy between subject/object is rejected, however it must be noted that unless such an autobiography is a collaborative project, who will retain the authorial and textual power is always the narrator (daughter in the examples presented by Malin).

In her family, her grandmother used to make clothes and so did her mother: the artistic inspiration, thus, did not start with Faith Ringgold but she was a carrier of the female tradition within her family. However, growing up in a home where art was truly appreciated, was a means of caring for the family, attaining financial security and self-expression, must have left indelible traces on Faith Ringgold, as is confirmed by Patricia A. Turner:

> While Willie (sic) didn't quite belong to the upper tier of the black bourgeoisie, she sustained a relatively comfortable lifestyle for herself and her one son and two daughters. Willie's clientele was firmly rooted in the black upper classes; she specialized in designing one-of-a-kind garments that well-heeled black women could wear to concerts, cotillions, wedding, and other formal events favoured by affluent blacks. Thus, Faith Ringgold came of age in a household headed by an artistic, successful, and confident black woman who encouraged her children to aspire to greatness. (Turner, 2009: 137-8)

Undoubtedly, Willi Posey played an important role in Faith Ringgold's decision not only to invest seriously in art but also to work with fabric, even if initially the author experimented mainly with paintings. Sewing, clothes and fabric were inseparable elements in their home and, as Faith Ringgold recollects in her autobiography, her mother would always insist that the children dressed in an original, if sometimes slightly embarrassing way. Therefore, as some art scholars affirm (Farrington, 1999, *ibid*.) daughters-artists often choose the same media as their mothers:

> Psychoanalytic studies have emphasized the importance of the mother in artist's choices of media. (…) A work of art is an outgrowth of the child's transitional object – in Ringgold's case, the fabric that she played with as a child. (Farrington, *ibid*., p. 101)

When she refers to her mother's artistic inclinations which Willi Posey managed to turn into a source of income and career, Faith Ringgold cannot help but transmit an image of a highly skilled and talented woman. Discussing her courage and determination to study at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York and join several guilds and associations for designers, the author constructs textually her mother as the role model she followed without hesitation in the world of art. Trips to Africa taken by her mother served as a source

of inspiration and knowledge about African art, patterns and prints she would later use when designing clothes. Referring to her mother's choice of fabric and finishings, the author comments on her mother's talent, eye for detail and fine taste as well as the originality of her ideas. As she claimed, years after her mother's death, she would still look for clothes that would remind her of her mother's taste and work.

The mother-daughter bond finds its utmost expression in their collaboration which further strengthened their mutual understanding and love. The inspiration Faith Ringgold's mother evoked in her daughter was translated into works of art both women created together. In 1976 Willi Posey and Faith Ringgold initiated their collaboration on the Slave Rape Series where Ringgold's mother made the tankas. According to the author:

> What was so wonderful about collaborating with her was her ingenious solutions to design problems. For example, I was not sure how the tankas should look for the Slave Rape Series. (…) When she was a little girl growing up in Florida, Mother had learned quilt-making in the free-hand piecing technique her grandmother, Betsy Bingham, had taught her. The result was that Mother's tankas were an amazing and original blend: a tanka that was Tibetan and African inspired, and yet also drew heavily from the African-American women's pieced quilting tradition. (Ringgold, *ibid*., p. 75-76)

The centuries old tradition of quilt-making, characteristic of African American women's art blends with African and Asian influences in a common effort brought to life by mother and daughter. This impressive mixture of artistic inspirations and female love and affects gives birth to productions that will outlast both the mother and the daughter. This creative collaboration remains a source of pride and happiness for Faith Ringgold also because it turned out to be a precious lesson on art and motherly-daughterly love. Racial identity is present too as both women draw from African American and African art and spiritual roots translating their origins and racial belonging into tangible objects. Quilt-making is passed, then, from one generation of Black women to another: the activity has been ongoing since Faith Ringgold's grandmother excelled in it. When in 1980 Faith Ringgold was invited to collaborate on an art project involving twelve artists for the exhibition "The Artist and the Quilt", she resolved to work with her mother again and, as she argues, that was the most adequate and natural choice (*ibid*, p. 76). Thus, "Echoes of Harlem" was born as a result of their collaboration. Musing about her late mother (who

passed on October 28, 1981 while she was preparing a maternity quilt for her granddaughter Barbara), the author admits to being indebted to her mother's values, ideas and memories that constitute now a rich depository from where she can draw strength and inspiration as a woman and artist:

> Mother left me with a rich endowment of ideas and memories. If I live to be as old as Susie Shannon, my great-great-grandmother (who was one hundred and ten years of age when she died), I would never need more. Not a day passes that I don't wish I could tell my mother about all the many beautiful things that have happened to me since she died: a twenty-year retrospective at the Studio Museum in Harlem; a twenty-five-year retrospective that travelled to thirteen museums; a senior professorship at the University of California at San Diego; seven honorary doctorates including one from my alma mater; this autobiography; over hundred awards, honors, citations, and grants; (…) an increasingly happy marriage; two wonderful daughters; three beautiful grandchildren; and many, many new friends. (Ringgold, *ibid.*, p. 77)

This is a moving homage to a woman who is at the heart of the author's autobiography and to whom she owes nearly everything, assuredly her sense of worth and purpose. Interestingly, the author enumerates many of her professional achievements, but she also transmits the message that her private life was equally satisfactory, even if at times fraught with tension, conflicts with her husband and intense misunderstandings with her daughters.

To mourn her mother, Faith Ringgold created a series of works where she portrayed her late mother and her granddaughter Baby Faith. The five-part abstract series depicts children with a figure hovering above them representing her mother. This hovering figure also symbolises protection, love and hope only a mother can provide. She called the pieces "painting the inside of my head" (*ibid.*, p. 79) and the whole process served to purify her mind and traverse the period of mourning. As she claims in her autobiography, it was also a deeply therapeutic process which helped her gain peace of mind after her mother departed.

Although Ringgold focuses on her mother and their fruitful relationship mostly in Chapter 4, the following Chapter also makes certain references to Willi Posey and, just as in previous chapters, they are equally flattering and positive. Chapter 5 addresses Faith Ringgold's tumultuous relationship with her two daughters, Michelle and Barbara, however

the author takes another opportunity to highlight the special bond that united her and her mother. Most of this Chapter is dedicated though to a sincere account of the author's problems with her daughters where she notes generational differences which resulted in unfulfilled expectations and deep ideological divides. Here, the daughter-autobiographer becomes the mother-autobiographer. Faith Ringgold speaks, thus, from multiple locations and occupies two contested terrains: that of a daughter and a mother. At any rate, the conclusion she reaches at the end of the Chapter is that, although there is much love between her and her daughters and she looks into the future with hope and peace, she could only wish her relationship with her daughters were as harmonious as her exemplary relationship with her mother in which lack of loyalty would be unthinkable. Everything her mother ever said was accepted and obeyed as Faith Ringgold would not even dare imagine disobeying Willi Posey. It was, however, not only a matter of discipline and different times (Faith Ringgold's daughters came of age in the 1970s) but, in her eyes, that of love and mutual respect. She is pained to see that her daughters were ready to disavow the feminine legacy of their family and turn their backs on its traditions. Her own expectations and even loyalty proved to be a burden to both Michelle and Barbara. What she reports to be even more painful is her portrayal in Michelle Wallace's widely known and equally widely criticised book *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* published in 1978.

Michelle Wallace did write a controversial book and received severe backlash for publishing it, particularly from the male side of the Black community. In it she discusses the questions of feminism and male-female Black relations which were often fraught with tension, misunderstandings, and outright sexism. However, in a part concerning her own mother, Wallace states that although her mother is a brilliant artist and feminist, she could never understand why she depended so much on her husband's income and on his disciplinarian role with regard to her daughters (Wallace, 1978/2015: xxxviii). In this way she, in fact, negates all that Faith Ringgold thought and wrote about herself as a strong, independent woman. In her autobiography she addresses this issue expressing her disappointment at her daughter for not giving her credit as a feminist who tried to raise them with deep respect for themselves as women:

> In her book Michelle "whitewashed" the Mexican commune incident and made me look like a controlling stereotypical black matriarch whose daughter became a feminist in spite of her. She gave me no credit as a role model for learning how to be a woman and a political activist. There is no greater defeat to a woman who is a

> mother than to have her value as a mother denied. I had produced two very talented children; why not give me credit? (Ringgold, *ibid.*, p. 94)

Ringgold positions herself here as a mother whose expectations, moulded by her own relationship with her mother, have been totally misplaced and she was disappointed in her children's treatment of her as they grew up. What would be totally unthinkable to her as a daughter – to defy and openly disobey her mother – was a normal growing process for her daughters. Challenging and questioning maternal (or parental in general) authority was definitely unacceptable at the time Faith Ringgold was coming of age. The opposite of it, obedience and respect were a sign of deep trust that bonded Faith Ringgold and her mother, Willi Posey. From that bond was born an individual who had determination and courage to become an artist at a time when Black female artists were largely ignored and marginalised by mainstream culture and the Black *milieu*.

5.4. Rebecca Walker's affective nomadism between maternal and paternal topography: the memoir as an homage to maternal roots.

Rebecca Walker's autobiography is the most troubled among the four texts analysed in this Thesis. It undoubtedly offers a narrative fraught with identity-related tensions which do not disappear from the book nearly until its closure. Rebecca Walker's textual battles with her biracial and hybrid identity have been examined in the two previous chapters of this work. These chapters take a closer look at the tension between her individual self and the community as well as the way she constructs her racial body in the narrative. In the process of her self's construction, the maternal and paternal figures are of the utmost importance because while transiting between her mother and father (both geographically, culturally, and emotionally), Rebecca Walker had to transit between an African American avant-garde and multiracial community and a white wealthy and conservative Jewish one. Each of the environments she was immersed in required her to adapt her comportment, language, way of thinking, body movements and to negotiate her subjectivity. Each of the worlds she inhabited was governed by its own rules to which people who were deemed unfit and non-belonging did not have an access. It can be affirmed that Walker's eternal strife to comprehend who she really was – a biracial child, fruit of a social experiment, the result of an unthinkable situation where a Black woman and a white man loved each other – resulted

not so much from her ethnicity as from the fact that the external world wondered how it was even possible she existed. Alice Walker's family and friends and Melvyn Leventhal's closest circle burdened the girl with their own expectations not allowing her to understand the nature of bicultural or multicultural origins. Among her peers she was often bullied into obedience or silenced if she failed to come up to their expectations too. Racial authenticity was absolutely required to belong and be an uncontested member of the group. All those rules, rituals and expectations made Rebecca Walker feel inadequate and wrong for many years of her life, as she relates in her autobiography.

Both of Rebecca Walker's parents occupy considerable space in her autobiography but it is the paternal figure that the author disavows at the end of the book when she chooses her mother's name and cultural heritage to claim as her own. What she remembers of her childhood is, primarily, the huge dose of freedom both her parents gave her believing she had to choose on her own whom she wanted to be and how she wanted to live her life. She claims that what she remembers from all the houses she inhabited (there were many especially after her parents' divorce and the decision for her to go back and forth every two years) were the doors and how they were always open to her, how she was free to leave and go wherever she wished:

> My parents did not hold me tight, but encouraged me to go. They did not buffer, protect or watch out for, or look after me. I was watered, fed, admired, stroked and expected to grow. I was mostly left alone to discover the world and my place in it. From the houses and apartments in which I lived, I remember most of the doors and how they opened for me. (Walker, 2001, *ibid.*, p. 5)

What she needed, though, were rules and discipline to bring some order into her life but she received adult treatment from her parents at a time when she needed guidance. She felt left on her own, like a flower, never really protected and looked after. This must have contributed to her sense of alienation and abandonment, especially when the author was flooded by multiple doubts concerning her self-worth, ethnic background, and the racial prejudice she faced within her Jewish family.

The narrative shows her mother mainly in the context of her professional activity, but it is clear from the beginning that whenever Rebecca Walker references Alice Walker, the language brims with affection. Some early memories from her childhood are related to

the moments little Rebecca listened to her mother's typing machine or to music performed by Black artists such as Roberta Flack or Al Green. Contrary to previous analysed autobiographers, her parents had resources and the fact that they had help, Mrs Dixon, testifies to the fact that Rebecca Walker was raised in a wealthy environment. She never had to watch her parents struggle to make ends meet and or to keep the family safe from hunger. Her earliest memories are related, similarly to Audre Lorde's, to bodily rituals between the mother and the daughter such as rubbing cocoa butter on their skins[24]. In fact, as has been already asserted before (chapters III and IV), the body and the skin, particularly its colour, are highly significant elements in Walker's autobiography as it is there, on the body surface, where she sees the visible expression of her and her mother's race. Expressions such as her "little copper form" or leaning against her mother's "cherry brown body" (Walker, *ibid*, p. 16) are telling not only because they reveal how Rebecca Walker felt about her body but because in her skin colour the author perceives a source of unity with her mother. She is undeniably her mother's little daughter because they share race. When her mother is ostracised by her husband's white family, Rebecca Walker reads this as a sign that she, too, is unwelcome. Her grandmother Miriam, a Jewish woman, is not described in a flattering way precisely because the author remembers the uncomfortable atmosphere of tension between both women, her mother and grandmother. Those tensions within the family have a clear racial origin and the mystery of the familial conflict unfolds as the narrative flows: the grandmother never accepted the fact that her Jewish son did not marry a proper Jewish girl. Alice Walker is, thus, largely ignored by the Leventhals' and to Rebecca Walker this fact will become one of the reasons she will opt to claim her mother's racial and cultural (and matrilineal) heritage:

> Daddy seems happy Grandma came to see us, but Mama seems nervous, angry. I think this is because Grandma doesn't look at Mama. When she talks to Mama, she looks at me. (Walker, *ibid*., p. 16)

In the text, Rebecca Walker's mother is portrayed as coherent and non-compromising before the prejudice she confronts within the white family. She is too honest and dignified to pretend she feels comfortable in the presence of people who refuse to

[24] Similar rituals are referenced in autobiographies written by Audre Lorde and Nina Simone, however Faith Ringgold's narrative, although deeply reverent of her mother, pays less heed to similar rituals which would bring two bodies, that of the daughter and of the mother, together.

acknowledge her existence and ethnic roots. During the meetings at the grandmother's home, Alice Walker's absence is telling and the author becomes gradually more and more aware of racial divides within the family. Her mother's absence is so prominent that, in fact, it fills the room where everybody gathered to dine. It prevents the author from fully enjoying the meeting and from loving her family members unconditionally:

> Nights at Uncle Jackie's I miss my mother's deep, melodious laughter floating alongside my father's, her elegant brown hands pooh-poohing my grandmother's ridiculous assertions, her warm voice complimenting my aunt Lisa on her antipasto. Her presence at the table would grant me the great luxury of being able to love my family members unreservedly, to take them irrevocably as my own. As it is, the specter of my mother, of race, really, and the inability of my relatives to deal with it, leaves me somewhere on the periphery of my own experience, unable to commit to fully being there. (*ibid*, p. 47)

At the same time, this ghostly (non) presence is the reason she feels inadequate, incomplete, and wobbling on the edge of two worlds. The rejection of her mother means to her that she is not acknowledged either. Her mother's dark skin is what dooms her in her father's Jewish family and, by extension, dooms her too creating her feeling of non-belonging. Thus, Rebecca Walker transmits the message in her autobiography that whoever failed to acknowledge her mother, failed to acknowledge her daughter as well. It is not through early identification with her father that she gains awareness of her worth and value. As the white family distances itself from Alice Walker, Rebecca Walker slowly comes to realise that she needs her mother in order to become a full person. If she is to achieve full realisation of who she is, she needs to embrace her mother's roots.

It is also through intimate moments with her mother, and not her white, Jewish stepmother that she develops bodily and emotional links to the Other. The author recollects nights when her mother cried because of marriage woes (which resulted in divorce) and those nights spent in one bed with her mother are the moments the author treasures most. The room where they sleep together in each other's arms, bodies entwined, becomes a symbolic space of intimacy which brings them as close as a mother and daughter can become. The daughter feels bodily and spiritually united with her mother; the link is so tight that Rebecca Walker reminiscences: "When I fall asleep I don't know where she starts and I begin" (*ibid.*, p. 56). This is the union of two selves undivided by anything: racism, rejection

by the family and the external world. One is the extension of the other. The white stepmother, although friendly and supportive also in the most private moments Rebecca Walker experiences, such as her first menses, never brings so much emotional comfort. Her white, as if emotionally cold, body is never able to replace her mother's brown, warm, love-exuding body that she misses every time she is obliged to live under her father's roof.

Every time Rebecca Walker lives away from her mother, she seems to lose footing; she feels deprived of protection and the source of life. When they reunite, during the periods in which the author lives with her mother again, their intimacy is intact. Listening to music, being together in the bathroom and washing each other's backs, they talk and re-establish the matrilineal link broken each time they live apart. The physical intimacy is the extension of the spiritual and racial links. It becomes clear, as the narrative progresses that, although conflicts between mother and daughter become unavoidable and Rebecca Walker's expectations regarding the concept of mothering are often unmet[25], her mother is the source of self-esteem and understanding of her own origins. Although she is constantly torn between two cultures and throughout the majority of her narrative does not know where to turn for help and how to solve her identity problem, she feels increasingly more attracted by and at ease with her mother's cultural heritage.

In moments of hesitation, when two cultures seem to claim her, she appears to reject her mother. Trying to navigate the complexities and demands of her white and Jewish friends, she recollects having lived moments of doubt regarding her Black mother. For example, when the children prepare the play *The Wizard of Oz*, she is overwhelmed by excitement and wishes her mother would not come to see it otherwise her white friend Bryan would immediately understand that she is Black - because if she has a Black mother, that

[25] In 2008 Rebecca Walker gave an interview to Farai Chideya where she admitted she had had a horrible and very troubled relationship with her mother, Alice Walker. She says that when she decided to become a mother herself, she hesitated whether her mother's presence would be beneficial for her and the unborn baby: "And I had had such a turbulent relationship with my own mother, that I felt a lot of trepidation about carrying forth a lot of those negative habits and dynamics." Further she adds about her mother: "Well, I think she was extremely ambivalent about motherhood, as were her cohorts. That whole generation. She wrote a well-known essay called "One Child of One's Own" in which she talked about how you should really only have one child, because if you had more than one child you would be enslaved to your children, and you wouldn't be able to be creative, and you wouldn't be able to be free, and you would lose your independence and your peace of mind. And that really to me reflected a great deal of ambivalence." "Rebeca Walker Explains Rift with Her Mother, Alice": https://www.npr.org/transcripts/92373475

inevitably means she is Black herself. In the end, it is her white grandmother who comes and sits in the audience. She is a living proof of Rebecca Walker's connection to the white world – the proof she cannot deny. However, the absence of her mother, another like the one she noted at her Jewish family's home, turns out to be a badge of shame for Walker when she realises her wish to prove her whiteness to her friends means she rejects her inherited Black roots:

> When I look out from the stage I can make out my grandmother's white face in the dark crowd. I think, Mama is not here, Mama is at home. I think, surely Bryan will see my grandmother. I think, surely Bryan will like me now. At the end, when all the parents and teachers stand up and clap for us, I feel an unexpected sadness come into my body, a heat inching up from someplace underneath the skin on my face. I picture Mama lying in her big bed by the window, alone, the lamp giving off a pool of yellow light as she reads, silently wondering about Play Night. Even though everybody says I was good, my mama, the one with the most important voice, can never say this to me. Shame sticks to me like sweat. (Walker, *ibid.*, p. 72)

Clearly, Rebecca Walker's mother is a strong link to the Black world, the most obvious evidence the author can think of her Blackness. Her mother is the constant reminder of her African American origins – something she cannot put aside and pretend she cannot see. Sooner or later, she fully realises she needs to make a decision as to which of these worlds she wants to belong and from which of them to draw her strength and inspiration. Clearly, even though she concludes at the end of the autobiography that she is a hybrid body, a human bridge between two worlds, a cultural translator for her friends from the Black and Jewish communities, she feels she cannot belong to both of them. Claiming her white roots would mean betraying her mother and all her matrilineal heritage and origins.

In fact, one can claim that the sense of non-belonging and displacement she experiences every time she is deprived of close contact with her mother has both emotional and political meaning. Every separation from her mother entails separation from Blackness. It means being returned to the white world of wealthy Jewish people with whom she is unable, as hard as she tries, to establish emotional links. When she spends a weekend with her mother, on the occasion her mother visits her, she is wrapped up in African American music, poetry, politics, Indian food, and revels in the company of the women that constituted Alice Walker's entourage. It is worlds apart from what she experiences with her

father and stepmother. It is her mother's world that she associates with emotions, colours, total acceptance of who she is. There is no doubt that it is Rebecca Walker's mother who enhances her racial identity, impacts deeply her sense of self, and awakens in her the appreciation for everything Black: culture, clothes, hair, and so on. The women Rebecca Walker encounters when she spends time with her mother all abide by the tenets of Black feminism. She states in her autobiography that sisterhood is talked about and lived in practise:

> In this woman's [Black] house there is incense burning and sweet-smelling, beautiful black women in flowing dresses of African print who laugh and discuss racism, sexism and imperialism late into the night. The women burn candles, order Chinese food, and spread out red, blue, and purple scarves on the table in the living room to read tarot cards. In between they talk about law and transcendental meditation and women they know who are traveling around the world. (Walker, *ibid.*, p. 102)

The excerpt above reveals much about Alice Walker's lifestyle: bohemian, intellectual and spiritual. In such an atmosphere Rebecca Walker was maturing to understand what her mother was able to give her and to what kind of world she belonged. This world had nothing, in Walker's view, to do with the white, austere, and intellectually detached life her father and stepmother offered her. In addition, as Rebecca Walker notes in her autobiography, she felt deeply disillusioned with her father because he seemed to have exchanged his earlier values such as racial equality, the fight for justice and an uncompromising attitude in life for financial comfort, an easy life in wealthy Jewish areas and obedience to the Jewish rules of marriage and settling down. According to the author, having given up on her mother and chosen to marry a Jewish woman, Mr Leventhal adapted his views and actions to mainstream and also Jewish culture and betrayed all he believed in throughout his youth. She makes it clear in the narrative that it was one of the reasons she opted, at the end, for her mother's roots and racial identity. She had no wish to become a collaborator of hegemonic society.

She started being associated with and recognised through her mother's family, not her father's. While accompanying her mother at the Library of Congress, she is approached as Alice Walker's daughter; she feels acknowledged, something her Jewish family was never willing to do. During her mother's poetry session she is seen: "She is Alice's little girl" (*ibid.*, p. 102). She can bask in her mother's fame and reputation and this also fulfils her emotional

needs to be claimed and wanted. Her mother's fame became the pleasure in which she could partake.

It must be stated clearly that Rebecca Walker's mother is not the only one credited with her developing sense of identity. The process is enhanced by the Black community she joins in the Bronx, when she lives with her father and stepmother. Walker's narrative is full of people – friends and acquaintances – who guide her on the path to total acceptance and embracing her Black roots. There is, for example, Melissa whom Rebecca Walker imitates in the way she speaks, moves, and reacts. The process of racial belonging is a long road from low self-esteem to certainty – as seen in chapters III and IV – where "authenticity" depends on the way a person dresses, talks, the music to which they listen. It is a complex social and cultural process where many things must be learned and performed well enough. Only then is a person deemed adequate to belong and be part of the community. However, it is clear that Rebecca Walker's peers, although important to the whole process, demanded proof of her belonging, her mother showed her she already did, no matter how she behaved.

Alice Walker becomes a central figure in the autobiography not only because of emotional links bonding mother and daughter but also, or primarily, because it is through her mother that Rebecca Walker solves her identity conflict. Her mother plays the role of an initiation guide, unveiling the secrets of what it means to be Black (either through her lifestyle, cultural influences or showing her daughter a picture of a great-great-great-grandmother who was enslaved) and that Blackness can be a source of pride and life. Additionally, claiming her Blackness, changing her surname to Walker and shifting the family name of her father to the middle is an act that demonstrates that Rebecca Walker chooses, along with her ethnic origins, the matrilineal heritage of her mother. She emphasises in this way the meaningfulness of her African legacy and her readiness to accept her Black past and people. It is through the women on her mother's line she associates herself with Blackness, women-oriented culture, and philosophy. Lastly, it is also through her mother that Rebecca Walker gains her values – political, feminist, and cultural. By giving visibility to her mother's name, she created an indelible link between them as well as between her and previous generations of Black women.

All four autobiographers analysed in this chapter weave their textual selves by establishing links with their significant Others. None of them portrays herself as a lonely island, autonomous and unattached to her family or the most intimate circle of friends and

lovers. The purpose of the chapter was to scrutinise how the maternal and paternal figures impacted the budding self of each of the authors, whether the father or mother are visible or hidden from the narrative and whether the authors give credit to their close Others for what they have become. All autobiographers weave their significant Others into their self-narrative, rendering them visible, depending on their experiences, memories, and the aim of their autobiographies. For all of them, however, the project of emphasizing the bond (even if complex) with their mothers and other women seems to be of more importance than highlighting the paternal and male figures in their lives. There is a greater or smaller degree of reverence towards the maternal figure in each autobiography and each author solves the textual tension in a different way but it can be concluded that none of the autobiographies under the examination ignores or glosses over the maternal figure, even if, seemingly, in some narratives it is the father who is placed at the centre of the text.

It can be safely concluded that Audre Lorde, Faith Ringgold, and Rebecca Walker compose narratives which give ample visibility to their mothers. To all the three authors the maternal figure is central in how they weave their textual self as Black girls coming-of-age. Nina Simone seems to pay more attention to her father, at least on a textual level, however it must be noted that it is a psychological and authorial strategy to emphasise her mother's impact on her life. Although described in a less flattering way than the father, Nina Simone's mother turns out to be the figure most longed for. There is no doubt that Nina Simone's artistic career and her choice to join the Movement are expressions of the deeply anchored desire to earn her mother's admiration and respect. Although less visible throughout the autobiography than the father, Nina Simone's mother is the person the author makes peace with and accepts the way she is closer to the end of the autobiography. This reconciliation between the daughter and the mother, at least textually speaking, brings Nina Simone a sense of relief and diminishes the tension caused by unmet needs for love and emotional fulfilment.

In contrast, Audre Lorde who focuses on her mother throughout the entire narrative and takes efforts to depict her as a strong, deeply erotic figure, ends her biomythography highlighting the split between her and her mother. Natural intergenerational differences, visible to some extent in each autobiography under the analysis, are particularly emphasised at the closure of the text in Audre Lorde's biomythography because, as has been suggested, the disappointment Audre Lorde felt in relation to her mother had more to do with the fact she turned out to be a heterosexual woman. Despite her efforts to render the figure of her

mother as a "dyke", a women-loving woman, she sees the pain her mother experiences caused by her husband's death and understands that her mother must have loved her husband. Nevertheless, Audre Lorde upholds the image of her mother as an erotic goddess with her brown womanly body, sensuous links to the West Indies and her poetic language which she instilled in Audre Lorde and which were the reasons of her becoming a poet. The whole biomythography is a tribute to Black motherhood and by choosing such an authorial strategy to express her gratitude to and deep love for her mother, Audre Lorde reclaims the dignity, power and beauty of all Black women and mothers.

In a similar way, Faith Ringgold's portrayal of her mother has as a goal to demonstrate that artistic passion and vocation came to her through the matrilineal line, from her great-grandmother and grandmother to her mother. The art she chose for herself, working with fabrics, creating tankas and quilts is a fruit of African American traditions cherished mostly by Black women. Faith Ringgold becomes an artist because her mother and grandmother were ones. Although Ringgold does use the emotional language when she reminiscences on her mother and emphasises the emotional bond between both of them, her aim is rather to show her mother as an outstanding woman-artist, independent and knowledgeable. In this respect she differs from Audre Lorde who insisted on the (imaginary) erotic and emotional dimension of her bond with her mother.

Rebeca Walker, in turn, paints a portrait of her mother as a figure from whom she was regularly separated due to the divorce arrangements between her parents. The author shifts constantly between maternal and paternal topographies. She is a nomad between two seemingly conflicting cultures, however at a certain stage she disavows her Jewish father to embrace the ethnic roots of her mother. She leaves no doubt throughout her narrative about who has the greatest impact on her budding racialised and feminine self. By choosing to shift her mother's surname to the more visible position, she fulfils a feminist task to cherish the matrilineal bonds, Black past and traditions. Identifying with her mother's brown body, Rebecca Walker opts for her mother's culture and embraces it as her own as well. Also in this way, she seems to bring to the end the internal conflict with her parents because she finally feels free to choose Blackness over Jewishness/whiteness. In this way she also eases the internal tension and strife in relation to her own roots, sense of identity and self-worth. The figure of the mother is, thus, a source of life-sustaining values, self-love, and final acceptance of who she really is.

CONCLUSIONS

It has been the goal of this Thesis to examine thoroughly four autobiographies written in the 20th Century by African American women. The autobiographies selected for this study were: Audre Lorde's *Zami. A New Spelling of My Name* (1982), Nina Simone's *I Put a Spell on You* (1991), Faith Ringgold's *We Flew Over the Bridge* (1995) and Rebecca Walker's *Black, White and Jewish: Autobiography of a Shifting Self* (2001). In its initial part, the study discussed the three literary concepts: the autobiography, the memoir and the autofiction in order to draw similarities and differences between them and better understand the complex link between the questions of memory, fiction, facts vs lies and authorial freedom to create rich self-narratives. This part of the Thesis focused also on the complex relationship between the text and the narrative self and, drawing on recent research in the area of Literary and Cultural Studies as well as Cognitive sciences; it sought to demonstrate and examine the theories which establish a close link between the written text, memories, and the sense of self. The female literary production, being of great relevance to this study, was ignored and dismissed as of little value by male literary critics during many decades of the 20th Century. Hence the initial part of this study focused as well on the important issue of gendered writing. Women's autobiographies have been considered by feminist criticism as a particularly useful tool for self-construction and self-affirmation and this premise illuminated the entire Thesis. The whole theoretical contextualisation included in the first part of the study had as its aim to prepare conceptual grounds for the examination of the four autobiographies included in the corpus of the Thesis.

The main research question focused on the textual construction of each of the writers' selves and subjectivities. What propelled the scholarly interest in the topic was the question defined in the following way: how do these different Black women – artists, activists, feminists, daughters, mothers, and partners – weave their textual stories and how do they create the fabric of their individual selves? The main research question is supported by three pillars which have also been called "axes". Each axis is composed of more detailed and specific research questions and refers to one specific problem which is examined in dedicated chapters. Also, each axis constitutes a problematic which is strictly linked to the phenomenon of self-writing and, in the case of African American women, traditionally exposed to racism, sexism and other forms of discrimination and silencing (which has been referred to as intersectionality and has been explained throughout the Thesis), prove to be

particularly relevant. The first axis refers to the tension or conflict between the individual narrated and narrating "I" and the Black community. What has been of particular interest to the study was not the "I"'s conflictual relations with white society but with the Black community. The Thesis investigated how each of the autobiographers rendered her individual self in interaction with their Black brethren. Were there any conflicts? Were the authors obliged to negotiate their selves to defend their personal autonomy as Black women, artists, and activists? Did their autobiographies bear any traces of tension, critique, and resistance in relation to the community?

The second pillar on which the present study is built refers to matters of the body. As has been demonstrated, drawing on research in the field of Literature, Cultural Studies, psychology, and neurology, among others, no self-narrative can be divorced from the author's body. Human beings are embodied subjects and as such experience the world upon and through their skin which is the only barrier between the world and them. The body is a surface gazed at by Others, frequently judged, rejected or accepted, depending on current cultural values and patterns of beauty within contemporary societies. Black bodies, a particularly complex topic, still attract attention and in the case of Black women the societal disapproval can come through the body. Thus, knowing that self-writing is deeply rooted in the body, which is also constructed by the gaze of Others, it has been proposed to examine the autobiographical narrative of each writer to better understand how they wove their textual bodies as well. How much space was accorded to the body in each text? Had the body been excessively visible or, on the contrary, placed at the margin of invisibility and silence? How was the body of young, coming-of-age girls depicted? Were the authors' bodies a source of pride or anxiety and insecurity? Was sexuality touched upon and if so, in what linguistic terms? Using what kind of language?

The last axis refers to the relational aspect of self-writing. It has been discussed in different sections of the Thesis that a solitary self is a myth upheld by male literary critics of the first part of the 20th Century. With time autobiography has come to be understood as a genre which portrays many different voices: that of the narrator, but also those of their significant Others, family members, neighbours, husbands and wives, lovers, foes and friends. All these figures gain visibility and a voice, to a greater or lesser extent, in life-narratives. The purpose of the third axis was to examine the autobiographies in the corpus considering affective relations. How did maternal and paternal figures impact the authors' selves? How much space do the authors dedicate to their significant others? In terms of racial

belonging and self-value, did the parental figures have any influence on positive or negative self-images that the authors developed? When the authors speak of female and male friends and lovers, what is the language like, dry or pregnant with emotion? These are the leading questions that guided the current research and dictated the way four autobiographies have been read, interpreted, and examined.

The conclusions are interesting in the case of each autobiography under scrutiny and although every chapter dedicated to each axis already ends with the analysis of findings and permits to draw parallels and differences among the authors and their work, more specific deductions shall be drawn in this final section of the study.

Zami. A New Spelling of My Name by Audre Lorde, her biomythography published in 1982, provides many examples of how the racial self is constructed and revealed throughout the narrative, and how the author, while clearly identifying with the Black community in America and the Caribbean, retained her own individuality and refused to confine herself within the limits of what others considered to be "racial authenticity". Her entire text, imaginative and complex throughout, deals with (non)belonging issues and attempts to transmit her hybrid and fluid self and personality. The question of "racial" belonging permeates the whole work showing considerable degrees of tension and anxiety. Throughout it, Audre Lorde is engulfed in difficult emotions caused by the antagonism of Black and white communities and by the divisions within the Black community along sexual orientation and political lines. Black heterosexual women do not mix with Black homosexual ones, avoiding each other's gaze. Audre Lorde then devises a life-sustaining strategy: because she is not closed upon herself and her racial belonging, she acts as a human bridge between both communities. In acknowledging and loving white women and women in general, she establishes a common point between two divided communities. In the house of difference, she is the one who understands that the future lies in inclusive, not exclusive love and cooperation. As a matter of fact, love and the erotic bonds are essential elements of her strategy of self-affirmation and survival. She deeply believes that love is what can save Black women, but before they can love other women (and men), regardless of skin colour, first they need to love themselves. In her biomythography, Audre Lorde weaves her textual self as a free, independent woman who refuses to give in to racial, political, or cultural dictates of separatism and antagonism. On many occasions she is deeply critical of her own people and community which display no courage to cross boundaries and accept the Other as an equal. What years later came to be known as "intersectionality" had already been

disseminated and advocated by Audre Lorde – she understood well that difference can become a source of power, resistance, and resilience. Thus, when it comes to the question of intra-racial relations, Audre Lorde's autobiography does not gloss over tensions and artificial divisions that scarred the tissue of the Black community. She was clear about her critique of Black people (women in particular) who would refuse to accept Otherness, particularly sexual "otherness" and embrace it within their ranks. Many a times in *Zami* she observes situations where she is seen as Other, non-belonging and transiting between two different worlds: the world of men and women, of Black and white communities, the world of straight and gay people.

In what concerns the matters of the body, it has been concluded that Audre Lorde's biomythography is a fertile narrative in terms of textual representations of the body, not only the author's but also those of other women of any skin colour. The book contains fascinating excerpts and reflections on how Audre Lorde saw herself as a Black, lesbian woman, as well as how she viewed other women, including her mother. Several studies have been written by Lorde scholars who are passionate about Audre Lorde's sexuality which is inextricably linked to the body. In fact, a striking number of works exist on one of Lorde's identities – that of a homosexual woman, on the power of *eros* in her life and poetry, on the strength she drew from being sexually and romantically involved with other women, and on her ability to create myths. Lorde's biomythography offers the readers a rich image of her body which houses all the sexual and cultural legacy of the Caribbean, of her mother and all the women she appreciated and loved, sexually or platonically. Her body is also constructed through her mother's cultural rituals and harks back to the West Indies' gastronomical habits. Many scenes depicted in the autobiography mingle sensuality with exotic flavours, colours and smells of the Caribbean spices, fruits, and juices. Her mother's peculiar use of language (Creole mixed with African American vernacular) lies at the origins of not only Lorde's poetry but the sense of belonging she encounters within her body. Although at times insecure of her body during her teenage years, Lorde portrays it as a source of strength, a home she inhabits where she can feel like herself. Such a sensuous, self-assured discourse places her brown body in striking contrast with the white discourse on Black physique. It is, undoubtedly, an act of resistance against the discriminatory norms of white society. Additionally, it can be safely concluded that Audre Lorde's approach towards her and other women's body (including her mother's) is a tribute to all Black women she knew and those she never met. This, in itself, is a political act of defiance and rejection of

widely accepted norms and beliefs that Black bodies are associated with pathology, impurity, excessive sensuality and sexuality, etc.

The final conclusions refer to the relational aspects rendered visible and significant in all four autobiographies. Here, *Zami* is unquestionably a tribute to the many women Audre Lorde admired and who both inspired and fascinated her. Audre Lorde's autobiography cannot be read and interpreted without picturing all the women, Black and white, who came into her life and stayed with her forever. Since the first page of her autobiography, Audre Lorde concentrates her narrative on other women, all she owed to them, the admiration, fascination and love she had for the women who were a part of her life. But the most important figure that dominates the entire narrative is that of her mother to whom Audre Lorde owes being a woman, a poet, and a lesbian. She is a body from her mother's body and that link can never be broken. She is a poet because she has become a translator of her mother's language. The mother – a figure she craved for, desired, loved and needed is the Woman of all women in her life. As has been mentioned, the maternal figure is a central one throughout the biomythography and it is due to her mother, Linda, that Audre Lorde becomes who she is. It is important to note that every time Lorde mentioned her mother in *Zami*, the language bristled with emotion, love, and even sexual desire. It became arid when it treated male figures, for example her father or her first sexual encounters with boys, but it displayed richness and became poetic when it focused on her mother and other women.

Nina Simone's autobiography, written in collaboration with Stephen Cleary and published in 1991, presents itself as a more traditional self-narrative than Audre Lorde's previously examined biomythography. While Audre Lorde's narrative is non-linear and only covers her adolescent years, which she views as formative and essential to her coming of age as a Black lesbian poet, Nina Simone provides her readers with a more complete, chronological picture of her childhood, youth, and adult years as a world-famous composer and singer.

It is meticulously constructed throughout the narrative, but Nina Simone made it clear that she was constantly torn between her dream of living as a free, racially neutral woman and her sense of obligation to contribute to social justice later in her career. Her individualism, a distinguishing feature of her self, was bolstered by an upbringing provided by parents who valued hard work ethics and meritocracy, and her artistic soul prepared her for the life of a loner pursuing her personal goals. Hers is a bold autobiography where she

continuously demonstrates her value as an artist. Being an artist, in fact, is the most important facet of her textual self. At the beginning of the narrative, she mainly emphasises her focus on her career, practising, playing, and so on. Her aim is to become a known concert pianist regardless of colour. To her, being an artist has no (and should not have) colour; what should matter only is the virtuosity and excellence of her profession. Thus, as she claims, she has lived unaware of her Black community and her "race" during a good part of her musical career. Only later in the text does she begin to realise that, even if she avoids the matter of race, it will catch up with her anyway because regardless of her professionalism, she is Black under the external gaze. Small but significant incidents start to show her she is not "colour-neutral"; she is "Miss Mazzy little colored girl", small, sweet and talented but coloured nonetheless. Nina Simone's autobiographical text is very important as it discusses the obligations and pressures exercised on Black artists. Both the white and Black communities have their set expectations regarding Simone's race, and it seems unavoidable for her to embrace her ethnic dimension. To her parents, especially to her mother, she is a prodigy child who has the chance, if not obligation, to become the first Black concert pianist. All of her sponsors share the same expectation. And then, as her career develops, Nina Simone emphasises in her autobiography that, at a certain stage, she had to involve herself in politics and act through her art, on behalf of her discriminated, tortured and killed community. It is worth noting, though, that in the final section of her autobiography, the author grew severely disillusioned with her community, the way the Civil Rights Movement proceeded and failed to achieve its goals.

Undoubtedly, Nina Simone's autobiography is an account in which the author weaves her narrative self, focusing primarily on the professional aspects of her life. Throughout her story, Nina Simone's textual treatment of her body is sparse. She does not dwell on the significance of her coming-of-age as a girl, transforming herself from adolescence to womanhood. Unlike Audre Lorde, Nina Simone is not concerned with her growing femininity; intimate details such as her developing body or first menstruation are never mentioned. She demonstrates a rather pragmatic approach to her body, with no excessive or obsessive focus on the meaning of being a girl/woman. She does not provide her readers with any philosophical analysis of living in a gendered and racialised body and accepts her Black skin and femininity as they are, without complicating her approach to life. Obviously, she does not shy away from writing about her body because, as an embodied subject, she experiences the world, other people, and herself through it. Her body is not a

source of excessive preoccupation when it comes to beauty standards, but she takes precautions to ensure her audience/readers that she is a respectable girl who adheres to the moral norms of the society she grew up in. Especially in the first half of the narrative she is cautious enough to render her textual body as worthy of respect because it adheres to the rules of feminine respectability. Thus, it is her textual strategy to write from the positionality of an innocent girl, unaccustomed to worldly life in a big city. She portrays herself as modest, shocked at finding out that some women earn their living selling their bodies. Finally, she is a body in transit as she moves between different geographies in America, from one city to another where she cloaks her body in different identities. She shifts as well between continents, and she freely admits, at the end of her autobiography, that she is also a sexual body involved in romantic relationships with people of the opposite sex. However, it is only toward the end of her narrative that she starts to admit to being a sexual and sensual body. Her encounters with men are mentioned but are described in a rather cool, dispassionate language. Nevertheless, at a certain point in her autobiography, Nina Simone turns into a woman on fire, hectically looking for a prospective partner, choosing among different African men, experiencing life from a purely sensual side. She deliberately weaves her textual body as one with sexual needs which, contrarily to the first part of her narrative, does not hesitate to follow its instincts. What she achieves through this strategy is debunking the myth of Black female respectability and claiming her (and other women's) right to choose her own partners and reject the white limitations imposed on a Black body seen as excessively sexual and lascivious. She rejects the option to render herself as a respectable, innocent Black female body as that would confirm her quality of a lady within the mainstream society. This is what white American society expected from Black women and Nina Simone decries the hypocrisy of such expectations. She indulges in her sexuality and describes several encounters with rich African men, portrays herself as a femme fatale, a "huntress" to show that Black women can be and are free to live their sexual lives and bodies the way they wish, rejecting in this way mainstream moral and cultural proscriptions.

Nina Simone too chooses to include descriptions of affective relationships with others, particularly her parents and, later, her partners and lovers, all of whom are men. However, it should be noted that the parental figures of mother and father are constantly woven into the narrative, and the author leaves no doubt that both her parents shaped her as a young girl in many ways. Throughout the narrative, Simone's self is in constant dialogue with the voices of her mother and father, influenced by their sometimes difficult

and complex love, as well as her parents' wishes, ideals, and actions. Although the figure of her mother seems, at times, hidden, unseen, or even belittled, especially in comparison with her father with whom she shared affinities, passions, laughter and secret moments of music-playing, Nina Simone's mother is, in fact, a central figure in the narrative. It is her mother she tries to win over and whose acceptance she desperately craves. All she does, including her composing career, is to please her mother, to win her respect and feel she deserves her love. The autobiography is fraught with tension when it comes to the maternal figure because even if Nina Simone does not speak high of her mother on many occasions, as a matter of fact she longs for her presence, maternal affection, and rituals that, traditionally, African American mothers and daughters share (as is the case of Audre Lorde, Faith Ringgold, and Rebecca Walker).

By accepting her mother as she was at the end of her autobiography, Nina Simone manages to resolve, at least partially, the tension and unresolved conflict with her while her refusal to forgive her father for a long time after his death (and resolving this internal conflict through traditional African spiritual rituals) demonstrates the significance of her mother in her life. Her insistence on having a near-perfect relationship with her father reveals how much she owes to her mother as a Black female artist.

Turning now to Faith Ringgold's autobiography, art historian Lisa Farrington (1999) claims in her insightful and informative book on Faith Ringgold that she is one of the most interesting and dynamic American artists who was faced with both racial and gender discrimination in the 1960s and 1970s. Faith Ringgold, as a woman and a Black artist, took a decisive stand against racial discrimination against Black artists during those two life-changing decades. It has been analysed how, as in Nina Simone's case, the efforts of the Civil Rights Movement and Black Liberation Ringgold witnessed and observed from her beloved Harlem proved to be a turning point in speaking out against centuries of discrimination. However, before Ringgold's narrative turns to the turbulent 1960s and 1970s and her role as a Black artist, her earlier narrative is examined with an aim to trace the fabric of her self-narrative and understand how she saw herself as an African American girl living in Harlem.

In the same way that her experiences with racial prejudice helped to shape her racial conscience and compelled her to speak out, the sexist attitudes she encountered in Black artistic circles helped her to see how the patriarchy victimised women and allowed for only male success and fame. This newly created consciousness bore fruit in the form of a series

of paintings and other art forms, having drawn inspiration from famous African American women such as writers, slave rescuers (Harriet Tubman, for example), and politicians (Shirley Chisholm), using citations and fragments of prose/speeches in her art, particularly quilts. Like Nina Simone, although their paths were different, Ringgold too had to come to terms with her Blackness and its influence on her art. However, Ringgold was aware of her skin colour from the start and did not avoid tackling the topic head on. With time, when she started to mature as a woman and an artist, she came to understand that her Blackness nearly forced her to take a position regarding the injustices the Black community experienced. She had not been granted freedom as a female artist and faced many different expectations both from white and Black communities. While the white artistic community was prone to ignore her art and expected she would be "raceless" (i.e., behave like a white artist whose "race" is never questioned and is taken for granted), the Black community expected more political involvement from her in its matters. Also, when she was already a mature artist, she experienced much gender discrimination from Black critics and gallery owners. The Black artistic community failed, thus, to provide her with a secure and life-sustaining environment in which she could develop as an artist. What turned out to be an insurmountable obstacle to Black artistic *milieu*, was Faith Ringgold's gender. This is the fact she does not hesitate to comment on, and, in fact, she proceeds to a severe critique of her Black community which tried to reject her not only as an artist but mainly as a female artist. In the process she cites names of art curators who failed to adhere to racial solidarity rules and gave Ringgold little if no chance at all to succeed as a Black artist. In this way, she too paints in certain moments an unfavourable picture of the Black community which, like in Audre Lorde's case, for example, imposes racial constrains on their members, stripping them of individual freedom, imposing artificial expectations and norms fulfilment of which is a condition to belong and deemed "authentic".

As has been mentioned previously, Faith Ringgold's orderly constructed autobiography allows her readers to follow different themes touched upon in her narrative in a specifically arranged way. Her treatment of her body focuses on her sexuality, femininity expressed through clothes, make-up, and haircuts, and, finally, pregnancies, which are said to be of high, but not of central, importance in her life. The body image she conveys has multiple dimensions; it is deeply human in its sexual needs and vulnerability, but it is not overly dramatized, as Audre Lorde's or Rebecca Walker's focus on their Black (lesbian) bodies is. Ringgold's approach towards her body is matter-of-fact, very natural and

balanced. She expresses no neuroses, anxieties or tensions related to her body. At the end of her autobiography, she does mention the problem of being overweight and her attempts at curbing the process of her body's expansion but other than that readers are offered a very balanced narrative around her body. Because Faith Ringgold writes maternity onto her body, this topic is clearly relevant as the very process of giving birth to her first daughter occupies several pages. Topics of maternity, sexuality, the pregnant body, and the body in pain or overcome by desire are approached in a humorous way, using language that reveals (and constructs) a mature self, aware of all aspects of womanhood. Interestingly, when the language used in all four autobiographies is compared, Faith Ringgold's command of it reveals to be the most balanced, neutral, and elegant. There is no aridity in the language she employs when she speaks of men and her affairs (with her husbands or her lover). Also, it must be noted, when Faith Ringgold speaks of white people, her language is restrained and does not reveal negative emotions, not to mention hostility. There is, in fact, plenty of humour and self-distance rendered through language, even when the author touches upon difficult topics such as sexual harassment or gender violence she was exposed to.

Faith Ringgold's mother, without a doubt, is one of the central figures in her autobiographical narrative and pervades the entire book. Unlike Audre Lorde's and Nina Simone's autobiographies, however, Ringgold's is an unequivocal and unwavering tribute to her mother's qualities. Challenging and questioning maternal (or parental in general) authority was unacceptable at the time Faith Ringgold was coming of age. On the contrary, Faith Ringgold took an effort to demonstrate deep trust that she and her mother, Willi Posey, shared. From that bond emerged an individual with the determination and courage to pursue a career as an artist at a time when Black women and female artists were largely ignored and marginalised by mainstream culture and the Black *milieu*. Similarly to Audre Lorde, Faith Ringgold too admits the decisive influence her mother her on her career and the kind of a woman she has become. Both authors revere their mothers and place them at the central stage in the autobiographies. However, Ringgold's portrayal of her mother does not bear any single trace of sexual desire, although she renders her mother as elegant, beautiful, and classy. If any generational differences appear, in Ringgold's text they are described in a neutral way, with a huge dose of respect and understanding of the times both women came of age in. Faith Ringgold is tolerant and fully accepts the differences she and her mother had regarding such issues as sexuality (which to her mother was a taboo topic).

The autobiography that is most fraught with tension from beginning to the end is Rebecca Walker's. She is also, ethnically speaking, the most complex figure, (or so she thinks) among the four selected writers. Her autobiography reveals a very disturbed, insecure self deprived of a sense of belonging. Alienation, in "racial" terms accompanies her throughout the entire narrative. To her, whiteness and Jewishness, associated with her father, represent a void, an absence. Rebecca Walker constantly asks herself (and possibly readers too) why she is a biracial child, a Child of the Movement, the fruit of a social experiment. She feels deep deprivation when she compares herself to darker people and recognises that there is an empty part of herself that will never be filled: it is that part of whiteness, devoid of literal colour, in which she is not typically "feminine" i.e., round and curvy but "unfeminine", where she knows she is not stable emotionally, in which she is neurotic, supposedly due to her Jewish heritage. This description may appear strange given that race is a social construct rather than a biological quality, but Walker still dramatizes her whiteness and rejects her Jewishness, blaming them for her internal shortcomings. Still, she weaves a harsh critique of her Black peers and community when she discusses the price she pays to belong. So-called racial authenticity is a realm she desperately craves but to belong and to be accepted, she must rehearse her speech, language, movements, the way she positions her body so that others, her Black friends can issue a "verdict": she belongs, she is one of us. Racial belonging, thus, is an act of performance. It is nothing natural. It is artificially constructed, not only, as it is observed, by white people, but also by Black community. It is something she needs to force her body to learn, perform and stage. This is, indeed, a very important observation on the matter of how community, supposedly a sort of home, a life-sustaining environment, turned out to be a place of insecurity and anxiety. It is understood in Rebecca Walker's autobiography that the Black community too can become a source of oppression when it is given power over others. When it is given an opportunity to decide who belongs and who shall be rejected, it exercises the power to emotionally abuse those who strive to belong. And to belong seems to require a rite of passage, knowledge of some linguistic and cultural code.

Only at the end of her narrative does Rebecca Walker find her peace and come to terms with her multiple ethnic identities, roots. and positionalities which she, finally, starts to see as an asset as opposed to an obstacle. Somewhat similarly to Audre Lorde, her body becomes a bridge between the white/Jewish community and culture and Black *milieu*. She turns into a cultural translator who has a privileged insight into both worlds and can transit

between them. However, this path of self-understanding as a human bridge, a cultural translator was a long and painful process.

Rebecca Walker's autobiography/memoir is a rich textual narrative in which the author obsesses over her developing self. As has been observed, her racial identity is placed at the centre of her text, along with a profound sense of non-belonging and the tensions she feels in the confrontation with both cultures and communities she is immersed in, Black and Jewish. Her body, perhaps more than that of any other autobiographer examined in this study, is troubled and haunted by racism and the fluidity of racial constructs. Her autobiography is most concerned with her skin colour and what it means for her sense of self and how she is perceived by others. Only at the end of her narrative is she able to come to terms with the mixed heritage imprinted on her skin. Before that, Walker deals with her skin colour, bodily needs, and the process of coming-of-age as a young girl in a very tensed way. Her body, often contorted and looking for the right posture, never secure of itself, finds peace only in the arms of her mother or her female friend Lena. Her body is never a source of calm and peace or self-affirmation; it is always approached as an enemy, an entity to fight against and to placate to be found fitting and Black enough by others. Contrary to Audre Lorde and Faith Ringgold, Rebecca Walker is an outsider in her own body; it is not the home where she finds a sense of belonging. It can be safely stated that while Audre Lorde and Faith Ringgold find a home in their own bodies, Rebecca Walker is on exile in her skin. Her body is a prison-house where she feels constantly on guard, inadequate and anxious.

When it comes to the treatment of significant Others, Rebecca Walker's parents are both prominent figures in her autobiography, but it is the paternal figure who the author rejects at the end of the book when she adopts her mother's surname and her cultural heritage. What she remembers most about her childhood is the enormous amount of freedom both her parents gave her, believing she had the right to choose who she wanted to be and how she wanted to live her life. She claims that what she recalls from all the homes she lived in (there were many of them, especially after her parents' divorce and the decision to switch geographies for her to travel back and forth every two years), were the doors and how they were always open to her, how she could leave and go wherever she pleased. What she needed were rules and discipline to bring some order into her life, but her parents treated her as an adult at a time when she needed guidance. She felt abandoned, like a flower that was never truly protected and cared for. This could have definitely contributed to her sense

of alienation and abandonment, especially given the author's numerous doubts about her self-worth, ethnic background, and the racial prejudice she faced within her Jewish family.

Furthermore, claiming her Blackness, changing her surname to Walker, and shifting her father's family name to the middle position is an act demonstrating that Rebecca Walker chooses, along with her ethnic origins, her mother's matrilineal heritage. She emphasised in this way how important her African heritage was to her, as well as her willingness to accept her Black past and people. She associates herself with Blackness, a women-oriented culture, and philosophy through the women in her mother's line. Finally, Rebecca Walker fought for all her values – political, feminist, and cultural – through her mother. By bringing her mother's name to light, she established an indelible link between them, as well as between her and previous generations of Black women.

As can be concluded, all four autobiographies proposed for this study reveal similarities and differences. What can be asserted is that Audre Lorde, Nina Simone, Faith Ringgold, and Rebecca Walker penned very insightful autobiographies/memoirs where they opened textual spaces to create their individual and free selves as Black women artists, writers, activists, lovers, daughters, wives, and mothers. It cannot be overlooked that in their pursuit of free and individual selves they had to fight for their own space within Black communities which had placed on them a set of expectations and obligations. More dramatic in case of Audre Lorde and Rebecca Walker, their racial belonging has been questioned and severely criticised. Their autobiographies do not shun social and political critique of their own communities which, in the attempt to discipline their members, limited their freedom as women and as artists. However, all the four autobiographers did manage to find a textual solution to the crisis and negotiate the terms of belonging and, at the same time, retain their individuality. All of the examined authors did pay more or less attention to questions of the body but Nina Simone perhaps revealed her textual body as least complicated and perhaps least important of all the four women under scrutiny in this Thesis. She paid least attention to the feminine aspects of her coming-of-age, gendered activities, and questions of beauty until the moment when she became a famous concert pianist. Then her looks started to be of much more relevance to her. The bodily issues, strongly related to colour and race are most prominent in texts written by Audre Lorde and Rebecca Walker. In their autobiographies, the body becomes the main source of love, belonging, self-affirmation and insecurity, drama, and pain respectively. Also, in all four autobiographies the significant Others, portrayed in more or less dramatic and tensed way play central roles

in their lives and impact the way the autobiographers see themselves as young Black women worthy (or not) of respect and self-love. As has been addressed previously, the maternal figures are given more prominence in three autobiographies (Audre Lorde's, Faith Ringgold's, and Rebecca Walker's) but it must be remembered that the textual visibility of Nina Simone's father is a narrative technique whose goal is to render her mother more visible, even if she seems less present throughout the book or described in less positive terms. Here the textual presence does not necessarily translate into emotional relevance and longing. It is, in fact, Nina Simone's mother who, at the end of the narrative is given credit for whom Nina Simone has become. While in Audre Lorde's narrative there is no reconciliation between mother and daughter and the ways between them seem to part, in Nina Simone's autobiography the author manages to come to terms with what her mother represents and who she is.

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ANNEXES

Fig. 1.

Faith Ringgold, The American People Series #1: Between Friends, 1963.

Fig. 2.

Faith Ringgold, American People Series #2: For Members Only, 1963.

Fig. 3.

Faith Ringgold, American People Series #5: Watching and Waiting, 1963.

Fig. 4.

Faith Ringgold, American Collection #6: The Flag is Bleeding #2, 1967.